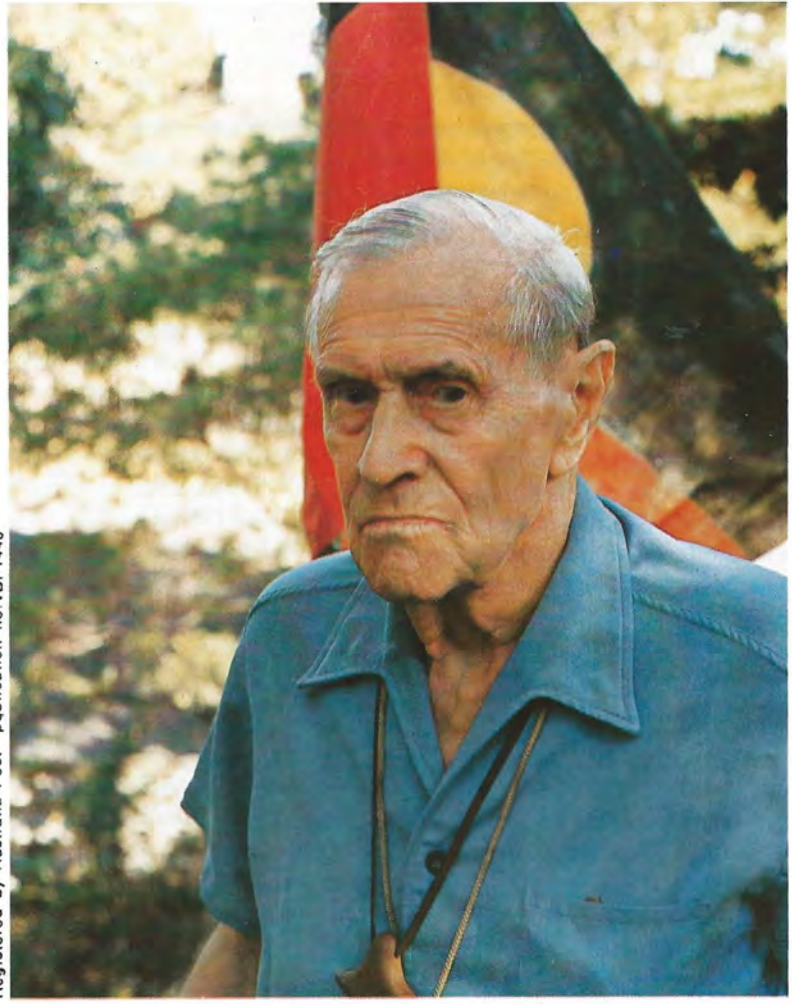

Registered by Australia Post—publication no. VBP1440

# overland

FEATURES
STORIES
POETRY
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Patrick White: CREDO
Jill Roe, Barry Jones: THE BICENTENNIAL HISTORY
Desmond O'Grady: GINO NIBBI
Leon Trainor: THE SETTLEMENT
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*COMPETITION*

We asked for an extract from *Such is Life* by Patrick White, *They're a Weird Mob* by Christina Stead or similar concatenations of author and text. The winner is Jill Hellyer, of Mount Colah N.S.W., for Bruce Dawe's version of "The Sunburnt Country". Honorable mention to Betty Birskys of Mount Gravett Q. for her extracts from *Once a Jolly Swagman* by Patrick White, Frank Moorhouse and John Morrison.

**The Not-so-good Sunburnt Country**

Especially I liked the glimpses I saw
as a boy (incidentally) from the back of the old Chev
clattering past mattresses spilling rubbishy guts
in an otherwise Magnificent Scattering of trees . . .
one thing I'll say about this country
it's not monotonous like they say, it's
texta/it's subtle/it's Open-your-eyes-and-look . . .
just as you think it's what you've seen on tv
(but BRRRIGHTER)
it's yes, sky bluer, yes, dust redder, yes,
just wait on while Hollywood bullets explode from the box into
your Dead Heart
and you'll get to see the Outback: QUICK! turn up the color!
there, it's Mike Mal and the ubiquitous Dick
only the earth is suddenly swallowed . . . it's all been a trick . . .
see, kids, gone, kids, hey, kids, hey . . .
well it's your country, see it another day.
Come back later, time for Robbo and Gra Gra,
a bit more like it? Not really. It's all out there
streets with Foster's-filled gutters
("watch your step") . . . YES, CITY, YES
and the SUBURBS, isn't that where most of us
perform our ritual lives and the rites of Footie?
O lucky country, but on weekdays it's traffic
crawling RED blink GREEN blink go GO
NO U-TURNS CAREFUL WHERE YOU PUFF . . . and graffiti
teaching us the (transitive and intransitive) senselessness of the
verb TO SUCK,
teasing us about our love for this
whole damn country of ours . . .
yet warming the ambience from the mellowing seed,
the need
(eventually) to die here, to receive the final nod of recognition.

OUR NEXT COMPETITION (set by Tim Thorne): The Great Australian Novel is always on the point of being written. But what we lack is the definitive Great Australian Character. Applications, please, in prose or verse, including *curricula vitarum* and names of referees, for the position of central character in the next G.A.N. Usual prizes—and unless more readers exert themselves to respond we shall have to think about closing these competitions down. We welcome suggestions for future competitions, however. Entries by 31 August.

Temper democratic, bias Australian

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June, 1988

Printing: The Book Printer, Maryborough

*Overland* is a quarterly literary magazine.
The subscription rate is twenty dollars a year (four issues); for students and pensioners the subscription rate is ten dollars. Life subscriptions are available for $100 each. Bankcard subscriptions and renewals are accepted (quote number).
Manuscripts are welcomed, but a stamped self-addressed envelope is required, or two if poetry is sent with prose.

*Overland* receives assistance from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and from the Victorian Ministry for the Arts. We pay minimum rates of forty dollars for a story or feature and fifteen dollars for a poem.

Address all correspondence to:
Editor, *Overland*, PO Box 249, Mount Eliza, Victoria 3930



ISSN 0030 7416

DESMOND O'GRADY

# Sincerely—Gino Nibbi

*[If someone wrote my biography] the biographer's sincerity would transform everything into perfidy . . . I would expect an indictment, a tremendous accusation. I foresee, at the very least, that the blandest biography . . . would be a murder mystery without a shot being fired.*

*Gino Nibbi, "Oracoli Sommessi".*

Sometimes the house at Grottaferrata in the hills behind Rome, a stone's throw from the site of Cicero's villa, rang with laughter as the owner recalled a Melbourne Herald strip cartoon of Ben Bowyang or Wally and the Major. Gino Nibbi had been enriched by his twenty-six years in Australia as well as enriching Australia, mainly through his Leonardo Art Shop in Melbourne, which became a rendezvous for people such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, John Reed, Arnold Shore and Albert Tucker. At the Leonardo they found an impassioned and informed Nibbi who was in touch with artists such as Giorgio de Chirico; who, for a time, distributed a cultural magazine Stream to which he contributed; and who displayed splendid reproductions of paintings by European contemporaries such as Picasso and Rouault.

Ben Bowyang may have been a poor exchange for Braque and Brancusi, but Nibbi had other favorable memories of Australia, ranging from the bush's gradations of green to the bureaucracy which, compared to its "exasperating" Italian counterpart, he found humane and efficient. Whether living in Italy or Australia, he became nostalgic for the other country.

"My nostalgia for Europe", he wrote in Italian in 1963, "is acute and sometimes even torments me. And when I am in my homeland I have a reverse nostalgia . . . for beautiful Australian nature. It will be a half-nostalgia; but it is still nostalgia". Nibbi also had a secret he wanted to hide from his Australian friends: "I have never succeeded in acclimatising myself in a country still too geological and impersonal. I would not like my [Australian] friends to hear me but in thirty-five years I have not succeeded in becoming assimilated."

Yet Nibbi devoted many of his best years to this "geological and impersonal" country. Over a span of more than thirty years he wrote more articles on Australia for Italian publications than anyone before or since: he published two books on Australia; he reared two children there; and, as well as bringing much European art and literature to Australia, he exhibited paintings by Nolan and Tucker in Rome.

Nibbi was seventy when I interviewed him at Grottaferrata which he compared to Sassafras (indeed the stone house with its unkempt garden could have been in the Dandenongs). Suffering had sharpened his features and given him a noble but haughty expression, abandoned only when he indulged his taste for paradox or humor. He had a shock of white hair and his stomach was distended: fond of rich and piquant food, although only five foot nine, for many years he had tipped the scales at eighteen stone. He was punished with a gastric ulcer and when, in 1954, part of his digestive tract was removed, it was found he had diabetes.

In Melbourne in the mid-thirties, tubby with a full face, he had seemed a walking advertisement for the pasta factory where he had worked in Italy. He had an aquiline nose, upstanding black hair and what Nettie Palmer called "smouldering" brown eyes. He changed little until 1954 but, with the intestinal operation, his hair turned white, his face became drawn and his weight almost halved. At the time I interviewed him, he seemed a mild man who had been set upon by the Fates. On Australia Day 1964 his Grottaferrata home was burnt down with loss of the manuscript of his biography of Modigliani (an English translation was saved), as well as many Polynesian and Aboriginal artefacts.

Gino's son Tristano has recalled Nibbi's spells of pessimism and questioning during his last years, in which he was fond of repeating Shakespeare's "Out, out brief candle". Once, listening to Chopin's first piano concerto, a favorite of his, Nibbi exclaimed "What more can a man do in a lifetime? A breath of wind and it's all over". Nibbi, who regarded death as

a leap in the dark, died at Grottaferrata on 17 December 1969.

How then did this son of a cooper in a small Adriatic port come to play a seminal role in Australian artistic life? Why did Nibbi, who was always subject to seasickness, shuttle between Italy and Australia for over thirty years? Who was Gino Nibbi?

Born on 29 April 1896 in Fermo, a hillside town of the Marches region, Nibbi grew up in the nearby fishing port and tourist resort of Porto San Giorgio. In 1915 he qualified as an accountant, then served as a lieutenant in an artillery regiment on the Austrian front. He was decorated for bravery in an action for which he volunteered but ended the war as a pacifist; in later years, during television war scenes he would leave the room.

After the war he worked as a bookkeeper for a Fermo agricultural cooperative and then for a Porto San Giorgio pasta factory. In 1922 he married Elvira Petrelli. The following year their daughter Sandra was born and, in 1925, Tristano, whose name indicates Gino's enthusiasm for Wagner. Nibbi's father loved music, particularly Italian opera, which could be enjoyed in a fine theatre in Fermo, and transmitted this passion to Gino. His father-in-law was an amateur painter who copied famous works, but Gino's interest was in the avant garde.

In a piazza of Fermo in 1920 Nibbi had a decisive meeting with an art teacher at the local technical school, Osvaldo Licini, who walked with a robust stick although he was only two years Nibbi's senior. The walking stick may have been important to Nibbi, not because Licini limped from a wartime leg injury but because he had wielded it to frighten outraged Parisian spectators who had attacked Picasso after the performance of one of his plays. Licini had convalesced from his war wound in Paris where he had participated in an exhibition with Kandinsky, had met artists and writers such as Picasso, Cocteau and Cendars, and had become a drinking mate of the Tuscan Amedeo Modigliani. Licini's stories of Modigliani doubtless inspired Nibbi to undertake his biography.

Nibbi, with his artistic friends such as Acruto Vitali, who was to become a poet, opera singer and, towards eighty, a painter and potter, dreamt not of Milan, and still less of Rome, but of Paris. An interest in Italian futurism did not diminish their conviction that Paris was the creative capital, the centre of the modernist movement. Nibbi, who surprised his friends with the breadth of his reading, was fond of quoting French authors.

Licini shared with Nibbi a passion for Rimbaud. Like Vitali, Licini was versatile, for he wrote stories as well as painted. Whereas Vitali was short, blue-eyed and ebullient, the olive-skinned, lanky Licini had dark, dreamy eyes and was outwardly calm, but capable of impulsive, quixotic gestures. Nibbi described him as having the "subterranean energy of a fearsome Bosch character". The friends exchanged French art magazines and poetry books. Licini was to develop a theory that the rebel angels would reconquer heaven; rebel temperaments together with an enthusiasm for figures such as Apollinaire set the Licini-Nibbi group at odds with the narrow perspectives and nationalist rhetoric which accompanied fascism's advent.

In 1928 Nibbi left Porto San Giorgio: Rimbaud had won out against the pasta factory. However he was not bound for *la ville lumiere* but for once-marvellous Melbourne. A letter from Nibbi in Melbourne to Vitali hints at why he left, for he described Porto San Giorgio as a "charming sewer which blinds you with its stagnancy", adding that he was "angry" with his past. In another letter he called Porto San Giorgio "deadly" and referred to his "humiliation", but without further details.

Possibly Australia had the appeal of the exotic for a young man impatient with the commonplace and fascinated by geography; in 1925 a friend Vincenzo Serroni, a ship's cook who had deserted in Melbourne, sponsored him. But the local fascist authorities would not let Nibbi leave. As a writer Nibbi was apolitical, but fascists threatened him several times. His family was republican, which at that time meant anti-fascist, anti-monarchist and anti-clerical, and he continued the tradition. Moreover some of his friends, such as Licini, had been jailed for anti-fascism.

Somehow Nibbi contacted Margherita Sarfatti, the striking blonde socialist journalist and author who at that time was Mussolini's lover, declaring his republicanism and explaining that he wanted to leave Italy for his family's good. Immediately he received permission to depart.

