The hall—the great hall as it was properly termed [...] was not much unlike a church,—with a fireplace in it and all the pews turned out. There was a screen like a rood-screen at the lower end, dividing it from an outer vestibule; at the upper end the massive staircase [...] branched into galleries running down the sides. The windows were mullioned and filled with old glass, partly stained; the floor was of chequered stone; the roof a mass of oak beams, spreading fan-wise in all directions. From the latter—very high up and shadowed—hung banners, beautifully dilapidated. There were trophies of arms on the walls, genuinely mediaeval; rows upon rows of family portraits, with authentic dates to them, historic and notorious; heraldic insignia on every hand, indisputably testifying that the Desaillys were an ancient and a noble family. Altogether, there was a fine, solemn, feudal air about the place, calculated to awe a colonial person seeing it for the first time. (75–76)

Ada Cambridge’s description of ‘The Chase’, the imposing Norfolk seat of the Desailly family, in her 1897 novella ‘At Midnight’, captures in a single architectural image the contradictory attractions of the medieval for her colonial Australian characters. On the one hand, the ancient materials and heraldic remnants in its great hall are ‘authentic’, ‘historic’, and ‘genuinely mediaeval’, offering ‘indisputable’ testament to the noble family’s ancestral rights of ownership. On the other hand, for Nettie Wingate, the story’s Australian heroine, ‘The Chase’’s attraction is overwhelmingly atmospheric and evocative, inviting aesthetic rather than historical appreciation. Its medieval banners are ‘beautifully delapidated’, adding to the ‘fine, solemn, feudal air about the place’ – an air which, enhanced by its wooded park, evokes for Nettie ‘the England of her romantic dreams’ (3–4). This aesthetic fantasy is inextricable from Nettie’s social and cultural aspirations as wife of a Queensland pastoralist and ‘heiress of the
Silver Boom’, whose ‘dream of luxury was to live in a mediaeval castle, with history around her in the atmosphere of refined, aristocratic, Old-England life’ (6). Notwithstanding these more prosaic aspirations, Nettie’s experience of the architectural Middle Ages registers most powerfully as colonial ‘awe’, an ineffable and impressionistic encounter with a composite past ‘described to her by exiled parents and in scores of delightful books’ (4).

Nettie’s desire to re-enact the life of the ancient English aristocracy is strongly conditioned by her social and cultural context: it is a kind of aspirational medievalism that is relatively rare in Australian literature. Yet as the essays collected in this issue show, Nettie’s dehistoricised, aestheticised, and densely mediated perception of the past, far from being peculiar to her, is in fact typical of how the Middle Ages have been understood, interpreted, and reanimated in Australia from the colonial period to the twenty-first century. Although the medieval past has exerted an abiding attraction for Australian authors, playwrights, legislators, political theorists, architects, and civic leaders (to say nothing of the scholarly study of the Middle Ages in Australian universities), rarely has this attraction been of a meticulously philological or antiquarian kind, geared toward a positivistic retrieval of the past and its textual and cultural artefacts. This is not to say that the historical Middle Ages is never evoked in the contexts of Australian medievalism. Stephanie Trigg’s essay demonstrates the ambivalent legacy of Magna Carta in the development and practices of Australian parliamentary democracy, while John Ganim’s essay reveals the extent to which the neomedievalism of Hedley Bull, the Australian political theorist, relied on a historical view of premodern geopolitics. But even in these cases, historical traces are subject to an adaptive impulse which creates a Middle Ages that is, first and foremost, serviceable to the modern. It is this simultaneous evocation and untethering of ‘the medieval’ from its historical foundations, whether for creative or instrumentalist ends, that is at the heart of medievalist discourse and practice in general, and Australian medievalism in particular. Just as Nettie Wingate’s Middle Ages is assembled from ‘scores of delightful books’, much Australian medievalism evokes an ‘aggregated’ Middle Ages which can be many things, and often at the same time: gothic and barbarous or romantic and chivalric; feudal and military or agrarian and harmonious; pious and repressive or outrageous and carnivalesque, depending on the use to which the period is being put by its modern interpreters. Such diversity is an understandable response to the vast temporal and geographical scope of what we call ‘medieval culture’, a totality which is more readily captured in evocative events, images, and objects. In the case of Australian medievalism,
however, this creative compression is also a response to the nation's vast geographical and historical separation from the European Middle Ages which has led to 'the medieval' being treated, in many cases, as a distant screen on which local issues, fantasies, and anxieties have been projected. Again, such projections are constitutive of all medievalism, but they are writ particularly large in Australian settler history.

