This article is concerned only with Australia's written literature in English. The songs and folktales of the aborigines, passed down orally within tribal communities, did not affect the development of this written literature. British settlement began in the late 18th century, but it was not until the mid-19th century that Australian writers—mainly poets—began to produce works of literary merit. Most of these writers closely followed the style of the English Romanticists.

Among the first writers to strike more original notes were Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson and Henry Lawson. Paterson was the best of the "bush balladists"—poets who celebrated in colloquial language the rugged life of the frontier. Lawson is best known for his short stories. Novelist also treated various aspects of colonial days. Marcu Clarke wrote sympathetic about the inmates of a penal colony in For the Term of His Natural Life (1874). Rolf Boldrewood (real name, Thomas Browne) presents a bushranger (outlaw) hero in Robbery Under Arms (1888). Joseph Furphy's satirical Such Is Life (1903) describes the rural scene.

Greatly influenced by European Naturalism, Henry Handel Richardson (real name, Ethel F. L. Richardson) shows psychological insight in Maurice Guest (1908) and a trilogy, The Fortunes of Richard Marhoney (1930). In Working Bullocks (1926) and Coonardoo (1929), Katharine Prichard reflects the stark grandeur of her native land. Xavier Herbert's Capricornia (1938) indicts the settlers' treatment of the aborigines.

The short story was a strong literary form in the 1940s and 1950s. Popular short story writers included Frank Dalby Davison, Gavin Casey, Dal Stivens, and Margaret Trist. Eleanor Dark, Kylie Tennant, Martin Boyd, Hal Porter, Kenneth MacKenzie, and Randolph Stow gained recognition during the first half of the 20th century. Patrick White, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1973, won critical acclaim with Voss (1957) and The Vivisector (1970).

Australian fiction since the 1970s has increasingly gained worldwide recognition. Among the more prominent writers are Thea Astley, who observes society with a satirical wit, and Thomas Keneally, who injects religious themes into his novels. Three important development in literature during the late 1970s were the reemergence of the short story as a literary form, the pervasiveness of irony and alienation as the characteristic tone of most fiction, and the emergence of a strong group of women writers. Notable works by these women include Jessica Anderson's Tirra Lirra by the River (1978), Barbara Hanrahan's The Frangipani Gardens (1980), and Elizabeth Jolley's Miss Peabody's Inheritance (1983).

Most critics consider Christopher John Brennan the best of the poets who came to prominence in the early years of the 20th century. His work, influenced by the French Symbolists, is intellectually mature and has depth of feeling. Other leading poets of his time include Bernard O'Dowd, Shaw Neilson, Hugh McCrae, Kenneth Slessor, R. D. Fitzgerald, Mary Gilmore, and A. D. Hope. Poets whose work was first published around mid-century or later include Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright, James P. McAuley, David Campbell, and Francis Webb.

The richness and variety of poetry of the 1960s and 1970s can be attributed to the work of Thomas Shapcott, Rodney Hall, and David Malouf. Les A. Murray and Bruce Beaver also gained recognition.

In the 1980s interest in poetry declined, and many poets, including Shapcott, Hall, and Malouf, increasingly turned to writing fiction.

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