He sailed alone for Melbourne early in 1928. (The following year his family followed him.) Excited by visits to Travancore and Colombo on the voyage, Nibbi regretted only that he had begun his "adventure" late (he was thirty-one). On arrival in Melbourne he wrote Vitali that he had "no regrets"; evidently, like James Joyce, he was flashing his antlers in the air. However, soon he wrote again asking what "devilish fever" had brought him to Melbourne. Italians advised him to take the first ship home but he said he had barely a tram fare. Nevertheless, shortly after his arrival he opened the small Leonardo shop, stocked with over 1200 books as well as prints and reproductions. The books were mainly in Italian and English but eventually he was to sell volumes in French, German, Russian and Spanish, including those of the renowned Argentinian publisher Espasa Calpe.

Despite the Depression, the Leonardo, at 170 Little Collins Street, behind George's department store, quickly acquired a clientele. Some came to see the color prints, including large ones from Piper of Munich; previously Melbourne artists had to rely

almost exclusively on color illustrations. Others came to the shop to enjoy the conversations; Nibbi's English was halting, but his hands helped out.

His Australian education proceeded apace. On opening one morning in 1929 he placed a reproduction of a Renoir nude in the Leonardo window. At noon a gentleman arrived announcing that he was from Russell street. Nibbi asked what he wanted to buy, only to be told to remove the obscene painting which had already provoked thirty telephone complaints to police headquarters. A similar censorship applied to books, from *Ulysses* to illustrated erotica, but there are hints that this did not deter Nibbi from selling them.

From letters to Vitali it emerges that Nibbi continued to dream of enjoying the Paris of Raoul Dufy and Corbusier when he had made sufficient money selling prints of paintings by Matisse, Cezanne and Van Gogh. Although Australia was a "sweet limbo", Nibbi hoped to make it buzz with discussions of modern art. Adrian Lawlor was to describe Nibbi as an "enlightened agent provocateur" within stagnant Melbourne culture; it took one to recognise another. Nibbi was to provoke a buzz with trenchant criticism of the local art scene in the Melbourne Herald of 7 November 1931. Under the heading "Is Australian Art Failing—Stilted and Half Dead", Nibbi described the paintings in the Australian Art Associations' exhibition (Charles Wheeler, Bernard Hall, Daryl Lindsay and George Bell were among the exhibitors) as being "almost totally devoid of personality". A similar idea was put more blandly in his *Italian-English Reader*: "The artistic sense on the whole is controlled by old wise men, and thus appears belated by some thirty years compared to the European".

One morning a poorly-dressed blond fellow with a tobacco-colored moustache entered Nibbi's shop. Although the newcomer barely responded to questions, he conveyed that he had arrived from Peking. Someone suggested he was a drug addict, another that he was a Buddhist—which seemed more likely to Nibbi, for the fellow's "passivity verged on self-annihilation". He began to unroll the dirty drawing paper he carried under his arm: scenes from Malaysia and other places on his southwards journey. Nibbi recognised the talent and quickly put him in touch with collectors, who snapped up Ian Fairweather's work.

Nibbi was leading a double life: one among Melbourne sophisticates, another with the migrants of all nations scattered throughout Australia. Every few months he would take cases of books on a train from Spencer street and not return until he had sold them. He went as far as north Queensland to find Italian canecutters, who also provided material for the articles he had written for Italian publications since his arrival. He was being paid 200 lire an article, a substantial sum.

Nibbi described himself as "tireless as a gladiator" but also wanted to "once more break the yoke of routine". In 1933 he visited Polynesia "in search", wrote Nettie Palmer, "of any memories [of Gauguin] surviving among the people". The result was his first book, *Nelle Isole della Felicita* (*In the Happy Isles*) published in Milan in 1934 and well reviewed, particularly for its style. In 1936 he published an Italian-English Reader composed of his own essays, which he used as basis for his Italian lessons over A.B.C. radio. (His wife was teaching Italian at Melbourne's Berlitz school and the Conservatorium of Music). The following year he returned to Italy for publication in Florence of *Il Volto degli Emigranti* (*The Face of the Emigrants*) a collection of thirteen slices of migrant life. Each narrative is named after the place where it occurs: one is set in Melbourne, one in Sydney, two in Tasmania and the remaining eight in Queensland, predominantly in the coastal towns where Italian canecutters lived. Two episodes are set on Queensland trains which, Nibbi comments, "are the real cities in every underpopulated territory". The characters are mainly but not only Italians; Spaniards and Jugoslavs are also prominent. As there is a strong sense of place but little exploration of the rootless characters involved, Nibbi's later description of Australia as "geological and impersonal" could apply to the collection.

On his European trip in 1937 Nibbi visited Berlin and the city of his dreams, Paris, making calls there on De Chirico, Brancusi, Zadkine and the Polish artist Moise Kisling as sources for his biography of Modigliani. He acquired paintings by De Chirico, Kisling and Gino Severini.

That same year a Modigliani print of a nude brought Nibbi wide publicity. It was one of a consignment of color prints, including works by Cezanne, De Chirico, and Kisling, which Customs officials blocked. "One of my biggest crimes in Australia", Nibbi described it when I interviewed him nearly thirty years later. "Because of it, friends I had lost touch with wrote me from Scandinavia, Mexico, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro."

Nibbi's English had improved. From his arrival he had lectured occasionally in Italian at the Dante Alighieri Society, but now he lectured with panache in English also. In one of these lectures he was searching for a word to describe a modern sculpture. "Spiral", suggested one of the audience; "screw-shape" suggested another; but Nibbi was deep in thought. Then he found it: "helicoidal".

Gino remained a protagonist of art innovation in its clash with traditionalism. In October-November 1937 he loaned his Kisling for a National Gallery exhibition which increased interest in contemporary European art. He also attempted to arrange a De Chirico exhibition in Melbourne.

During 1937 discussions took place at the Leonardo (better known as Nibbi's) on the need for a body which

would promote innovative art. In mid-1938, the participants drafted a statement criticising the Australian Academy of Art, established the previous year under Robert Menzies' auspices. With George Bell as president, they established the Contemporary Art Society. Whereas Bell wanted purely an artists' society, John Reed and his friends saw contemporary painting as expression of a modern movement which had wider aesthetic and socio-political implications. Nibbi (a member of the C.A.S. council) was prominent in this group.

Among those who frequented Nibbi's shop in this period or later were H. V. Evatt, Keith Murdoch, Donald Friend, Hepzibah Menuhin, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Daryl and Lionel Lindsay, Sali Herman, James Gleeson, John Sinclair, Basil Burdett, Peter Bellew, Judah Waten, Alister Kershaw, Geoffrey Dutton, Stephen Murray-Smith, Alan McCulloch, John Perceval, Rupert Bunny, Matcham Skipper, Jock Frater, Colin Badger, Russell Drysdale, Joshua McClelland (who had the adjoining shop), Max Harris, Bernard Smith, Harry de Hartog, Carl Plate, Len Annois, Norma Redpath, Leonard French, Tim Burstall and Beresford Fowler, whose unintentional theatre of the absurd inspired, among others, Peter O'Shaughnessy. Some clients, such as Evatt, Burdett and the Burchetts were occasionally invited for dinner at Nibbi's Hawthorn home; a gourmet, he was loth to accept invitations to dinner parties and would never have an after-work "drink with the boys".

After being art entrepreneur, journalist, collector and committee man, in 1940 Nibbi became a judge of the Sydney Contemporary Art Society exhibition held both in Sydney and in Melbourne. He awarded a prize for 'new expression of thought' equally to two surrealist artists Eric Thake and James Gleeson, marking a stage beyond the post-impressionism which had been the prevailing style of the prints he imported for more than a decade.

The previous year he had been naturalised. If not naturalised, he would almost certainly have been interned during the war. But it was in Australia that he, like many other migrants, became fully Italian, whereas in Italy he thought of himself primarily as a Marchigiano (a native of the Marches region). In Australia, as friends remarked, "if you spoke of Italy his whole face lit up".

In 1947, despite the advice of his wife who thought it too early after the war, he closed the Leonardo and returned to Italy. Presumably when defining "nostalgia" he described himself: " . . . to suffer, to yearn, to be inebriated with the desire to reach your homeland in the hope of recovering at least your identity."

But it was a different Italy from that he had left. Nibbi settled in Rome rather than in Porto San Giorgio and, moreover, his identity was now linked to Melbourne's "crystalline autumnal air", taking his children to see the giraffes at its zoo, meeting a bull on the banks of the Murray, the bouillabaisse which had sent him into ecstasy in Port Vila, Martinique and Madera. He resumed contact with friends such as Licini, but his mother had died during the war. One of his hopes, he wrote, was to rejoin her after this life and "enthusiastic, see you again and, satisfied, contemplate you and, instead of crying, smile at you". His temporary return to Porto San Giorgio achieved something of the impact he had in Melbourne almost twenty years earlier: in 1987, those who were students at the time still remembered their stupor when Nibbi showed them color prints of Cezanne's "The Chair".

In Rome's central via della Scrofa, Nibbi opened a bookshop "Ai Quattro Venti" (To the Four Winds). His predecessor had specialised in books for the clergy, and the property was owned by the French Embassy to the Holy See. This, and the proximity of the Senate, determined its clientele. Although unfamiliar with missals and breviaries Nibbi survived, but he missed the ferment of the Paris end of Little Collins street. This was true even though the French ambassadors to the Holy See at the time were both writers: first the philosopher Jacques Maritain, then from 1948 the novelist Vladimir d'Ormesson. Nibbi knew them; the playwright Paul Claudel occasionally visited his shop, as did the woman who had enabled Nibbi to leave for Australia, Margherita Sarfalti.

There had been a reversal of roles. In Melbourne he had lived quite close to the city at Hawthorn, run a "European-style" salon/bookshop and participated in an avant-garde movement. In Rome he had bought an Australian-style house with garden in the hills, over an hour's drive from the city centre, and his bookshop was frequented mainly by clerics and senators rather than by bohemians. Although he praised "placid" Rome's "opulent climate" he called it a "provincial city packed with provincials". (His enthusiasm for Paris had waned also.) He became friendly with the aged American philiosopher George Santayana but otherwise, as far as stimulating company went, he might as well have transferred from a European capital to the colonies in shifting from Melbourne to Rome.

Placid Rome barely noticed when, in 1953, Nibbi held an exhibition of Nolan's Ned Kelly series and Albert Tucker's paintings. It was the only art exhibition held at the bookshop, and Ned Kelly meant nothing in Italy.

That same year he published in Florence *Oracoli Sommessi* (*Whispered Oracles*) probably his best and most revealing book. Perhaps because he was catering to clerical clients in his bookshop, he subtitled it "pages of a breviary". One of the approximately 700 brief entries arranged alphabetically, "Breviary", may be a clue to the book's genesis, for it reads " . . . imagined during dead moments in trains, trams, ships and buses."

The entries range from *Acacia* to *Zurich* and concern subjects as diverse as adultery and zabaglione, sentiments and Sydney (whose "half Brazilian, half Neapolitan" climate and atmosphere appealed to the "half pantheistic" Nibbi). They avoid the temptation to flippancy inherent in brief annotations. Many are devoted to artists, including Bach, Blake, Cezanne, Chopin, Emily Dickinson, Hindemith, D. H. Lawrence, Rilke, Verdi and Virginia Woolf. It is a product of a dilettante in the best sense of the word, in which Nibbi elucidates what has inspired his enthusiasm or, more rarely, his disapproval. The entries are as concentrated as espresso coffee: for instance, he devotes fifteen lines to Tahiti, which was the subject of his first book. Among the pithiest entries are the portraits of places such as Aden, Colombo and Naples. Other subjects which fully engage Nibbi are food, animals and flora. "To see them lined up so docilely," he writes of asparagus, "with that exhausted pale green, that mellifluous and insinuating flavor, and that diffuse liquid, they seem convalescents on a special diet."

Nibbi's hostility to Anglo-Saxon culture, and the English, is recurrent. The entry *Gentlemen* begins "An English prerogative usurped since the official sadism of obliterating European cities and monuments during the second world war." "The sadistic Allied bombing of European cities," he stated elsewhere in the same book "was not reprisal but intimidation". Political observations are infrequent, but that on Churchill describes him as involuntary promoter of Russia's refound power, then adds "the enemy was not the one he cunningly believed to choose."

A *'traitor'*, Nibbi maintains, is " . . . an idealist of any nation who allows himself to desert the English cause". Again, he stated that it is mistakenly believed England's strength derives from individual character and moral resources when, in fact, it is due, on the diplomatic level, to subterfuges, a unique capacity for compromise, dissimulation and duplicity; and, internally, on the "persuasive powers of a tamed press."

For Nibbi, Anglo-Saxon culture implied not only hypocrisy and euphemism but also rhetoric, as he noted in an entry on *Glory*. His detestation of "so-called Anglo-Saxon culture" has its corollary in pride in Italian and Latin qualities.

Although Nibbi had visited England, his experience of Anglo-Saxon culture was predominantly in Australia. Obviously he had a gutful of Anglo-Saxondom, but how did he reconcile it with his half-nostalgia for Australia? He was prepared to admit Latin and Italian defects and Australian, even English, qualities. But evidently the Australian-Anglo-Saxon qualities did not appeal to the heart as did the Latin; to Nibbi they concerned more the public than the private sphere. His other ploy was to see Australians as victims of Anglo-Saxondom, for instance when he described Sydneysiders as "open-minded and tolerant, used to making fun of their rhetoric and submitting, solemnly, to the hypnosis of London's when it becomes emphatic . . .".

