

Intelligentsia

Louis Kahan's portraits of writers

Vivien Gaston

A recent exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art provided the opportunity to view a remarkable group of drawings by the renowned portrait artist Louis Kahan AO (1905–2002), now in the Special Collections of the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.¹ Depicting notable writers, the 129 portraits were gifted by Kahan over four years from 1979 to 1983, a benefaction arranged by the then Vice-Principal of the University of Melbourne, Ray Marginson. On 5 November 1981, at the University of Melbourne Gallery, Marginson launched a handsome book illustrating a selection of the works with an adroit estimation of the artist's career:

How can one say anything more about a man who has served in the French Foreign Legion, worked for thirty years at the heart of the Australian Literary and Artistic establishment, and not only survived both, but emerged universally loved and unscarred.²

Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan's portraits of writers ran at the Potter from 22 January to 19 April 2009 and brought together an array of portraits depicting poets, essayists, philosophers and political writers



created for the journal *Meanjin*. They provide a rich microcosm of Australian intellectual life from 1955 to 1974, depicting many of the key thinkers of the day who opened up for local Australian culture the contemporary international world of ideas. Kahan's inclusive vision was ideally suited to interpreting this extraordinary array of talent and intellect, which spanned writers from the right and left of politics, early female authors, edgy cultural commentators, novelists, speculative poets, and scholars of subjects obscure, refined and pioneering. Through his uncanny ability to capture likeness, this exhibition recreated the intensity and verve that animated these minds.

Trained as a tailor in his birthplace Vienna, Kahan worked for the couturier Paul Poiret, and as a theatre set designer in Paris in the 1920s where he encountered first hand the work of Picasso, Matisse and the School of Paris. With the outbreak of war he joined the French Foreign Legion and, after demobilisation, began his life as an artist in Oran, Algeria. After travel in the United States, he moved to Perth in 1947 where he was reunited with his family, had his first solo exhibition and began to gain recognition from the art world. In 1950 he moved to Melbourne where his talent for portraiture was recognised by the *Melbourne Herald* art critic Alan McCulloch, who introduced him to

Previous page: Installation view,
Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan's portraits of writers,
exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art,
University of Melbourne, 2009,
photographed by Viki Petherbridge.

Below: Louis Kahan, *Clement B. Christesen*, 1960,
pen and ink on paper, sheet: 56.9 x 37.8 cm.
Reg. no. 1980.2044, gift of the artist, 1980,
Special Collections, Baillieu Library,
University of Melbourne.
© Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY,
Sydney 2008.

Clem Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*.
On a return trip to Perth in 1953 he
met and married Lily Isaac. His
contribution to Australian cultural life
was recognised when he was made an
Officer of the Order of Australia in
1993. Louis Kahan died in
Melbourne in 2002, aged 97.

Kahan's prodigious capacity for
swift summation of the human face
was honed in an unusual training
ground: the hospitals for wounded
soldiers in Oran, Algeria, where he
donated his time and talent to the
Red Cross, producing over 2,000
portraits of soldiers which the men
sent back to their families. With this
experience he was able to produce
portraits with a sense of spontaneity
under almost any conditions. The
majority of the *Meanjin* portraits
were drawn directly from life,
sometimes in the subject's home or
workplace, often in Kahan's own
home studio. Occasionally however
he was compelled to work from
photographs or even from television,
grasping the essentials of a face with
minimum input.

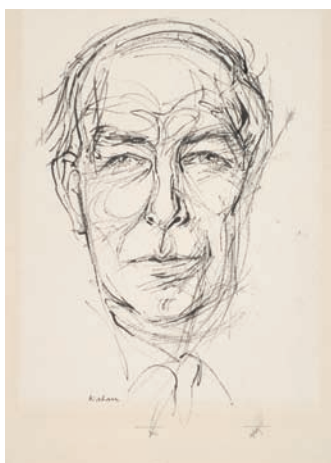
The portraits in this collection
were commissioned for the
provocative literary and cultural
journal *Meanjin* by its founding editor
Clem Christesen. *Meanjin* provided a
ready network for writers and a
platform for new writing, a resource

for innovative ideas and a forum for
debate at a time when the media in
Australia were at a rudimentary stage.
Meanjin exerted considerable power;
at its 21st anniversary dinner Arthur
Calwell, leader of the opposition
Labor Party, gave a speech and Prime
Minister Robert Menzies sent a
telegram. Contributors to *Meanjin*
represent a who's who of Australian
writing. Since 1945 the journal has
been supported by the University of
Melbourne and in 2008 it became an
imprint of Melbourne University
Publishing.



