



## Introduction

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The David Nichol Smith Seminar in Eighteenth-Century Studies is held about every four years, usually in Canberra, but also at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and the Universities of Otago and Auckland, New Zealand. It honors the memory of Professor Nichol Smith (1875–1962), Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford, whose books constitute a significant part of the Australian National Library's rare book collection. The Library, together with the other host universities, sponsors the Seminar. The first of these international conferences was held at the National University of Australia in 1966, the thirteenth at the University of Otago in April 2007.

Taking as its theme "Rewriting the Long Eighteenth Century," the Seminar included presentations on art, music, drama, philosophy, history, and literature. Although all essays collected here focus on literary works, they exhibit a generous variety of approaches to women authors and actors, to famous figures such as Shakespeare, Swift, and Johnson, and to less frequently studied authors such as Nathaniel Lee. Conversations range across centuries as specialists in modern literature examine the responses of Henry James and Samuel Beckett to our period, while scholars of the eighteenth century explore Defoe's challenge to Robert Filmer and Swift's reply to Edward Said. In line with the conference theme, these essays probe

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the complex evolution toward modern culture as writers refract, reflect, and revise their understanding of the world.

In an impressive display of present and future scholarship, essays by graduate students from New Zealand, Canada, and the United States sit comfortably alongside plenary addresses and essays by internationally known scholars. The relatively small size of the Nichol Smith Seminars (usually fewer than a hundred participants) allows more lavish opportunities for interaction than do most other conferences. We regret that we could not capture these rich occasions in print.

In a moving summary of four stimulating days, Stuart Sherman identified three connecting themes: multiplicity, that is, the sheer fascination, and yield, of lots and lots of *things*; impalpability, or “the attempt to recover, or reconstruct, and then interpret, whole sectors of experience so evanescent and elusive, so resistant to textual record that the scant traces need a deep Proustian dip in imaginative scholarship if they are to let the past speak at all”; and suppleness, when authors such as Johnson negotiate the meaning of anonymity, where suppleness is a defining skill, a nuanced social adaptation, a means of gaining eminence and then deploying it.

Suppleness kept appearing, both as a salient feature in the writers studied and as an indispensable way of studying them. As Judith Hawley observed of Fielding and Sterne, history is “something that is not yet set in stone, . . . not yet fixed.” Sterne, for instance, in reconstructing Uncle Toby’s battles, “loosens his purchase on history; he frees things up.” Or as Clive Probyn remarked of Said on Swift, he “hardens Swift into a kind of stereotype,” making the Dean into a referential political commentator. For Swift, though, language’s referentiality is always unstable, and “Swift’s scepticism is actually endless,” reading from plenitude to infinitude.

May the essays that follow, a small sampling of all the talks delivered at the conference, entice readers to attend future Nichol Smith Seminars. We extend our warmest thanks to all of the participants for their contributions, and to Cedric Reverand for including this special issue in *Eighteenth-Century Life* and for meticulously copyediting the selections. With a celerity unusual in the humanities, the collection appears within a year of the event itself. We hope that such prompt publication preserves the freshness of the thirteenth David Nichol Smith Seminar in Eighteenth-Century Studies at Otago. Enjoy.