Perhaps because *Oracoli Sommessi* appeared with a small publisher, it received little critical attention. The poet Sandro Penna was to say that Nibbi would have been a great writer if he had stayed at home. Twenty years away from Rome had probably been too long if he was to build a literary reputation but, in any case, he was bound once more for Australia.

Rather than choose between two countries, both of which inspired nostalgia but also irritation, he wanted simply to be with his family, but now it was divided. He had hoped Tristano would take over the Rome bookshop, but his son preferred to teach English at the British Institute, whose Director of Studies was a former Leonardo client, Max Nicholson. In Melbourne Sandra was pregnant. This made Nibbi decide to return where, for years, he had watched swallows cavort in the "virulent cobalt of Melbourne mornings".

It was a homecoming with friends refound. And the grandson was a delight. Nibbi complained that in Italy he had been exploited like an American tourist. He bought a house in Hawthorn once more and resumed writing feature articles for Italian dailies, including the Roman Il Tempo and the Bolognese Il Resto del Carlino. Nibbi travelled extensively from Arnhem Land to Zeehan; from Carnavon, where he went whaling, to Broken Hill. He described the impact of the Anglo-Saxons on the Aborigines as "Syphilisation".

Not only were Nibbi's articles on Australia appearing in Italy but some Australians influenced by him were exploring his country. One was Norma Redpath, who was just beginning her career as a sculptor. In 1956 she made her first trip to Italy. "Undoubtedly some of us went to Italy because of Nibbi," she recalls. "A mixture of empathy and detachment, he seemed to hold a mystery which was both Italy and the creative freedom I was seeking".

As they wanted to be with Tristano again, in 1957 the Nibbis set sail once more. They left Sydney on the *Castel Felice*, which passed through the Panama canal, and disembarked in Lisbon. They made an extensive tour of Spain, a country which appealed strongly to Nibbi, as was evident in the articles he wrote for his Italian papers and the Melbourne Herald. They were so enthusiastic it almost seemed he had suffered sensory deprivation in Australia. In Granada the Nibbis complimented a cafe proprietor on his Italian. The Spaniard said he had not been in Italy but had learnt his Italian on the Queensland canefields.

In 1958, for the fourth and last time, the Nibbis sailed to Australia. Once more he sent articles to Italian publications and also to the Madrid art magazine

*Elvira and Gino Nibbi, Melbourne 1937*

Goya. For six months in 1961 he left Melbourne for Tokyo where he was the Japan Times art critic. He was enthusiastic about Japan and in 1966 completed a book of essays, "Variazioni Nipponiche". It remained unpublished, as did his study, completed that same year, of a hundred artists of all periods called "Galleria". In 1963 Nibbi left Australia for Italy again, making a journalistic stopover in Spain.

That year *Cocktails d'Australia* was published in Milan (in Melbourne he had collaborated with Netti Palmer to produce an English version, but was disappointed by the result). Nibbi, who said he achieved his writing aims with *Cocktails d'Australia*, called the twenty-six items "stories", but rather they are slices of life, briefer and more vivid than those of *Il Volto degli Emigrati*. The items seem largely to fit the statement of purpose with which he prefaced his Japanese vignettes: "manipulation of true episodes to produce a narrative which provides a society's objective portrait". The formula bristles with ambiguities. One episode is set in Tasmania, another describes a trip in Arnhem Land, while a third is an affectionate portrait of an Italian restaurateur in Innisfail, whose passion was writing, for a price, poetry for ceremonies such as wedding feats. But most of the pieces give a lively picture of life among Italian migrants in or near Melbourne.

One of the best is "Newsreel of a Suburb", which records life in a Hawthorn street inhabited mainly by migrants. The anonymous narrator achieves an appropriately gossipy tone, linking scenes with phrases such as "And here's the most awaited and cursed of all" (the postman) or "and another thing", as if a newsreel is rolling. It is one of four items devoted to Hawthorn where the Nibbis lived for some seventeen years. The other three recount what was presumably the Nibbi's experience when they let half their house to various couples. One *de facto* couple is violent, another comprises two drunkards, and the third political agitators. In an attempt to understand these wild couples, the Nibbi-figures spy on them through keyholes or by opening their mail.

In striking contrast to the Nibbi-figures is their next-door neighbor, elderly, robust Artemisia, an Abruzzese peasant. The Nibbis had known Australia for a span of thirty years; Artemisia had flown out only six months previously to join her son and daughter-in-law. Artemisia hardly knows a word of

English and not much more Italian. She uses Abruzzo dialect, just as she conserves Abruzzo attitudes and folk knowingness. Despite her language limitations, she retails gossip about everyone in the street. She is more at home than the Nibbis because she considers Australians the foreigners. Abruzzo has assimilated Australia: she represents the strength of uncontaminated Italian peasant culture. One cannot help suspect that Nibbi admired Artemisia and may even have envied her.

It is noteworthy that, while Nibbi had contact with burgeoning local talents, they hardly entered his narratives. One concerns an art exhibition opening but is dominated by gossip about bourgeois bed-hopping, while another records a visit to Stanley, Tasmania, where a former poetess has been submerged in domesticity. (Although a parallel between her and the whales which are beached during his visit would have given the narrative greater depth, Nibbi does not make it.) Admittedly Nibbi was writing for an Italian audience primarily interested in Italians' vicissitudes, but it is nevertheless intriguing that the Leonardo-Australian art world, a large slice of his experience, was virtually ignored in his slices of life. He missed an opportunity to break the stereotype about uncultured Australia.

The division between part of Nibbi's life and his narrative seems to correspond to a conviction that in Australia vitality and wit lay with the Italians rather than with the locals. It bears out strikingly the assertion in the *Cocktails d'Australia* preface that he was neither acclimatised nor assimilated – despite enjoying from the beginning good connections and artistic Australian friends.

Nibbi was prepared to concede that a country is what one makes of it and that Australia had valid achievements: for instance, he expressed his delight in places such as Green Island, and wrote appreciatively of Melbourne. He deplored those who left for Europe claiming Australia lacked culture without seeing the "sporadic sparks which occasionally arise . . . and which are premonitory".

But it seems Nibbi did not warm to Australia. In an article welcoming the advent of Barry Humphries' Mrs Everage he deplored the tyranny of the average man and the intellectual's consequent emigration. His repetition of this complaint elsewhere may have reflected frustration that he was not more heeded. In the same article he compared the compendium on behavior given arriving migrants to a diploma of the average man. He detested this assimilation to mediocrity, the prevailing conformism which seemed all of a piece with provincialism and "official, enforced optimism". He deplored widespread drunkenness and the puritanism of Australian life, by which he meant more than a severe attitude to sexual matters (indeed, he frequently commented on Australian women's forwardness). By puritanism he meant mainly a utilitarian attitude to life which, by excluding the gratuitous and the superfluous, inevitably dessicated it. Associated with this attitude, he found, was hypocrisy, a reluctance to talk frankly about sex but still less about money or domestic troubles.

Others, including native-born Australians, have made similar criticisms. Some of the charges (lack of frankness and ability to dissimulate) are often levelled against Italians. Nibbi's criticism is interesting because made by a naturalised Italian who, although a member of Australian society's artistic elite, identified instead with Italian migrants. It is a denial of the possibility of assimilation; Nibbi preferred Artemisia to Australia.

After his return to Rome in 1963 Nibbi's greatest enthusiasm was for visits to Porto San Giorgio which, on arrival in Melbourne, he had berated as a "charming sewer". Now, on his trips from Grottaferrata to the Adriatic port, he delighted in meeting old friends and recognising children of former acquaintances. He was making up for thirty-three years' absence. As he had done for Italo-Australian, he compiled a glossary of local expressions. He always had shares in the local pasta factory whence he had escaped to Australia; Rimbaud with ragu.

Fifty years a herald of the avant-garde, Nibbi was now tender towards the forebears he was soon to join. In an article unfinished at his death, he wrote of Porto San Giorgio cemetery as an oasis of silence. He claimed that "nearly all in the necropolis" smiled at him from the porcelain portraits on their tombs " . . . because when they were alive I knew many of them and we exchanged words, plans and other things. That is why I am happy to go to the cemetery. Within the walls I find all the city I once knew."

*Desmond O'Grady, Australian novelist, biographer and playwright, lives in Rome, where he works as a journalist. He comments: Nettie Palmer mentions Gino Nibbi in her* Fourteen Years, *and Cordelia Gundolg has an article on him in Quaderni dell'Instituto Italianodi Cultura (no. 4, Melbourne 1971).* *My thanks are due to Vivian Smith, the Melbourne Herald librarian, to Acruto Vitali and Luigi Dani and, most of all, to Tristano Nibbi, who made available to me his father's writings and letters.*

LEON TRAINOR

# The Settlement

*From the forthcoming novel* Livio *(Greenhouse)*

Grandfather was dead. I had seen him die. I took another look, just to make sure.

His smile had an air of rat cunning. If his eyes had been open he would have looked sideways at me, a sudden darting glance. He would have winked.

He seemed utterly detached from the Mass. Even if he were alive he wouldn't have heard the priest. At that moment the priest was comparing him to the apostle Paul, his namesake, who had suffered much but had kept his sense of humor. Grandfather Paolo smiled in wry indifference.

His coffin floated in mid-air, buoyed up on a wave of pale wreaths and whirling carnation hoops. They shimmered in the half-dark church, as if they would evaporate in the crowd of bodies around them. Another instant and they would be gone, swallowed up like their scent in the bitter incense.

Grandfather's face and hands were as pale as the flowers. They had been just as pale two days ago, when I came back from Milan.

He had been alive then. Julie had been with him when I arrived. She heard my voice out in the roadway. She ran to greet me and dragged me up to see grandfather. Halfway up the stairs she ran out of breath. I picked her up and carried her across the balcony into grandfather's room.

The late afternoon shadows had begun to fill his room. His face was very pale on the linen pillow-slip.

He shivered. He always left the door open during the day, even in the dead of winter. It was a sign that there was life in the house. People would think him inhospitable if his door was shut while there was still someone inside.

—Who is it?
—Livio, grandfather.
—Ah, the tourist. How are you?
—Happy to be home again. And you?
—I can't complain. I have Giulia for company, I can't do better than that.
—Who?
—Giulia.
—Oh, Julie. How has she been?
—She sits with me all day. She never says a word. As I said, she is a good companion. How is Celeste?
—My aunt sends her love.
—She doesn't send herself. She was too busy to come and see me the other time too, when your father died. Do you think she'll come?
—She said she prays for you to get better.
—That means she definitely won't come. Still, I'm glad you're here. I was worried for you. And it isn't good for Giulia to be left alone.
—Has she been a problem?
—Of course not. But it isn't good for her to be away from you. I also missed you. How long were you away this time?
—Fourteen days.
—Too long. Where else did you go besides Milan?
—Only Milan. I stayed with Aunt Celeste.
—I was in Milan once, years ago, before the war.
—Under Mussolini?
—Of course not. I'm talking about the real war. I did my military service there in 1914, near Monza. I also went back after the war.
—The same war?
—Of course. I was on my way north to the mountains, to find where my brother was buried. I also left my wife and children behind.
—Did you find him?
—No. There were too many graves, most of them without names. My children were very unhappy while I was away, especially your father. Silvio was a sensitive child.
—Perhaps I should've taken Julie with me. I'm not sure Aunt Celeste would have liked that.
—If you want your children to love you, don't be separated from them. Your father, for example. I shouldn't have let him go to Australia. Why on earth did you let your wife do the same thing?
—It isn't quite the same thing.
—How long has she been there?
—Ten years, I think.
—When is she coming back?
—She isn't. I told you that.
—Then you'll be going to join her?
—Probably not.

—See what I mean?

He closed his eyes suddenly. Something had hurt him. It might have been the pain in his leg, it might have been the conversation.

He had never accepted my break with Nadia. For him it was a separation based on necessity. Such things had divided all the families he knew. One of his brothers had emigrated to America in the 1920s. His own daughter Celeste had married a fellow from Pennapiedimonte and moved to Milan with him, never to return.

Of course, one or two details of my separation didn't fit the usual pattern. It had been Nadia who had gone to Australia in search of a better life, I had remained behind to raise Julie and make a precarious living for myself as a *professore* when the cheques from Australia had stopped. That was all a bit odd, but grandfather had seen stranger things.

It was dark now. I got up to leave. Julie kissed him on the forehead. We went out to the next house along the balcony and had supper with my aunt.

When I got up next morning it was very cold. I dressed and went downstairs without waking Julie. I went out onto the balcony and stood in front of Uncle Mario's place, waiting for my cousin to come out. It was the last day of the hunting season. We were going up on the mountain above Pennapiedimonte to shoot grouse.

It was very still. I could almost hear the mist slide along the stone walls of the house.

I expected to hear my cousin clatter down the stairs behind me. Instead, the first thing I heard was the crunch of footsteps along the dirt road. All of our family walk the same way, and for a weird moment I expected my cousin to walk towards me out of the mist.

It was Uncle Fabio, the bachelor who lived across the road. He clumped up the stairs in his gumboots and walked gently over to grandfather's bedroom door. He tapped on the door.

—Papà. Papà, are you awake?

Grandfather moaned. That didn't mean he was awake. He also moaned in his sleep. My aunt said he even screamed in his sleep without waking. Fabio seemed to think he was awake.

—Papà, it's Fabio. I want to talk about the settlement this afternoon. May I come in?

Fabio must be nuts. How could he get in? The door was locked. My aunt always locked it when she left grandfather at night. Even if grandfather had a key, he couldn't open the door. Six months ago the doctors had cut off one of his legs. Now the other leg had gangrene. He couldn't sit up without screaming in pain.