The exhibition *Intelligentsia*
demonstrated how the creative
interaction of literature and the visual
arts was integral to *Meanjin's* broad
cultural purpose. While Kahan's
drawings gave a distinctive graphic
quality to the journal for nearly 20
years, other innovative work was also
featured, including sketches, prints
and paintings by Aboriginal artists
(usually unnamed) and artists and
designers such as Arthur Boyd, Roger
Kemp and Douglas Annand. Kahan's
portraits, however, played a special
role. Featured next to the subject's
writing or a review of their work, they
provided an unabashed tribute to
their subjects and their intellectual
and creative achievements. While
postmodern critics, whose theories
diminish the importance of the
author, might disparage this elevation
of individual identity, the effect of
these portraits is to illustrate the
personal engagement involved in
keeping such an independently
minded journal alive. The exhibition
paid homage to this spirit of free
speech that has motivated and guided
the journal. In his foreword to the
first issue of *Meanjin* (Christmas
1940), Clem Christesen wrote:

... at a time of war and transition,
we still strive to 'talk poetry.' ...
Literature and art, poetry and



Left: Louis Kahan, *A.D. Hope*, (c.1962), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 46.5 x 35.5 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2076, gift of the artist, 1980, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
© Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2009. First published with A.D. Hope, 'The young girl at the ball', 'A Blason', 'On an early photograph of my mother' and 'Letter from the line', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2, June 1962.

drama do not spring into being at the word of command. Their life is a continuous process growing within itself, and its suppression is death.³

Kahan's portrait of his patron, Clem Christesen (illustrated opposite), head resting on his hand with cigarette, book and glasses, is both determined and contemplative, almost melancholy. It makes a remarkable comparison with van Gogh's wistful portrait of his physician Dr Gachet (1890, now in the Musée d'Orsay). By contrast, *Meanjin's* second editor, Jim Davidson, who took over in 1974, is portrayed as gently benevolent. This group of drawings also includes some of the wider field of experts who contributed to *Meanjin*: Asian studies expert C.P. Fitzgerald; politician, diplomat and academic Neal Blewett; agricultural chemist Geoffrey Leeper; and geographer, geologist and writer Marcel Auroousseau.⁴

As editor of *Meanjin*, Clem Christesen was supported by his wife Nina who founded the Department of Russian Language Studies at the University of Melbourne. Kahan's portrait of Nina, depicted next to Professor R. Douglas (Pansy) Wright, is one of several group portraits drawn at *Meanjin's* 21st anniversary dinner in 1961, when the artist wove

through the crowd recording the lively interactions of guests such as professor of English Ian Maxwell, eminent art historian Dr Ursula Hoff, Labor leader Arthur Calwell and writer Frank Dalby Davison. In another, Christesen darts a glance at *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith, with literary historian H.M. Green in the background.⁵ Kahan relished the aesthetic possibilities of the occasion's collegiality, commenting: 'A chance group—so often its members complement minds while their bodies compose a study for the artist.'⁶

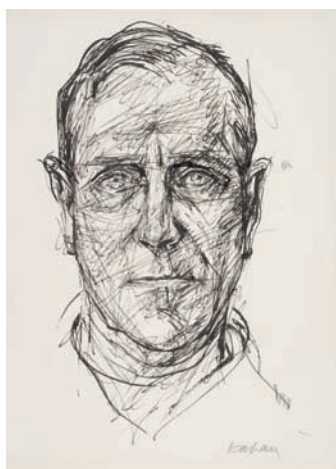
Kahan's forte was to depict the creative mind at work. This is especially apparent in his portraits of the poets—established, mid-career and upcoming—who chose to publish in *Meanjin*. Instead of a static record of facial features, his pen and ink lines fly and coalesce around nodal points in the face correlating with the workings of the active mind within; the poet's synthesis of free, disparate thoughts at high velocity. In his depiction of A.D. Hope (illustrated above), a long prophet-like face conjures up the oracular cadence of his poetry with its mythic themes and, for the 1950s, provocative sensuality. Described by Clive James as 'the leading poet of his day', Hope was also known as 'the antipodean

Below: Louis Kahan, *Dame Mary Gilmore*, 1960, pen and ink on paper, sheet: 54.0 x 37.7 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2068, gift of the artist, 1979, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
© Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2009. First published with Robert D. Fitzgerald, 'Mary Gilmore: Poet and great Australian', *Meanjin*, vol. 19, no. 4, December 1960, and subsequently with W.H. Wilde, 'Mary Gilmore: The hidden years', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4, December 1973.