Collectively, these essays demonstrate the prevalence of medievalism in some of the most central sites of Australian literary and performance culture; but they also express the ways in which these traditions have undergone characteristically local permutations. Bradford, for instance, explores the distinctively Australian 'bush' adaptations of Romantic medievalist fairy folklore in that most formative of literary phenomena, children's fiction. Andrew Lynch explores the local reanimation of the legendary Middle Ages by W.M. Akhurst, the Melbourne-based composer of burlesque extravaganzas, a genre consumed widely by audiences in Australia's colonial metropolises. Focusing on a more recent phenomenon, Kim Wilkins takes on a truly ubiquitous genre in her analysis of fantasy fiction, which has global scope but also numerous successful Australian authors and series, reaching large Australian audiences whose reading habits encompass both the local and the global. Part of Australian medievalism's multivalency arises from the fact that it has always intersected with and responded to the broader context of international medievalism. Accordingly, the Australian essays in this issue are framed by essays devoted to examples expanding beyond the antipodean: John Ganim broadens the ambit of medievalism into global politics by exploring neomedievalism in late twentieth-century international relations theory, while Seeta Chaganti analyses the performative channelling of the discourses of medievalism and orientalism in nineteenth-century European ballet. The transnational reach of medievalism is a point reinforced by Chaganti, who argues for the body of the dancer as a physical text of memory in the historical ballet Raymonda, which has been consumed by audiences across and beyond Europe.

This special issue explores the almost limitless pliancy and multivalency of medievalism, demonstrating its capacity to attach, often simultaneously, to a wide range of social and ideological perspectives and practices. Michael Ackland's essay on Christina Stead uncovers the medievalism nestling in the young author's burgeoning socialism, and Stead's sense that medievalism could attach both to revolutionary politics and to escapism. For Louise D'Arcens, the medievalism appearing in novels by nineteenth-century Australian women writers, which itself combined with fashions for orientalism and classicism, both symbolised and criticised capitalist and
colonialist aspirations, while for Clare Bradford the image of the fairy has been mobilised to embody, or resist, social fantasies of race, gender, and nation in Australia. Kim Wilkins explores the way fantasy fiction typically occludes indigenous mythology, reminding us that despite its seemingly endless capacity for conjunction, medievalism is a discourse that sometimes operates under considerable strain, with its own ideological blindspots.

One of the aspects of medievalism that has received much attention in the past few years is its multi-temporality: as a period that is regarded as historical yet also mythic and 'timeless', the medieval is frequently represented in temporally and historically fluid ways. Similarly, representations of its relationship to the modern are frequently unstable, portraying it (again, often simultaneously) as a remote, superseded age and/or as a point of origin that is still strongly present in the modern. It is unsurprising, then, that the slipperiness of 'the medieval' as category is a Leitmotif running through the essays in this issue. To invoke select examples, Peter Otto's essay on David Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life* argues that the novel's temporal frame, and its evocation of a species of Gothicism, challenge conventional historical periodisation. Similarly, Melanie Duckworth's essay on Randolph Stow's *Girl Green as Elderflower* explores the ways in which the novel collapses the medieval into the modern, while Chaganti's analysis of orientalism in dance performance demonstrates how such temporal slipperiness can also be expressed in geographical terms, with the evocation of space ('the East', conceived as the Orient, or indeed as Eastern Europe) coming to stand in for an equally loosely-evoked historical period.

As a number of these essays demonstrate, Australian medievalism has been characterised at times by ambivalence, and even irreverence, toward the past. Stephanie Trigg shows that while the medieval antecedents of Australian parliamentary democracy generate discomfort at the survival of 'archaic' institutions within modernity, they also bestow symbolic capital on modern parliaments and generate real affection and desire for continuity amongst their modern inheritors. Conversely, Lynch's exploration of nineteenth-century Australian burlesque argues that while colonial Australia participated in a larger irreverent, comic culture of popular medievalism, its apparent irreverence toward the Middle Ages sometimes in fact belied a nagging sense that modern Australian public life could only be a base parody of an illustrious European past. D'Arcens' essay similarly explores, via Australian women's critiques of fashionable aesthetic medievalism, the ambivalence felt in colonial Australia about what it meant to reclaim the medieval for the modern, raising the question as to whether these colonial critiques, rather than condemning the medieval period itself, in fact disclose

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a reverence for this period and a regret at its commodification at the hands of bourgeois modernity.

Finally, for all their engagement with larger ideological forces, a number of these Australian evocations of the Middle Ages are also arrestingly idiosyncratic – even eccentric – and personalised. Among the most conspicuous examples are Randolph Stow’s character Crispin Clare who, as Duckworth shows, maps his friends onto the events and characters of twelfth-century chronicles and compendia. Similarly, Stead’s Michael and Joseph Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, as explored by Ackland, imbue the Middle Ages with a significance that is deeply personal, spiritual, and creative. And, perhaps most unconventionally of all, David Malouf’s unsettled historical periodisation and evocation of an idiosyncratic pre-medieval Gothic in *An Imaginary Life* allow him, as Otto argues, to develop a vision of the premodern that is like no other, Australian or otherwise.

The essays collected here started life as presentations delivered at the Australian Research Council-funded symposium ‘Medievalism, Colonialism, Nationalism’, held at the University of Wollongong in January 2010. This exciting opportunity to gather scholars of medievalism together with scholars of Australian literature led to many valuable and mutually illuminating exchanges. The editors of this volume thank the participants for their insights as well as their enthusiasm and collegiality, and also the Australian Research Council for its support in enabling us to develop the symposium and this publication.

WORKS CITED