There was another moan from behind the door. Fabio grew more excited. His fingers drummed on the door.

—Papà, Papà let me in. We've got to talk about the settlement, it's important. I don't want you to get the wrong idea about what I said the other day. It doesn't matter about the land at the Solagna. Mario can have it. But I've got to have the land in front of the house, like we first agreed. You won't go back on your word, will you Papà?

Silence. Surely Grandfather was awake. Fabio put his big round head against the door and listened. He grabbed the door handle and shook it. The door convulsed.

—I know you're awake, Papà, you can hear me. You'd better not play any silly games this afternoon, that's all. We'll make the settlement as we agreed.

He turned and stumped down the stairs. His footsteps crunched off into the fog.

I hadn't moved while he spoke. He had been only two metres away and hadn't noticed me.

The door opened behind me. I jumped. A shotgun came out of the dark slot of the doorway, followed by my cousin.

—Have you been waiting long? You should have knocked. I'm a light sleeper.

—I suppose uncle Fabio woke you. Did you hear what he said?

He gave me an odd look. I misunderstood it and asked another question.

—You mean you didn't hear him? I wouldn't be surprised if they heard him across the valley in Pennapiedimonte. What kind of light sleeper are you?

—I didn't hear a thing. We had the shutters closed upstairs. You have to knock on the door if you want to be heard.

It was a strange morning out on the mountain. We spent hours clattering up and down the stony slopes and never saw a thing to shoot. My cousin would have been happier down among the broom trees and thorn bushes he knew so well, but someone in Pennapiedimonte had told him there were grouse on the mountain. It had been a challenge, he had never shot grouse before.

At one point the dog disappeared around a cliff, scattering loose stones behind it. As soon as the noise of the dog died away, my cousin sat down on a rock and began to talk. That was odd, I had never known him to interrupt a hunt to have a chat. It wasn't much of a chat, either. He didn't wait for most of my answers but provided them himself.

I began to wish for the dog to come back. We would never get anywhere near a grouse while we talked. They would hear us and melt off into the snow higher up the mountain. If he didn't shoot anything he would get in a filthy mood and sulk. At least he stopped talking when he sulked, but he was still far from that. I put it all down to the fact that he wasn't used to shooting on the mountain.

—Did you go and visit those fellows I told you about?

He wanted news of his friends in the Milan political police. He was upset to hear I hadn't been to see them.

—But I gave you their names, addresses and phone numbers, dammit. They were good fellows, every one of them.

—I'm sure they were, but I didn't go into the city very often. I went a couple of times to look for coin dealers, but after that I couldn't stand it. It was too dangerous. I hung around Aunt Celeste's for the rest of my stay.

—You're worse than I am when it comes to excitement. You're right, though. I couldn't stand it either, I was glad to come back. It's quiet here, more orderly. The hunting is better too. In Milan the game used to carry weapons. Half the time you weren't sure who was the hunter.

He had always loved hunting. It had become an obsession since he had left Milan and come back to Pennapiedimonte. He normally spent his four-hour lunch break in the thickets. He would have spent the rest of the day on the mountain, if his father hadn't threatened to skin him like a fox. He had agreed reluctantly to bring me back in time to sign the agreement.

He had stopped talking by the time we got back. No, he wouldn't come inside. He had to put the dog away. He went off in a huff.

I ran up onto the balcony and went into grandfather's bedroom. He wasn't there.

I found him in the kitchen, sitting on his wheelchair next to the fire. He opened one eye when I came in, then shut it again.

There were other people in the room. Mario and Fabio stood opposite me. Their arms were folded, they looked uncomfortable. Fabio nodded at me and tried to fold his arms more tightly. The strain showed on his face.

Mario unfolded his arms and gestured jerkily towards the carafe on the window-sill. Then he folded them again, as tightly as his brother.

Why did they look so stiff? They didn't like each other, but they usually ignored each other without difficulty. It wasn't because of the settlement, either, though they had thought of nothing else for weeks. There was something else that was odd. It was the way they stood against the wall.

Of course, they were wearing suits. They looked like the photos my aunt had shown me, the studio portraits they had sent grandfather when they were working in Switzerland.

I didn't contribute anything to their peace of mind by staring at them. Uncle Mario suddenly started forward, grabbed the carafe of wine and poured me a glass. He put it on a corner of the table in front of me. The table was covered in documents.

—It's good to see you Livio. You're on time too. Do you know Agostino? He's our notary, he fixed the settlement.

Mario waved vaguely towards the shadows on my right. One of them stepped out and shook my hand. It was a young man, less solidly built than my uncles, with steel-rimmed spectacles on his nose. He was wearing a suit too, but he didn't seem ill at ease in it.

He had a sense of occasion. His hands had already slipped out of mine and darted across to seize one of the documents on the table.

—Since we are all assembled we can proceed to the purpose of the assembly, I think. Does that meet with your approval?

He got the silence he wanted. He began to read.

Most of grandfather's land was split up fifty-fifty. Fabio got the land in front of his house. Mario had built next to grandfather's place, he would get it when grandfather died. For the moment he would have to be satisfied with the land at the Solagna. Both brothers seemed satisfied.

Aunt Celeste in Milan also got a little land, near her husband's allotment at Pissavini. She also got a little money. That was odd. Her brothers hadn't got any money. And why such a paltry amount?

There was something familiar about the amount. I must have paid a similar sum recently. Yes, of course, it was the price of a return fare from Milan to Pescara. I looked sideways at grandfather but he hadn't smiled.

The notary came to my father's share. As Silvio's representative at the settlement I got quite a lot of money. My brother and sisters got much smaller amounts. Like Aunt Celeste's train fare, the money would be lodged in the post office at Pennapiedimonte until the owners came to claim it. I felt sure they never would.

The money was a pleasant surprise, but I was still impatient to hear the rest. I needed to know who would get my father's house. It stood next to Uncle Mario's house and shared the same balcony. Julie and I were living in it. It was a tiny place, but we had to have somewhere to stay until I found a job.

The notary stopped speaking. The tension in the room relaxed a little. He looked up.

—Is everything as it should be? Does anyone want to say something before you all sign?

What about my father's house? Why hadn't he mentioned it? Nobody else seemed to have noticed anything odd. The two brothers still stood with their arms folded, looking like visitors in their father's house, but they were more relaxed now. They had heard what they wanted to hear. Nobody said anything. Oh well, get it over with.

—What about my father's house? Grandfather never made the house over to him while he was alive. Shouldn't there be some mention of it in the agreement?

The atmosphere suddenly tightened. Fabio threw up his hands and turned away abruptly. His voice crashed

out in the silent room.

—Believe me, Livio, I had nothing to do with it. It's a dirty trick. It should never have happened.

—What do you mean? what dirty trick? Grandfather still owns the house, of course he does. You can't sell a house like that, not if it's built onto your own place. Who would want a house like that anyway? It's impossible.

I looked around at each of them. Grandfather still had his eyes shut tight. The notary had taken off his glasses and was calmly polishing them.

Uncle Mario gestured vaguely, as though he had reached out to touch something and found that it had suddenly disappeared.

—It's like this Livio, Papà has sold the house.

—I don't believe it. You couldn't sell a house like that to anyone, it has only three rooms.

—Don't worry, Papà hasn't sold it out of the family. He sold it to me. I bought it for your cousin Paolo. He'll need a house of his own when he marries.

—When did this happen?

—A few months ago, before you came back from France with Giulia.

—You mean I've been living as a guest of yours all this time?

—Please, Livio, it isn't a question of obligation. We have been happy to have you with us. You can stay with us as long as you like, if you want to.

What was I to do? I couldn't think of anything. I felt numb.

Until that moment I hadn't realised how much I needed the house. Julie wasn't well, I didn't have a job. I was aware of all those details of my life, but they had been bearable before. I mustn't think of them or I would panic.

They were all watching me, waiting to see what I would do next. Stuff the lot of them. I had nothing to lose.

—What if I don't sign? The agreement needs my signature. It'll be worthless without it. I won't sign.

My uncles hadn't thought of that. Their eyes bulged in their sockets. Mario fumbled wildly in the air in front of him. Fabio found his voice with difficulty.

—You must sign. Everything depends on it. I'll be ruined if you don't sign. I can't live on my savings. I may as well go out and hang myself.

—Why should I care? You've all dispossessed me, your brother's son. If I'm to be turned out I may as well take you all with me.

There was a dry, crackling sound from a corner of the room. Grandfather was laughing.

—You're right, Livio, brotherly love doesn't count for much in our family. You must admit, though, that we look after our children. For that reason I think you should sign.

—I think I'd rather be cut out of the agreement, grandfather. You cut me out of the family when you sold the house. Very well, if your surviving children matter so much to you, you'll have to have another agreement drawn up.

—You know I'll be dead before this snail of a notary can draft twelve copies of another agreement. Once I'm dead it will never be settled. Mario will have a house, Silvio's house, but everything else will be sequestered, the land, the other houses, everything. Everyone will be destitute once you let the bailiffs in. As it is, I'm giving the money from Silvio's house to you and Giulia.

—But I don't want the money. I need a house, I must have somewhere to live.

—You won't live here forever. You're an Australian. You travel a lot, it is better for you to have money. You have a daughter to look after, too. You'll need money for that. Please sign the agreement.

He ran out of breath. He put his head back and spent the last of his strength sucking air into his lungs.

My uncles stared at me, like two pullets mesmerised by a snake. Only Fabio showed any sign of life, his upper lip trembled. I had to make the next move.

I took out my pen and went to the table where all the papers were laid out. I signed myself out of their lives a dozen times. I left the wine untasted and went outside.

The priest stepped out from the altar and came down to the railing with the ciborium in his hand. My aunt stirred beside me and got to her feet. Yes, I suppose I should too. I got up and stepped into the aisle.

As I knelt to take the host, something strange happened in the air around me. A silent but profound feeling of unease rippled through the church.

I took the host on my tongue, got to my feet and turned. Every eye in the church was staring at me. I stopped in spite of myself. Why were they staring? I forced my feet to start moving again.

As I reached my seat I realised what was happening. I was pushing my way through a crowd of women. I was the only man to take communion.

All the other men stood at the back of the church. Mario and Fabio stood on opposite sides of the church, in front of the others. My cousin stood next to his father, he was wearing his police uniform.

I sat down next to the coffin and waited as the seats around me filled up with women. Grandfather had been surrounded by women last night, when he died.

Mario and cousin Paolo were on the balcony outside grandfather's house when I came up the steps. Mario was strolling up and down in the shadows with his hands in his pockets. My cousin leant on the railing and looked across the valley at the lights of Pennapiedimonte.

—Hello uncle, how is grandfather?

—I don't know. I haven't been inside for a while.

—Perhaps we should go in and find out.

—You go in Livio, I don't think anyone will mind if you go and see him.

He spoke softly. His face glistened wetly in the shadows. I understood he wasn't going back inside.

My aunt stopped me on the doorstep.

—Where's Giulia?

—Julie? I put her to bed ages ago.

—Please go and get her. She must say goodbye to him.

—She will be asleep. She needs to rest.

—She should be here to say goodbye. Go and get her.

I came back with Julie dozing in my arms. The bedroom was full of women. Some already wore black. They moved about like shadows in the dim light. They would cluster in groups to talk in undertones as soft as the darkness between them and then separate and drift off to form new groups.

Someone had hung a shawl over the only light in the room, next to grandfather's bed. The yellow light softened the edges of his face, but the lines in his face had a depth I hadn't seen before. As we pressed forward to the bed his eyes moved in a stricken manner from one face to the next.

I reached down and took his hand. It convulsed and clamped itself around my fingers. It hurt. His grip wouldn't relax. When I realised the spasm of pain wasn't going to stop I wrenched my fingers free. His hand strayed across the sheet as if it had a life of its own.

I knelt down and Julie kissed him, as she always did when she went to visit him. His hand stopped moving and the cloudy look in his eyes cleared. He looked at her for an instant then his eyes turned and looked up at me. He stayed quite still as he looked at me, but the look in his eyes was like a shrug. He knew why we had come to visit him.

He shut his eyes suddenly and began to pant with pain. His chest moved sharply up and down. His head pivoted on its neck, he turned his face to the wall.

I turned away so that Julie wouldn't see. She swung her head around to look. I turned again, so she lifted her head above mine. I decided to go back to the bedside. The women stepped aside to let us pass.

His breath began to sing in the back of his throat. A thought burst into my head, it moved in time to his breathing, panting with the same rhythm. Please God let him die, don't let him suffer, please God stop the pain. The prayer repeated itself over and over in my head until I no longer noticed I was saying it.

Julie breathed in suddenly and pointed. His face had relaxed, the pain had drained out of it and left him calm. His eyes had opened but I couldn't see what he was looking at. His breathing grew more easy and slow. Then he stopped breathing.

Julie hugged me and snuggled her head into my neck. She was right, it was time to go. In the doorway we collided with Uncle Fabio coming the other way.

—How is he? Why didn't anyone tell me?

—They sent for you. Where have you been?

—Down the hill, below my house. He should have waited till I came back.

With his blank, bewildered face he looked like a hurt child. Other men came into the bedroom. They shook Fabio's hand and murmured their regrets. He didn't seem to notice. He looked at his father.

I didn't go near grandfather's house until late next morning. The balcony was crowded with people on their way to the funeral. My aunt bustled among them, offering flat cakes on a dish.

—So there you are. What have you done with Giulia?

—I took her over to the Solagna. She'll stay at Camillo's for the day.

—You know your grandfather would have liked her to come.

—Yes aunt, and it is a long walk from the church to the cemetery. It would tire her too much. The only car in the procession will be the hearse, you wouldn't want her to drive in the hearse, would you?