Augustan' and was a scathing critic of unstructured modernism. With T. Inglis Moore he introduced the first degree course in Australian literature as professor of English at the Australian National University.

Kahan was equally insightful in his depiction of the legendary Dame Mary Gilmore (illustrated below). Her highly popular poetry was bound up with her activism, her concern with urban poverty, the rights of women, children and indigenous Australians and her patriotism. Her politics were radical; she was the first woman member of the Australian Workers Union and worked as editor of the *Australian Worker*. In 1937 she was appointed Dame Commander of the British Empire for her





Left: Louis Kahan, *Patrick White*, (1960), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 36.0 x 28.4 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2042, gift of the artist, 1980, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. © Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2008. First published with Peter Wood, 'Moral complexity in Patrick White's novels', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 1962.

Below: Louis Kahan, *Katharine Susannah Prichard*, (c.1961), reed pen and ink on paper, sheet: 57.0 x 38.5 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2052, gift of the artist, 1980, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. © Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2009. First published with Katharine Susannah Prichard, 'The grey horse', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, December 1961.

contributions to literature and in 1993 she was depicted on the Australian ten-dollar note. Kahan emphasised the active life of his subjects. His empathetic depiction of Gilmore evinces her vital determination with eyes fixed on a vision beyond, despite the age apparent in her stiffly folded hands. The drawing can be compared with the theatricality of William Dobell's portrait of Gilmore of 1957 (entered in the Archibald Prize) and with Kahan's own more reflective painted portrait of 1960.

Later in his career Kahan was to depict the poet Fay Zwicky. She responded with an evocation of Kahan's method of working:

to sit
and let the master work his miracle,
humming away over black pots
and nibs,
the sunny room, the light, the
harmless ease of it.
Portrait (Louis Kahan, 1992)⁷

Zwicky's words indicate Kahan's unusual rapport with his sitters. Besides the poets, these included many other luminaries of Australian literature, including Patrick White, Christina Stead, Miles Franklin and Alan Marshall.⁸ Avoiding simple idealisation, Kahan created images that reveal the psychology of his

sitters as well as contributing to their mythic stature.

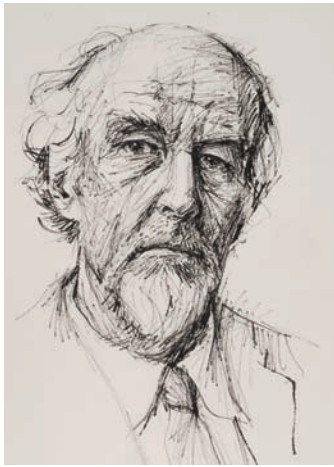
His frontal depiction of the novelist Patrick White (illustrated above) floats like an icon on the page with a mesmerising stare and ruminating mouth, aptly illustrating Kahan's response to 'those unforgettable, unforgetting seer's eyes, looking through you, and beyond ...'⁹ This sketch laid the basis for his depiction of the writer that won the Archibald Prize in 1962, a work that intensifies the emphasis on prophetic vision, a 'behind-the-scenes Voss' as Alan McCulloch put it,¹⁰ surrounding the head with a turbulent sky and desolate landscape.

Equally powerful is his semi-abstract depiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard (illustrated right), whose evocative novels of Australian country working life attracted national and international recognition. Active as a journalist, she helped found the Communist Party of Western Australia in the 1920s and remained committed to her political causes, campaigning for the peace movement and social justice. Kahan captures her steadfastness in a face of monumental structure, the eye socket a bony crevice, the hands a supportive plinth for the head.

Kahan's depictions anticipate recent analysis of the facial 'micro-

expressions' that indicate personality. The face with its numerous working muscles is a complex arena of forces. Rather than expressing one emotion or attitude at a time, there can be several. His depiction of Kylie Tennant, for example, whose novels portray life in the Great Depression, combines judiciously narrowed eyes, empathetic smile, and assertively clasped hands.¹¹ His unusual skills in creating a convincing likeness out of scant information was especially useful for providing *Meanjin* with representations of international writers, whose work was published or reviewed in the journal. The depictions of James Joyce and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, based on photographs, hold their own in





sparkle and liveliness against those made from first-hand experience of their subjects.¹²