She shuddered and crossed herself. I went back down onto the roadway. There was a crowd around the hearse, listening to the driver.

—The Maserati was a real car. The Ferrari has its good points, yes, but they depend too much on their drivers. Lauda, Regazzoni . . . can you imagine what they would have done with a Maserati?

—Smashed it up.

—Don't laugh. Formula One racing hasn't been the same since Maserati packed it in. Nowadays it's all a question of design. In those days you needed nerve. You had to have guts to drive those things.

His eyes had a glazed, dreamy look. Nobody else said anything. We waited for him to start talking again but he continued to gaze off into the distance.

There was a scuffling sound on the stairs behind us. The funeral assistants were bringing down the coffin.

—Get your Maserati ready Enzo, you've got a passenger.

—You mean a co-driver. He couldn't drive slower than Enzo.

The laughter didn't stop until the coffin was locked away in the hearse. We set off up the road to Pennapiedimonte in high spirits.

The Mass was over. It was time to pay our last respects. As I stepped out into the aisle, my aunt's arm brushed mine. There was a funny smell about her. Her coat was wet, so was mine, it had rained the last kilometre to Pennapiedimonte. No, it wasn't the wet coat which smelt odd. It was my aunt, she smelt upset. She fumbled something into my hand, hard, round. A coin, a silver coin. Five hundred lire.

—Put it in his coat pocket when you go past.

—But it doesn't make sense. We're Catholics, this is a Catholic church. Catholics don't believe those things.

—Do it anyway. I'm sure the others have forgotten to do it. You never know, your grandfather might need it.

Mario and Fabio had already come past and bent

in turn to kiss their father. I did the same and slipped the coin into grandfather's waistcoat pocket. I looked back at my aunt. Her face was as stern as ever, but she nodded warmly.

When everyone had filed past, the two funeral assistants pushed their way through to the coffin. They carried a large, dome-shaped glass lid. They took a long time fitting it over the body. Grandfather's cunning smile probably distracted them. Perhaps they half expected him to breath on the glass and cloud it. It was the sort of joke he liked to play.

The wooden coffin lid was passed through the crowd to Mario and Fabio. They raised it over the coffin, and its shadow ran across grandfather's body like a veil. They lowered the lid over the bolts, flipped the butterfly nuts into place and screwed them down tight. The entire operation took only a few seconds, as though they had done it many times before. Perhaps they had thought of it so often that it came easily to them.

Several other men stepped forward, grabbed the coffin by the handles and swung it up into the air. The women picked up the wreaths and held them above their heads. Everyone surged towards the church doorway.

The crowd packed in the back of the church exploded out into the square. The women waved the wreaths in the air and clattered down the front steps. The hearse driver whipped off his cap and ran around to open the back of the hearse. When the coffin was in place the women arranged the smaller wreaths around it. They hung the large, hoop-shaped wreaths along the sides of the hearse.

When the last wreath was hung, everyone stepped back to admire the display. Higher up, around the church door they jostled for a better view.

Bells began to bang and hammer in the tower. The priest pushed his way down the steps, followed by an altar boy with a censer. They took their places in front of the hearse.

It started to rain as the hearse pivoted in the narrow square. We turned up our coat collars and scuttled behind it, trying to get a good place in the procession.

Mario and Fabio walked immediately behind the hearse. I walked several paces behind them with my cousin and aunt. Behind us, the narrow street seethed with dark figures dressed in different shades of grey and black. The first umbrellas popped open.

The rain fell steadily. It ran in trickles through our hair and down our necks. It fell even more thickly across the valley. The whole hilltop was a blur. I couldn't see the house anymore.

—Has anyone got an umbrella?

Paolo produced one. He didn't bother to open it.

—What's the matter? Has it got a hole in it?

He aimed it at his father's back.

—My father hasn't got an umbrella. It wouldn't look right for me to be dry and him to be soaking wet.

Someone in the crowd behind us must have heard him. A fellow in a dark suit darted out and thrust himself between the two brothers. He held out an umbrella.

—Come on you two. You've divided up everything else, you can at least share an umbrella.

Uncle Mario stared at him in amazement. He hesitated, then reached for the umbrella. Fabio ignored the fellow and kept on walking with his hands in his pockets. Mario shrugged and turned back to follow the hearse. The man with the umbrella stood aside to let us pass.

—What was that about? Why wouldn't Fabio share the fellow's umbrella?

—Perhaps he thought it was a joke at his expense. He was probably right, people do funny things. Still, my father also refused the umbrella, you all witnessed that.

He popped open his umbrella and gave it to his mother. We both huddled close to her.

—What will you do now Livio?

—I'm going to stand close to you, aunt, and stay dry.

—That's not what I meant. Anyway, it's your cousin's umbrella.

—I take your point. I shall probably go back to Australia. There's Julie for one thing, she isn't very well. The hospitals are better in Australia. Also, now that grandfather's dead there isn't much to keep me here anymore.

—You are always welcome in our house, Livio.

—Thank you aunt, but I can't be a guest forever. I will have to find a place of my own.

My cousin didn't seem to be listening. He looked straight ahead. Perhaps he was waiting for his house to appear out of the rain across the valley.

My aunt's arm trembled suddenly. She spoke with a voice that was very firm but very small. It sounded like it came out of the depths of her.

—I wouldn't like you to think that your grandfather didn't love you. He loved you very much, more than the rest of us, because of Giulia.

—They were very close. Julie loved to visit him too. I suppose they liked each other's company.

—No, Livio, not because of that. He loved you too, you know, and because of her.

—I don't understand.

—It's simple. You are the only member of his family to name a child after his brother Giulio, the one who died in the war.

I suddenly remembered the old lady who lived down near Ponte Avello, who gave us cakes and wine one late afternoon years ago, shortly after I had arrived in Italy.

—The one who died in the fighting along the Isonzo?

—Yes. That was when the family first paid for the place in the cemetery. They expected Giulio to be brought home, but he never was. Now your grandfather will fill the space. His amputated leg is

already there, waiting for the rest of him.

—But Giulio died over fifty years ago.

—Yes, but nobody named a child after him. There was nobody to remember him with his name. A soul must put its life in order before it can find peace. You changed all that when you had a child.

—That made grandfather happy?

My voice had an uncertain sound to it. The words formed with difficulty.

—Everything was in order. He was very happy to see her before he died. He was worried that she wasn't well. He sold your father's house so you could have enough money to look after her.

I couldn't think of anything to say. I shut my mouth tight so that I wouldn't say anything, I knew my voice would break.

Tears began to run down my face. They ran into the corners of my mouth and down my nose and chin, I felt they would never stop. I wanted to open my mouth and shout loud enough for grandfather to hear. I felt it strain in me, tightening my chest.

What could I shout now? Grandfather, why didn't you tell me? It was too late for that. I kept my fists tight in my pockets and held my shoulders rigid. I walked straight ahead behind the hearse and the two brothers who ignored each other.

We all walked without saying a word. The rain continued to fall gently over all of us. It breathed against my face. It mingled with the salt tears that still flowed down my cheeks and washed their taste away.

## JANUARY IN BRISBANE

January oppresses like
a Roman god – heavy of brow
and with a sullen look of clouds
threatening storms. Drags on day
after day with its cohorts
of clouds weighted grey with the burnished
polish of heavy armor. How
does bare flesh defend under the
metallic assault of this month?
Sweat like tears pouring from the skin's
pores. Be subject and abject? This rule
has to be survived if we are
to arise to the blandishments of
a kinder God, above Caesar.

JOHN BLIGHT

# Credo, 1988

Unless you are one of the living dead, you'll have to write another will and another, always another . . . So, too, unless you've given up on life before time finally escapes, you will put together another Credo.

> I am coming to believe, not in God, but a Divine Presence of which Jesus, the Jewish prophets, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi and Co. are the more comprehensible manifestations. This Presence controls us but only to a certain degree: life is what we, its components, make it. Hence the existence of megalomaniac politicians, dictators, mafia millionaires, greedy landlords, rapists, murderers, self-obsessed spouses within the same scheme which embraces the Teresas, St. John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, and others who continue to speak to us out of the historic waxwork-museum—all these along with the anonymous who lift us from the gutters, wiping the vomit from our lips, who comfort us as our limbs lie paralysed on the pavement, feed us within their limited means, and close our eyes—these humble everyday saints created for our consolation by the same mysterious universal Presence ignored, cursed, derided, or intermittently worshipped by the human race.
>
> Patrick White

NINETTE DUTTON

# A Little Optimism

*Patrick White's* Three Uneasy Pieces
*(Pascoe, $7.95 and $14.95)*

There is a certain trepidation in picking up a new Patrick White book. You know that after you have read it your view of the world may be changed, that White's influence may color all subsequent events. Any resistance to such a possibility disappears at once with *Three Uneasy Pieces*. The stories hold you from the start and you are prepared to put yourself in the writer's hands.

Three stories, three potatoes, potatoes with their sightless eyes in the earth to which we will one day return. The photo at the beginning of the book, which shows "two guest stars" staring gloomily at the camera over three spuds lying before them on the table, may be intended as a commentary on the stories, but conveys only something of their quality and nothing of their humor. For a story to be as short as the first in this collection, "The Screaming Potato", it must have the impact of a poem to succeed. This does. White tells us in *Flaws in the Glass*, his "self-portrait" as he calls it, that "I did at first aspire to poetry as a means of shaping the emotional chaos with which I was possessed."

It is always dangerous to read too much autobiography into a writer's work of fiction. Writers write about what they know, the territory of their mind and imagination, but they take a little from here and a little from there and make a selective whole which often seems more real than the component parts. Yet these three stories do have a strong ring of autobiography about them, and a parallel reading of *Flaws in the Glass* illuminates them.

White's prose has always been as dense, with as many layers of meaning, as any poem. You may read his work for the entertainment of the story, but it is often necessary to re-read paragraphs to savor their full complexity. I once apologised to White for taking so long to read his latest novel. He replied that he was not vexed. "Only Sidney Nolan, given a wet Saturday afternoon, could read the Bible from cover to cover".

One of White's gifts is to make the reader feel that he is confiding in him, trusting him as a friend and carrying him along on his explorations. One of the ways in which White achieves this is in his characteristic and quickly recognisable use of words, especially his figures of colloquial speech, almost nursery talk, "cardy", "mucking about", "mumping". They give a sense of intimacy, and the reader thus privileged must respond adequately.

In any expedition with White through his books, whether in the simplest practical areas or a journey through a wider field, you have the possibility of discovering unknown lands. Standing beside him in "The Screaming Potato", at the traffic lights or on the escalator when he remarks "don't touch the rail, God knows what you'll catch", you remember your lighthearted amusement as a child admonished of the world's dangers. Then, with the sudden contrast of which he is a master, he changes the mood and you are conscious that there are strange forces about. There is always possible murder in the air, the murder of sensibilities stretching out for sympathetic contact with an understanding spirit, or we face the horrible physical destruction of some animate being. White's susceptibilities are always open to the menaces of life. Black shadows—"the black in White"—play over the highlights. The "screaming of a naked potato in its pot of tumbled water", the "whimper of a frivolous lettuce"—such images convey both White's humor and his sense of horror.

As in his other writings, White is concerned in this book with the processes of old age. He finds them hard to accept. "I would like to believe in the myth that we grow wiser with age. In a sense my disbelief is wisdom." We remember that in *Memoirs of Many in One* we are told that "Everyone old and smelly" deserves to be shot. In these stories, though, there is a hint of a different note. In "Dancing with Both Feet on the Ground", the second story in *Three Uneasy Pieces*, White tells us that "Life doesn't end on the kitchen floor while there is the will to dance" and, later, "I was never young. Just as I am not old."

Enid Bagnold once said that she was not really old, whatever false witness her body might bear, that she still enjoyed many of youth's pleasures, including walking barefoot over dewy grass on a summer morning. Little as I share such delights, I realise how important feet are in our appreciation of life, and

White uses the image of dancing feet with great effect. Behind the images are the winged feet of joy and of Mercury, the cloven foot of the devil, the beauty of the lover's feet in the Song of Solomon and the failed hero's feet of clay. Feet links us to the earth, and White understands the strength to be drawn from the earth. In *Riders in the Chariot* Miss Hare likes to sink into "good soft loam," and White mentions more than once the consolation which he finds in landscape and the "spiritual sustenance" which he drew from the "tough and bitter Monaro scene" as a young jackaroo. His feet, his joints may have lost some of their power, but "inside himself, he is well away."

From dancing alone in the kitchen the narrator's mind wanders to his youthful days at a smart *thé dansant* in a large hotel in a European mountain resort, before the first world war. The sharply acid details are vintage White, though possibly vinegar rather than a vintage Bordeaux. A group of us were sitting round a table recently, during a seaside holiday. One member of the party was reading "Dancing with Both Feet on the Ground" and kept looking up and laughing out loud at some of the episodes. White is so often read with frozen solemnity that people occasionally forget how funny he can be. His humor often comes from seeing the very bones of a situation, but with an interpretation both original and familiar, so that you seem at once to recognise that this has always been how they really are. Yet he wonders in *Flaws in the Glass* whether truth can be the greatest destroyer of all. He always avoids the faintest touch of sentimentality whatever his enthusiasms. In this story he goes so far as to say "Those who dance will always dance, will share the privileges of air fire water . . ." In the end of the story it is dancing which brings about the hilarious and revealing denouement.

When reading White's books there is a dread that the world's imperfections will prove too overwhelmingly distressing for him. At the beginning of "The Screaming Potato" he says "For the young we scarcely exist unless we are unavoidable members of the same family, farting, slobbering, perpetually mislaying teeth and bifocals." He sees the irritating, the ugly, but tenderness finds no place here and he is not prepared to accept it in others. When the schoolboy in the third story, "The Age of a Wart", is seasick and vomits he does not have the luck to find a suitable receptacle, but manages to catch the lot in his face and lose his cap to boot.

In "The Age of the Wart", the warts epitomise the nastier side of life. A wart may develop into a melanoma, incurable, everybody's "spreading throughout the world. Darker every minute". Yet the life of a wart is only two years and it may disappear as if by magic. Blue Pratt suffers from warts, eczema, chilblains, the lot. He passes a wart on to his so-called friend. Reluctantly the school friend, from a rich and superficial family, is forced to go to tea with Blue, who lives on the Wrong Side of the Harbor. His mother, Effie, is a widow and works as a nursing sister to send her son to a good school. Gradually the theme of twins, of an alter ego, emerges. White has written about such matters before, of course, as in that complex novel *The Twyborn Affair*. Of himself in *Flaws in the Glass* he says: "I did not question the darkness of my dichotomy, though already I had begun the painful search for the twin who might bring a softer light to bear on my bleakly illuminated darkness."

The young visitor discovers that the tough, unattractive Blue has a different side, and an unsuspected name, Tancred, the name of a crusader knight; that Rossini wrote an opera in which Tancred appears. This exotic name gives an immediate depth and mystery to the character. Tancred is a noble name and the noble side of Blue's character becomes more obvious as time goes on.

Circumstances separate the boys and they lose touch. The story resolves itself into a quest, not just for an elusive old acquaintance, his activities almost mythical, but for more than that, for a necessary half to the narrator's existence. "Tancred is the part of me I've always aspired to. My unlikely twin, who got away."

In the first story "eyes continue to conceal knives", the question of atonement is doubtful. In the last the world may darken but understanding is possible. Perhaps White will allow us a little optimism.

*Ninette Dutton lives near Williamstown, South Australia. Her next book is* An Australian Gardener's Notebook, *essays on native plants in the garden, with her own illustrations.*

DON WATSON
AND ROSS FITZGERALD

# The Greatest Game

*With apologies to those of our readers who live in Queensland and New South Wales, but no apologies at all to those who live in Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania, we print here extracts from the speeches made at the recent launching of Ross Fitzgerald's and Ken Spillman's anthology,* The Greatest Game *(Heinemann, $29.95).*

*Don Watson:*

After the last football book launch I attended I vowed never to go to one again. The book was *The Barracker's Bible*, a useful item if in the smart-arse genre, and funny, written by Jack Hibberd, a playwright, and Garrie Hutchinson, a man of parts. The launch was held at the Footscray Social Club, which of course overlooks the Western Oval. There was a wind from the west-sou'east blowing around in the pocket. A crow was playing in the currents with an ice cream wrapper—doing an imitation of Georgie Bissett. The social club was full of academics, newshounds, jackals and publishing types. Mike Fitzpatrick launched the book and he of course seemed perfectly at home among such people.

But such people were not at home in Footscray Social Club, and if Mike Fitzpatrick had seen the look on Ted Whitten's face he would have realised it.

Mr Football was perched at the bar—his bar. He was looking stopmarks at the gathering. A bunch of poonces in the bulldog's kennel. His mouth was as tight as the lace on a Sherrin. Each eye like the point of his elbow. We'd ventured on a sacred site and I couldn't wait to get off it.

But this is different. This is the Melbourne Football Club. This is genteel.

Besides, I've thought about it and decided that I'm entitled to be here. I've played football and I've got a lump on my nose to prove it. Johnny Paterno, the Wonthaggi ruckman, did it. In fact if he did it once he did it ten times.

You'll keep, Paterno, I said—and fell down on the flank. Twitching. It was the only way to get a trainer out on a wet day.

It was always a dangerous thing roving to the opposition ruckman. Especially at Wonthaggi. Wonthaggi was a socialist community. Stealing was not on.

If you've played football you've got a right to an opinion about it. In fact you haven't any choice about it. You're stuck with it for life.

Football causes brain damage, and mothers should think twice before allowing their children to play it. It is not the head-high tackles, it's the nostalgia. The memory gland becomes inflamed and sore. It sporadically infarcts, causing blackouts, choking and insomnia.

Seventeen years after giving it away in favor of a lingering death, I still wake up in the middle of the night shouting "You'll keep, Paterno", and spitting into the air.

I can't look at a saveloy without thinking of football.

It's a quarter to twelve on a Saturday. The fog is lifting on the last quarter of the under-sixteens. It is replaced by drizzle. The mud is calf-high. You're on the wing shivering in your nicks, your spavined arms like chicken legs poking out from the sleeveless jumper you feel asserts your manhood. And then you smell the saveloys wafting through the rain, as their skins split in the boiling water, in the kero tin, beside the changing rooms, under the cypresses.

On the hill the jersey bull bellows. Mounts a cow. Amour-propre. They slide down the hill. Amour-non-propre.

Soon it'll be a hot shower, a flick on the arse with a towel and a sav in the Holden with Eula.

Sorry to get poetic. Football makes poets of us all.

For most of us of course it's just memory. We should be grateful I suppose. For some people not only will the memory not stop. The body won't.

Brent Crosswell is trying to write it out of his system, and he's doing it very well. His tribute to Bruce Doull had an almost Mosaic authority, which was appropriate, and all the more admirable because players like Doull were the curse of players like Brent. They kept the price down.

"What makes you think you're as good as Doull?" they used to say when Brent would name his price.

In retirement Brent's problems are different. Even his Elegy in a Duck Pond with Vin Cattogio cannot stop his nerve-ends from twitching, trying to propel him forwards, or upwards or into something.

Have you ever seen Crosswell play cricket?

It's as if he's the only one on a horse.

In taking a short single in social match one day he careered into his partner before the poor man had had a chance to leave his crease, reflexively forearmed the bowler on his follow through, jumped the umpire—jumped him!—jumped over him!—and finished up down at long on.

Crosswell had created an ugly, milling, groaning pack at the bowlers end, simply out of his own unresolved kharma.

Top footballers become writers but the reverse is never true. It's a sad thing.

But the Greatest Game is the writer's moment. There are pieces in this book which go to the mystery of the game, if not to the mystery of life.

A great game of Australian rules football extends the limits of human invention and the limits of emotion. It is also the one place you can go on a Saturday with a chance of witnessing a miracle. It's hardly surprising that writers should be attracted to it. What *is* surprising about this book is that they so often come close to describing it.

Nevertheless I have to remind the authors that theirs is a fringe book. It is a receiver's book, Jack Dyer might say. It will understandably be ignored by the men who really played the game, for the same reason that Ted Whitten shunned the gathering at the Western Oval. The real football press will not go for it you can be sure . . .

But it is a great book. The writing is very often inspired and so are the photographs.

I want to conclude by saying that Martin Flanagan must never be allowed to stop writing about football. Much as I would like to see him in Len Radic's job.

I say this because Martin Flanagan is the only football writer I've read who is so good I think he could nearly describe a heartbeat—and that, if you want to touch the essence of football, is what you have to do.

*Ross Fitzgerald:*

Writing's a dangerous business. My last two satirical novels were labelled by most local critics as disgusting and offensive, which of course they were, while a few years ago volume two of my history of Queensland was recalled, pulped and reissued. During that harrowing time, quite apart from threatened civil action by persons who must remain nameless, it was reported that *à la* Frank Hardy, Queensland's unhumorous then Attorney General was to charge me with criminal libel. As they play for keeps in the Sunshine State, I feared they might throw away the keys.

So I thought I was on safe ground when Ken Spillman and I decided to compile a book of writings about Aussie Rules. In an essentially tender piece about my Collingwood playing, non-drinking Dad, which Geoff Dutton published in the *Australian* on Easter Saturday, one paragraph recounted how a highlight of my boyhood was my father Bill (or "Long Tom") Fitzgerald recounting on Christmas Day, my birthday,

a story of how 'Soapy' Vallence who lived nearby in East Brighton (or was it Bob Chitty?) bit Ron Todd's balls in the 1938 Grand Final. As I say in the story, "apocryphal or not", that was the highlight of my day.

Well, in Brisbane's first game this year against my tribe Collingwood, at Carrara, I was the guest of the Bears. Of course you will all know that the koala is not a bear but a marsupial, the Brisbane team is currently based on the Gold Coast and the whole team scarcely boasts a Queensland player to its name.

Anyway, ensconced among dignitaries like Pixie Skase and the devoted Christopher, actor-entrepreneur Paul Cronin, and a Gold Coast real-estate developer with the unlikely name of Max Christmas—all of whom seemed unaware of how ludicrous it was to be supporting a supposedly competitive footy team named after the cuddly koala—the master of ceremonies gave this book quite a plug. Then it was announced that among the assembled guests was none other than the legendary Ron Todd.

As my late father had talked about him with awe, I decided to (1) ask which person was in fact Ron Todd, and (2) introduce myself. A helpful VFA official pointed out an elderly couple at the end of the room, the man wearing a cardigan. Mr Todd himself being temporarily besieged, I decided to introduce myself to his wife by saying "Hello, Mrs Todd, I'm Ross Fitzgerald". At which the woman wheeled around and responded: "You're that dreadful man who wrote those terrible untrue things today about my late husband Bob Chitty". You could have hit me with a brick! What enormous bad luck. Entirely unbeknowns to my unsuspecting self, and perhaps I was the only one in the multitude not to be aware, the great Ron Todd had finished up marrying Bob Chitty's formidable widow.

Fortunately, although not in front of his terrifying wife, Rod Todd thought the whole matter highly amusing and said "Don't worry, laddie" (a term I found endearing), "You must come down and have a meal". An ex-TV commentator, currently on interchange for alcoholic over-indulgence while on the airwaves, made a perceptive suggestion as to who, if anyone, might have taught Bob Chitty to bite balls, if indeed that is what he did. Which, of course, is not what I said in the first place.

So then to *The Greatest Game*.

It's the book my co-editor Ken and I would most like to have found on the shelves of our favorite bookstore. With such an array of writing talent, nothing like it has appeared before in Australia.

We know from the daily newspapers who has been dropped, injured or suspended, and which teams are winning and losing. We know that recent changes have done little to bolster the VFL while undermining the leagues in other states. But what about the things that really matter? What about the heart that aches, and the memories that linger? The sleepless nights and the rainy afternoons? The ecstasy and the grim despair?

Many contributors display a sense of nostalgia about "the old football", a yearning for times when there was more talk about winning and losing, of loyalty and love, than about the commercial future of the game. A number of writers, glad for what Australian football has given them—confirmation, hope, a sense of participation even—are anxious about what lies ahead.

Thus it is no accident that, despite their close wins last week, currently we find in deep trouble both the Sydney Swans and the totally inaccurately named Brisbane Bears.

This, I strongly suspect, is because unlike Perth, which has a long Aussie Rules tradition, there is no home-grown basis to the game in either New South Wales or Queensland. Whether we like it or not, although uniquely Australian, Aussie Rules is a tribal code.

The game is a metaphor for the human condition and deals with fundamental drives like sex, aggression and the search for meaning and identity.

The first girl I 'took out' (if that's the phrase) had the last name of Twyford. When the affair inevitably dribbled to a close I couldn't forget her, for in those days all public urinals in Melbourne were made by Twyfords. As the name was prominently displayed, every time I went for a pee I ended up in tears.

After our first night together a mate who is now an ultra-respectable medico inquired: "Did you kick a goal?" Those days I didn't know what he meant, but if I'd told the truth I would have explained that at first I dropped the ball and that later it was the lady in question who virtually single-handedly scored a remarkable major, for which I remain grateful to this day.

Now if any of you reckon that Aussie Rules isn't about sexuality, look closely again at Noel Counihan's wonderful "High Mark" painting that adorns the cover of the book and observe the coupling in mid-air. Being a life-long Collingwood supporter, I would of course have preferred it to be the Magpie that was in what Havelock Ellis used to call the "superior position".

The canalization of aggression and of murderous impulses in the game requires no amplification. However my favorite football agro story, told by that great Tiger and historian Ian Turner, to whom *The Greatest Game* is dedicated, is actually about soccer. A Spanish supporter was so enraged when his side—Barcelona—was losing four nil that he came onto the ground with a pistol and literally shot the ball. We don't have to be Sigmund Freud to psychoanalyse that.

It would be offensive among such an assembled mob of tribespeople even to attempt to explicate the loyalty and love and sense of meaning that this wonderful code engenders. So I won't.

For those of us lucky enough to be able to see our tribes performing first hand, a number of essays in

the book poignantly convey the mad love of following Australian football from afar.

Although all contributions are superb, the remarkable nature of *The Greatest Game* to my mind is best exemplified by two quite different pieces by one of Aussie Rules greatest players, football's former *enfant terrible*, Brent ("Tiger") Crosswell. In "Sex Before the Game" and in "Vinny Catoggio", Crosswell captures the humor and the pathos that is part and parcel of Australian football. If I was a literary critic I might be tempted to say that Brent writes like a cross between Damyon Runyon and Shakespeare in *King Lear*!

At last, at last, we have the book we could never find. " 'Carn' they cry".

*Don Watson and Ross Fitzgerald are both professional historians but, while Fitzgerald is still at the last at Griffith University, Watson writes speeches for John Cain and sketches for Max Gillies. He was also one of the authors of "Manning Clark's History of Australia", the musical discussed in our previous issue.*

**ARCHETYPES**

An indoor pool
with western light

and the swimmers are somehow
high in the window

suspended in a
sea-green wash . . .