The subjects of Kahan's portraits for *Meanjin* also include some of the most significant, vocal and controversial of Australian intellectuals and reflect the editor's commitment to diversity of opinion. Manning Clark (illustrated above left) was the controversial author of the epic six-volume general *History of Australia* published between 1962 and 1987, criticised by conservatives for its declamatory rhetoric. In Kahan's memorable portrayal he is aloof and enigmatic. Clark addresses the viewer with sombre deliberation, the lines in his forehead converging on the furrow between the eyebrows, a sign of concentrated thought since ancient portraiture. By contrast, the face of maverick historian Geoffrey Blainey (illustrated above right), author of the influential *Tyranny of distance: How distance shaped Australia's history*, is open, engaged and curious. Modelled with incisive angular lines, the drawing demonstrates Kahan's incubation in the quasi-abstract circles of post-cubist artistic circles. Blainey mused after sitting for Kahan: 'When I left I had a slight feeling that I had been X-rayed.'¹³

Typically for the time, three of the academics portrayed by Kahan are

smoking. T. Inglis Moore, writer, literary historian and indefatigable advocate for Australian literature, and Ian Maxwell, professor of English and expert in Old Norse, clutch their pipes as essential aids to thinking. The scholar of French literature, A.R. Chisholm, nervously gestures with a cigarette in hand, while a wild flurry of lines around his head evokes a frenetic intellectual force.¹⁴ Yet, despite his remarkable ability to capture the distinct individuality of his subjects, Kahan's portraits never verged on caricature. He always moderated his feel for expressive forms with observation of subtle detail. Commenting on the striking appearance of A.A. Phillips, critic and inventor of the phrase 'cultural cringe', Kahan wrote: 'A crowded literary party; here there is this remarkable profile, nose and chin trying to meet. My pen couldn't resist them.'¹⁵

The exhibition also included four of Kahan's painted portraits of academics, revealing another dimension of his contribution to the cultural life of the University of Melbourne. His use of vigorous brushwork and rich colour are evident in depictions of George W. Paton, Vice-Chancellor 1951–1968; Zelman Cowen, Dean of Law 1951–1966; Victor M. Trikojus, Head of the

Left: Louis Kahan, *Manning Clark*, 1973, reed pen, ink and felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 57.1 x 38.5 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2037, gift of the artist, 1980, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. © Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2008. First published with Manning Clark, 'The years of unleavened bread: December 1949 to December 1972', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, September 1973.

Right: Louis Kahan, *Professor Geoffrey Blainey*, (1967), pencil on paper, sheet: 49.0 x 35.1 cm. Reg. no. 1981.2024, gift of the artist, 1981, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. © Louis Kahan (estate)/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2008. First published with Geoffrey Blainey, 'Godzone 7: The new Australia: A legend of the lake', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4, December 1967.

School of Biochemistry 1943–1968; and Warwick Eunson, Principal of Melbourne Teachers' College until 1972.¹⁶

Kahan's portraits continue to play a crucial role by documenting the diversity of the intellectuals who have been embraced by *Meanjin*. Lively and seemingly spontaneous, his depictions usually occupy a full page and are positioned next to the text, bringing the speaking voice and its ideas to life. With Kahan's inspired contributions over 25 years, *Meanjin* became, in Geoffrey Blainey's words, 'an illuminating mirror of Australian cultural life'.¹⁷

Dr Vivien Gaston is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne. A widely published art historian and critic in the fields of 19th century, Renaissance and contemporary art, her special research interest is portraits and self-portraits. Currently she is curator of forthcoming exhibitions for the National Gallery of Victoria and Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery and most recently curated *Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan's portraits of writers* for the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.

Notes

- 1 For their generous assistance in researching Kahan's portraits I want to thank Ray Marginson, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Lily Kahan, Belinda Nemeec, Chen Chen, Bala Starr and Joanna Bosse.
- 2 Ray Marginson, Speech notes for the launch of Louis Kahan's book *Australian writers: The face of literature*, held on 5 November 1981 in the

Installation view, *Intelligentsia: Louis Kahan's portraits of writers*, exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2009, photographed by Viki Petherbridge. Visible are photographs of Kahan in his studio at Kew by Henry Talbot (1984) and an unknown photographer. In the showcases are copies of *Meanjin* from Special Collections, Baillieu Library, while a video plays of the ABC television program *Panorama* (episode on *Meanjin*, originally broadcast 8 December 1960).