Fluently like
freestyle dolphins

they tumble tirelessly
into the turns

then push off from
the wall and glide

to let their limbs
define again

the absolutes
from end to end.

The pool in six
frenetic lanes

is boiling with its
silver haul . . .

and the swimmers are always
high in the window

straight out of Plato
and slipping the net.

GEOFF PAGE

BRUCE OAKMAN

# Scraps From a White Man's Notebook

*October 12th.* Alice Springs. I'm accustomed to the heat, after weeks in the Simpson and Sturt's Stony deserts, and relish idling in Alice Springs, free from camping's daily disciplines and the demands of four-wheel-drive travel. Hire a bicycle and pedal across the flood bridge on the Todd. Many Aboriginals squat cross-legged in the red riverbed; some sleep, some drink, a few talk, but not many. One shouts, "What's the time, Bruvver?" "Quarter to twelve", I yell back, barely controlling a lurch from the bike. "Thanks", he says and sits on, in the dust. God knows what he thinks of a sunburnt white man, pedalling inexpertly in noon's high sun.

The sights of Alice Springs are few: the Old Telegraph Office, Aviation Museum, Vintage Car Museum, Panorama Guth, Pitchi Ritchi Sanctuary. There are many reasons to journey to the centre of Australia but these are not they. The graves at the Old (much restored) Telegraph Station seem lonely despite tourism, or because of it. One headstone bears a quotation (unidentified) from Adam Lindsay Gordon:

> Should the sturdy station children pull the bush flowers on my grave,
> I may chance to hear them romping overhead.

The station children are long-gone; no romping today. No bush flowers today either. Another day, chance he may hear the shuffle of sheepish tourists as they are herded to and from bus convoys. Today, he may hear a crash and swearing as, forgetting childhood skills, I topple off my bike into soft, warm sand. If he listens.

Todd Street, near the John Flynn Memorial Church, is a resting place for many Aboriginals. Some lie full stretch in the gardens outside the church, others recline on seats in the mall; one is losing his trousers, his bare backside mocking passers-by as he snores face down on the pavement. An old man, sitting with two women on a seat says, "What's the time, Bruvver?" "Ten past three", I tell him. He nods.

*October 13th.* I walk to the Royal Flying Doctor Service: a little display and a continuous video are provided for the tourists. Afterwards stroll to Traeger Park where Aboriginals sit in groups, women and men together, quiet, some drinking from flagons with identical labels; a brand on special in Todd Street.

After dinner, climb Anzac Hill by the track from Wills Terrace (a link between two glorious failures) and watch the sun disappear between the great red ranges, bleeding them grey, then black. Gradually lights in the town below turn on and glow like a child's birthday cake in the dark, fostering illusions of security for those who watch the glimmer and ignore the endless dark. Unseen in the west, is Pine Gap, offering, to some, its own ambiguous comfort.

Darkness enshrouds me; it is with difficulty I find the track, scattered with bottles and cans, descending from memorial to town. Bushes rustle when sleepers twitch. Two Aboriginals drinking beside a campfire are startled by my stumbling. One jumps up. "What do you want?" he bellows at the blackness and me. "The way down", I shout back, hoarse with rising uncertainty. He relaxes. Sinks beside the fire. I blunder on down Anzac Hill telling myself I should have used the longer, less convenient road. But trouble most likely comes by car, and more swiftly.

*October 16th.* Uluru. Take a bus tour to get here. There is a teachers' strike in New South Wales. A little, middle-aged woman whose husband, she tells anybody, is president of somewhere's Rotary, says she's got more time for Aboriginals than school-teachers. She thinks I'm a school-teacher, or worse.

*October 19th.* Darwin. This is a different place with different people. Was Maugham right about whites in the tropics where the oppressive, thudding heat before the Wet can drive them mad? First to go are the pleasantries, manners, little decencies which make up civilization's veneer in more temperate climates; the

last to go might be self-respect. People are too lethargic to smile, to say "please", "thank you", "excuse me"; the heat has crushed these from them. Money and drink are life's sufficiency. An Englishman, a contract academic, tells me that Aboriginals are beaten-up in hotel carparks; regular Friday night entertainment. Darwin is an ironic name for this place.

I stay at the Commonwealth Hostel, a place of tropical courtyards, blazing bougainvillea, home of itinerants and the lonely. In the centre of the ceiling of each room a fan gyrates—noisily when set at high speed. The top section of a wall of every room is open, covered by fly-wire, facing a passageway, with the aim, no doubt, of encouraging circulation of air.

This system bestows some cool air and much intimacy: snores, belches, blaring radios, vigorous couplings, shouts, punctuate the night—an up-market doss-house where one does not have to look at the other occupants.

*October 20th.* Somebody steals my washing from the clothes-line. I report the loss, as a sign instructs, although the sign also records a denial of responsibility which seems to make reporting pointless. The man at the front desk seems cross at being distracted from his illustrated magazine.

"Can't do nothin' ", he says.

I tell him the sign had covered that.

"Probably Abos. They take anythin'."

Must pinch "g's" even. I tell him my pegs weren't stolen.

He sneers, without expending too much energy, and returns to his titty pictures.

The incivility of some shop-assistants is astonishing. "Whatdayawant?" she mutters through lips that run no risk of admitting a fly, when I go to purchase a new T-shirt. She dumps my change on the counter and turns away to avoid looking at me any longer than necessary. Perhaps customers are an even greater nuisance here than they are in England. At the bank a girl interrogates me in monosyllables. Speech is as useful to her as a diseased appendix. After a time I realize that she and the manager—who telephones Melbourne to check on me—are suspicious because I do have money, not because I don't.

Smith Street Mall. I see my running shorts. They are custom-made, a gift from a friend, quite distinctive. A white man, for whom they are too small, wears them in support of his beer-sodden podge. He's with three big, beer-fattened mates.

"Nice shorts", I say, not too brave.

"Get fucked", he replies, not unexpectedly.

My heroism gauge is, as usual, on empty; I walk on.

Returning from the Art Gallery—a delightful place—I start to sag from thirst in the sapping heat. Go to a door to ask if I might drink from garden tap. Nobody home. Decide to steal a drink from the tap which I am able to do while standing in the street. Owners drive up in a station-wagon.

"Whatdaya think ya doin'?" she asks from the front passenger's seat, her mouth imitating an inconvenienced bulldog's.

I explain, and apologise for my presumption.

"Howmy ta know ya telling the truth?" The mouth may be bulldog-like but the teeth are false.

This is getting to be a bit much.

"You don't", I retort. "Let's discuss it with the police. You can charge me with water theft."

Now the husband, who has maintained a silence and the expression of one waiting for his wife to wipe some shit off her shoes, offers a thought.

"Piss off, smart arse."

"Gladly", I say.

He turns into his drive; a shot-gun lies on the back seat of the station wagon.

In the Smith Street Mall an old, very black, very drunk Aboriginal stops me and puts his arm around my shoulders.

"Hello, Bruvver", he slurs while I look momentarily into his blighted, crusty eyes, trying to control my unease for I don't know what he wants. A companion speaks to him in words from another world and steers him away.

This evening I sit swatting mosquitoes above Lameroo beach, while the sun, a great red penny, slots into the flat, fiery sea. The horizon smoulders for a while; fades to black, and the brilliant, sticky night embraces everything.

*October 21st.* Take launch to the run-down resort across the harbor. The outside bar has a few morning patrons; a big Alsatian lies on its stomach at the drinkers' feet. Its ears stiffen when it sees me; it springs up and dashes snarling for my legs. Nothing to do but yell. "Down you bastard."

But it seems more like a plea than a command. Jesus. Nearly on me. Back against a tree.

"Sharky." A voice from the bar, or heaven. "Piss off, Sharky." And he does.

My heart's entered the Stawell Gift. Back mark.

My savior is fattish, florid and must be in the queue for dialysis. "Jesus, I'm sorry, mate. He didn't get ya, didee?"

It'd be obvious if he had.

"Who owns him?" I say, my heart still after the big money.

"Nobody." A friendly, stupid man answering unfriendly, stupid questions.

"Where's the manager?"

"That's me mate."

Meaning himself, not his mate.

"Something should be done about him", I persist, "before he tears someone to pieces".

"People just feed him. He don't belong to no-one. But I'm real sorry mate, I really am." He means it. Something puzzles him.

"Ya know I've never known him go a white bloke before. Just Abos."

His flabby face contorts with worry as he struggles to get the universe back in order. My heart's returned to a wild, as opposed to frantic, pace.

"At least he's not racist", I say. Leave quickly.

*October 27th.* Overnight bus from Katherine to Mount Isa; whites in front, Aboriginals at back. I sleep fitfully on two seats. Wake-up because the bus has stopped. A generator hums, a light burns and, in its vain circle, I see a white man kissing a young black woman before a great metal cage imprisoning God-knows-what. Or who. Security must be important here. He leads her to the bus; she climbs aboard and sits in the first seat, the one reserved for the relief driver. Her white man returns to his cage without looking back. As the bus grunts away, the relief driver says to the girl, "That's my seat. Go down the back".

Shyly, clutching her plastic carry-bag, she sets off down the dark aisle; it's obvious she's pregnant.

*October 30th.* Train from Townsville to Cairns. A young woman, an explosion of hair, lips, legs and sunburn, boards before me. Seats are numbered in Queensland and we are in the wrong carriage. As we make our way to our appointed places a middle-aged Aboriginal, in white shirt and grey slacks, starts to ogle her, nudging his companions. He's playful, not threatening. Then he sees me following her and says, "Sorry, Brother".

I dispensate. "That's all right." Grace comes easily when there's nothing to forgive.

The sunburnt woman and I are seated next to each other in the next carriage. She is a psychologist from Sydney who is journeying from beach to beach putting skin cancer on lay-by. Possessing a range of encouraging squeaks and grunts and one of those round faces people talk at, there's no doubt she's chosen the right profession. Should she tire of psychology she'd make a wonderful barmaid.

Behind us sits The Pelican—middle-aged, balding, beaky nose, great wobble of flesh connecting mouth to chest—and his mate, a smaller twittering species responsible for foraging. I watch as she hands him a lamington which he hurls into his great food bag, where it rests momentarily, before despatch to vast digestive chambers below.

We have been rolling slowly up the coast for about two hours when a hand falls on my shoulder, startling me.

It's a big Aboriginal in a brown suit, quite drunk. "Bruvver", he says thickly, "Can ya help me find me seat?" He thrusts his first-class ticket into my hand. I say I'll try and start in the direction of the first-class carriage towards the front of the train. "Hang on", he says, linking his arm through mine before we lurch off. The Pelican in the seat behind says, "Bloody abos", to his wife and stares out the window at the lush vegetation.

The train is steady. We are not. We blunder towards the first-class carriage past jabbing glances, some guffaws, much indifference. My companion roars, "God bless you, Bruvver". When we arrive in the first-class section there is another Aboriginal in his seat. I explain that my mate is supposed to sit there and the man in the seat says, giving me his ticket, "Wheremy spossed to be, Bruvver?" He is wrong by a row and moves contendly to his correct seat. My mate grins broadly, shakes my hand and flops into his chair. "Thanks Bruvver", he says, shuts his eyes and goes to sleep. I return to the sun-seeking psychologist.

The Pelican gives me a Christ-he's-back-again look. The psychologist is reading *The Count of Monte Cristo* and turns to me when I sit down with, "What do you make of that?"

I'm nonplussed, think she means *The Count* and say, "Engrossing".

"No, not that. You and your friends."

"It's not the first time I've helped a drunk find his way."

She nods. Her eyes open wide and she displays absolute attention; the carriage becomes her consulting room. "Why do you think he chose you, of all the people in this carriage, to help him?"

I'm pretty good at speculation and I'm off. "Well, the poor buggers get so much shit poured on them. They get abused, shunned—so they get to be pretty good at picking those who are friendly—sympathetic I suppose."

She isn't convinced and tries another tack. "Why do you think the old fool behind disapproves of you?" She means The Pelican.

"How should I know? Thinks I'm unemployed, I suppose." Not far from the truth.

She is amused by all this. Her sunburnt face puckers from smiling. Little wrinkles about her eyes suggest the parched furrows of still distant days.

"He thinks, and your companion thinks, and several others think that you're one of them."

"Rubbish."

She isn't easily halted. "Who am I describing? Tall, Thin. Dark-burnt skin. Brown eyes. Curly black hair—too long. Black, curly beard—unkempt. Faded black T-shirt. Faded denim shorts. Skinny legs." She stops and adds, "Q.E.D.?"

"I'm hardly dark enough."

"You're dark enough to be not quite white enough for some whites. And racial percentages are of no interest to Aboriginals."

Back to the wall. "My voice is wrong."

She's used to whimpering defences. "First impressions count. And, to some whites, an educated Aboriginal, or part-Aboriginal, is more threatening. More difficult to categorize."

I think back to suspicious shopkeepers, friendly Aboriginals, strange glances and, most of all, an Alsatian who only attacks blacks.

I say, "I still like my empathy theory but I know a dog who'd agree with you."

"Tell me about it", she says, and puts *The Count of Monte Cristo* away.

*November 10th.* Fly home to Melbourne to tenure, superannuation, aspiring colleagues, talk of personal fulfillment, mid-life crises, dinner parties, mortgages, tax deductable booze, assault and battery weather, Alsatians of indiscriminate savagery and where nobody, not even my brother, calls me Brother.