University of Melbourne Gallery. Copy held on office file in Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

- 3 C.B.C. [Clement B. Christesen], 'Foreword', *Meanjin Papers*, vol. 1, no. 1, Christmas 1940, facing p. 1.
- 4 Louis Kahan, *Jim Davidson*, 1972, felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 55.7 x 38.0 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2065, gift of the artist, 1980; *Prof. C.P. Fitzgerald*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen and ink on paper, sheet: 38.7 x 57.5 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2063, gift of the artist, 1980; *Dr Neal Blewett*, 1973, felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 55.8 x 38.1 cm. Reg. no. 1981.2035, gift of the artist, 1981; *Prof. Geoffrey W. Leeper*, 1971, felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 56.2 x 37.9 cm. Reg. no. 1981.2029, gift of the artist, 1981; *Marcel Aurousseau*, (n.d.), pencil on paper, folded sheet: 51.2 x 35.0 cm. Reg. no. 1981.2033, gift of the artist, 1981. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 5 Louis Kahan, *Nina Christesen*, *Prof. R. Douglas Wright*, *Dr E. Macwhite*, *Col. Aubrey Gibson*, (n.d.), pen and ink on paper, overall sheet: 38.0 x 56.2 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2079.00A.00C, gift of the artist, 1980; *Prof. I.R. Maxwell*, *Dr Ursula Hoff*, *Arthur Calwell*, *Frank Dalby Davison*, (n.d.), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 28.2 x 38.3 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2081, gift of the artist, 1979; *H.M. Green*, *C.B. Christesen and S. Murray-Smith*, (n.d.), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 38.9 x 29.3 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2051, gift of the artist, 1980. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 6 Louis Kahan, *Australian writers: The face of literature*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981, no. 40.
- 7 Fay Zwicky, *The gatekeeper's wife*, Rose Bay, NSW: Brandl and Schlesinger, 1997, p. 29.
- 8 Louis Kahan, *Christina Stead*, 1973, felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 45.5 x 38.4 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2067, gift of the artist, 1979; *Miles Franklin*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 55.8 x 37.5 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2073, gift of the artist, 1979; *Alan Marshall*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 49.2 x 38.9 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2075, gift of the artist, 1979; *Alan Marshall*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen and ink on paper,



- sheet: 55.9 x 38.0 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2047, gift of the artist, 1980. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 9 Kahan, *Australian writers*, no. 38.
- 10 Alan McCulloch, 'Every(lay)man's simplified guide to the Archibald', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, March 1963, p. 111.
- 11 Louis Kahan, *Kylie Tennant*, (n.d.), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 53.9 x 38.0 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2043, gift of the artist, 1980, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 12 Louis Kahan, *James Joyce*, (n.d.), conté on paper, sheet: 38.3 x 38.5 cm. Reg. no. 1981.2054, gift of the artist, 1981; *Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 56.0 x 38.1 cm. Reg. no. 1982.2078, gift of the artist, 1982; *Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 56.0 x 38.4 cm. Reg. no. 1982.2081, gift of the artist, 1982. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 13 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Introduction', in Kahan, *Australian writers*, p. ix.
- 14 Louis Kahan: *Prof. T. Inglis Moore*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen and ink on paper, sheet: 50.7 x 35.5 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2069, gift of the artist,

- 1979; *T. Inglis Moore*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen and ink on paper, sheet: 55.8 x 38.1 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2071, gift of the artist, 1980; *I.R. Maxwell*, (n.d.), felt-tip pen on paper, sheet: 50.6 x 37.8 cm. Reg. no. 1979.2077, gift of the artist, 1979; *Professor A.R. Chisholm*, (n.d.), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 55.0 x 38.0 cm. Reg. no. 1980.2045, gift of the artist, 1980. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 15 Kahan, *Australian writers*, no. 30.
- 16 Louis Kahan, *Sir George W. Paton*, 1968, oil on board, 116.8 x 88.9 cm. Reg. no. 1968.0003, commissioned 1968; *Professor Zelman Cowen CMG*, 1968, oil on composition board, 122.0 x 91.5 cm. Reg. no. 1968.0004, commissioned by Maurice Cohen on behalf of friends of the Professor, 1968; *Professor Victor M. Trikojus*, 1968, oil on board, sight: 120.6 x 90.2 cm. Reg. no. 1968.0005, commissioned by colleagues and friends of the School of Chemistry, 1968; *Warwick Eanson*, 1972, oil on canvas, 89.7 x 67.2 cm. Reg. no. 1972.0091, commissioned by Melbourne Teachers' College, 1972. The University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 17 Blainey, 'Introduction', p. viii.