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STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH

# swag

On the whole we don't want to think about prisons, the ultimate 'under-the-carpet' solution. It's hard for failed radicals like me. On the one hand my blood boils when I hear that the chap who knifed Geoff Blainey's daughter in the street was out of gaol before I'd had time to ask Blainey how she was getting on. On the other hand the old Christian-Marxist guilt ethic of 'it's all really my (our) own fault' also operates. I've never been inside bars myself, though Comrade S., my employer in Prague in the 1950s, did say to a colleague there, after she had farewelled me and given me a present, "I wonder if I should have had him arrested after all." A well-turned sentence which has stayed in my mind and which may serve, as well as most, to suggest that Goethe was right when he said that without a real rule of law, even a bourgeois one, there can be no freedom. *Und das Gerecht nur kann uns Freiheit geben.*

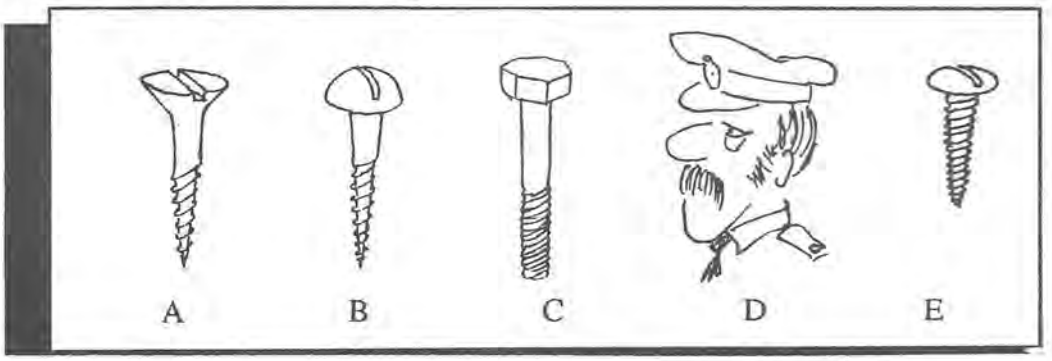
Or perhaps a rule of law *has* to be a bourgeois one. The socialist systems of law I've heard about inspire no confidence in me. Maybe we have to put up with judges from Melbourne Grammar, whatever their blinkers, in the same way that we have to put up with appalling millionaires and would-be millionaires, and the whole nasty ambience of the consumerist society, in order to be able—as Brian Fitzpatrick once put it—to "call our souls our own." Yet, it would be nice to see more radicals or Aboriginals or Vietnamese on the Bench. Except, of course, that they would be bourgeois too, by the time they got there. And please don't quote Lionel Murphy at me. It will only disrupt a pleasant friendship.

This disquisition is prompted by vol. 1 number 1 of a new magazine, Just Us, published by the inmates of H.M. Prison at Beechworth, Victoria, and sent to me by David Martin, an original Overlander, who lives and writes in Beechworth and is tolerated by his splendid Quaker wife Richenda. ("The Martinet and the Martiness," David calls them.) Just Us contains some amusing stories which are not printable in a family magazine like Overland, some spirited classified ads ("Outdoors person with rope seeks like-minded person with grappling hook and fast car") and a number of poems. One of them, by "Scratcher", ends thus:

Even the animals in the Royal Zoo
are handled by professionals that know what to do;
Yet we are humans, the most complex of species,
we get rejected-labourers, who couldn't shovel faeces.

Perhaps the most cheerful aspect of the Victorian penal system is that the screws (see below) helped and approved the publication of Just Us.

## Which one does not belong?



I have recently made a remarkable discovery, admittedly with the help of my friend the classical scholar and critic of television, Dennis Pryor. It is that Australian slang was invented, not by Anthony Trollope's "nomad tribe", but by classical scholars.

Take, for instance, *stone the crows.* This is a literal translation of a similar expression in Aristophanes. Then there is *send her down, Hughie.* Arguments have raged for decades about the origins of this invocation of rain, but it is quite simple, really: *Huei* is Greek for *it rains.* To clinch my argument, there is the case of *tall poppies.* The original story is from Livy. Sextus sought to displace his father, the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus—and did ever a tyrant have a more magnificently intimidating name? He sent a message to his father pointing out his intentions. The king made no reply, but walked into his garden: "There, walking up and down without a word, he is said to have struck off the heads of the tallest poppies with his stick."

I rest my case. An honorary doctorate for me, I think, at least. But the coincidences do suggest one interesting thought: a great many more Australians were familiar in the nineteenth century with the classics than they are now. Did this affect popular speech?

The Sydney storm, a real southerly buster, which has generated over the future of "Wyewurk", the house at Thirroul in which D. H. Lawrence wrote *Kangaroo*, has been slow in moving south, and I heard of it only recently. Years ago my wife and I had much trouble finding Wyewurk. When we finally got there, admiring its clearly unchanged state since Lawrence's day, and the outlook it had just above the beach, we were given short shrift by the occupier, heard some abuse of Lawrence and were smartly shooed away. But we had seen Wyewurk.

I should have thought that, if Australian universities are supposed to be the kind of places they are supposed to be, Wyewurk would long ago have been bought and put to some inoffensive and appropriate use by the University of Wollongong. I'm not sure that I *quite* agree with the revered John Douglas Pringle that *Kangaroo* is the only profound book that has been written about Australia, or with Louis Esson that "Lawrence's Australian adventure is the most astounding episode in the history of the country," but they are not far off mark. Anthony Burgess has written that "No novel, not even by a native Australian, has caught so well the spirit of a place whose magic has been virtually denied by the inarticulate culture that has been dumped upon it."

*Kangaroo* as a novel has certainly suffered. Downgraded by the rest of the world because it was both set in Australia and concerned with the examination of Australian values, it was largely ignored in Australia also. The book offended, amongst others, Katharine Susannah Prichard ("yards of fatuous drivel"). In a country where people prefer to talk about writing rather than get on with the job it seemed a reproach that it was written in a few weeks by a man who didn't even wish to live in a city and who had, in any case, only been in Australia a matter of months. And then, of course, we were told that it had a rubbishy and contrived plot, a matter that seemed to annoy the academics in particular.

The splendid work of Robert Darroch (*D. H. Lawrence in Australia* (1981); see also the Bulletin, 20 May 1986) has made fools of those who pooh-poohed Lawrence's account of secret right-wing armies mobilising in Sydney—and note that this important historical and literary investigation was carried out by a working journalist, not by an academic or academics. This has had some part in the revival of interest in *Kangaroo* but it is certainly not the whole reason that increasing attention is being paid to the novel, both overseas and in this country. There are other factors also at work. Perhaps these days we are more relaxed, and not so quick to resent the British taking an interest in us. Tim Burstall's admirable film of *Kangaroo*, released a couple of years ago, may also have helped. But above all, I think, we can appreciate today how much more vividly and effectively an outsider—an outsider of perspicacity and genius—can see and understand than we can ourselves. This is one of the services rendered to us by the flourishing immigrant literature we now have.

*Kangaroo* is a good novel in any context and a great novel in the Australian context. This is not primarily because we now see more clearly that Lawrence's fears and concerns were based in his real experience, but because he was better trained and better placed than anyone else in his time to discern the alterations wrought in *Homo britannicus* by a sea change. He should, indeed, be one of our great environmental heroes. *Kangaroo* is *about* the impact of environment on people and hence on history. Only Henry Handel Richardson has done it better, but her focus was shorter. The significance of this book, and hence of the place where it was written, is going to grow.

Wyewurk is now owned by a local estate agent, clearly a decent enough fellow, who wants to put a second story on the bungalow to accommodate an expanding family. There is a "Save Wyewurk" committee, which includes Manning Clark, Margaret Jones of the Sydney Morning Herald and Tom Fitzgerald, which is arguing strongly for the preservation of the existing Wyewurk intact. There are tangled issues, as in all such cases, and the NSW Heritage Council is involved. It would seem to me that some way has to be found of compensating the present owner, either for moving or for preserving the *status quo*. The "Save Wyewurk" people urgently need help and support: 68 Brougham Street, Potts Point, NSW 2011.

The saddest aspect of this whole matter has been the negative attitude of some Sydney writers and

academics, arguing in the press that – for instance – to seek to preserve Wyewurk represents "slavish adulation" of Lawrence by "well-off, middle-class conservationists" (Don Anderson of the University of Sydney), and opposing to Wyewurk the need to preserve Varuna, the former home of Eleanor and Eric Dark at Katoomba. Eleanor Dark was an important Australian novelist, and Eric Dark a notable radical, and both suffered for their opinions. It would of course be good to see Varuna preserved. And certainly they lived there a long time. But in terms of intellectual resonance, of unfettered genius ranging this country with its burning spear and its horse of air, Lawrence's sojourn was, in Esson's word, an "episode" of startling quality in our cultural life. If literary associations are worth preserving at all, and I believe they are, the Wyewurk campaign is of great importance to our history and our self-respect.

I remember how, as a young man, hardly more than a boy, I was moved to remember for ever Motley's words on William of Orange, the concluding words of *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*:

> As long as he lived, he was the guiding-star of a great nation, and when he died the little children cried in the streets.

And later I was also unable to forget the last words in Pepys's diary:

> And so I betake myself to that course, which is almost as much as to see myself go into my grave: for which, and all the discomforts which will accompany my being blind, the good God prepare me!

Fortunately Pepys did not, of course, go blind, though it is one of the great literary tragedies that he thought he was doing so.

It was Arthur Phillips who pointed out, in that magnificent and seminal article on "The Craftsmanship of Lawson", that Lawson had three possible ending points for the story "Shooting the Moon" before the one he chose:

> "Yes. I knew him well after that, and only heard one man say a word against him."
> "And did you stoush him?"
> "No, I was going to, but Tom wouldn't let me. He said he was frightened I might make a mess of it, and he did it himself."
> "Did what? Make a mess of it?"
> "He made a mess of the other man that slandered that publican. I'd be funny if I was you. Where's the matches?"
> "And could Tom fight?"
> "Yes. Tom could fight."
> "Did you travel long with him after that?"
> "Ten years."
> "And where is he now?"
> "Dead – Give us the matches."

"If that pattern," wrote Arthur, "was achieved by artless accident, I will cheerfully eat every professorial mortar-board between Hobart and Darwin." Lawson, he says, "is a master of this final reverberation."

One unfortunate consequence of being 'consciousness raised' by Arthur Phillips in this matter is that I find myself at films, plays and operas saying to myself, as the action approaches its end, "Stop there. That's the place," and often seeing the conclusion as an anti-climax. Such is life.

We all know the great openings: *Anna Karenina, Pride and Prejudice, The Go-Between, Such is Life* itself. But, sitting round the fire the other night with Dorothy Hewett and Merv Lilley, we found ourselves on the topic of the great endings of literature. I threw in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*: I remember tears running down my cheeks when I first finished that epic:

> And, thereafter, his resting-place was indistinguishable from the common ground. The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit.

(Recently the post-master at Koroit was kind enough to show us the room, now a lumber-room, in which Walter Richardson died.)

My wife Nita brought in *Wuthering Heights*, not dissimilar:

> I lingered around them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.

And I was very moved by the conclusion to Richard Ellmann's recent *Oscar Wilde*:

> 'There is something vulgar in all success,' Wilde told O'Sullivan. 'The greatest men fail, or seem to have failed.' He was speaking of Parnell, but what was true of Parnell is in another way true of Wilde. His work survived as he had claimed it would. We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy. He belongs to our world more than to Victoria's. Now, beyond the reach of

scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing, and so right.

The Art of the Dying Fall, I suppose the genius of knowing when and how to end may be called. Perhaps readers will send us some of their favorites.

Patrick White writes of his "Credo", which we print in this issue, that "I've had a lot of illness lately. After coming to my senses in hospital a few weeks ago, I put the enclosed together." We wish him well.

Urgently needed for Overland use, a photo-copier in good nick. Donation preferred, of course, but prepared to consider an attractive offer. Please write to the Editor.

A national conference on writing and publishing in the community will be held in Melbourne on 17-18 September. It will deal with such issues as desk-top publishing, community radio and writing workshops, and further details may be obtained from the Community Arts Network at 18 St Andrews Place, East Melbourne 3002.

Entries for the re-opened National Library Poetry Award ($5000 and $2000) close on 9 September. Entry forms from the National Library, Canberra.

Closing date for the Judah Waten story competition is 30 September. First prize $600, junior sections, details from Box Hill-Doncaster Regional Library Authority, 1040 Whitehorse Road, Box Hill V. 3128.

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**TWO POEMS FROM *UNTOLD LIVES***
**by Rosemary Dobson**

**REMEMBERING KITTY**

Katherine she was, and Kitty she became.
And she was tall and slender. Black, black eyes
And dark, dark hair had Kitty. When she laughed
Low in her throat at first, so intimate,
Then running up the scale – one thought of rain
Or notes of birdsong. A child, I followed her
Longing to hear again, again, again
That charming, choking, then ascending laugh.
Only her daughter, waiting in the wings
Watchful and still, stayed grave when Kitty laughed.

Spendthrift in age she squandered what she had
On clothes she hardly wore, and chiffon scarves,
Choosing a different color every day
To hide the tautened lines about her throat.
Leant on a thin umbrella for support
As elegant as herself.

When Kitty died
A widow twice, in her fine house alone,
Her soul like thinnest chiffon floated free
And – not to be handed on, Kitty's alone –
Her laugh went with it, up and up, away.

**PRIVATE SOLDIER**

Photographs show him diffident, reserved,
Flanked by his sisters. Life was hard for him –
For everyone in those depression years.
Too young for one war, too old for another
He joined Field Ambulance, A.I.F. Abroad,
Trained, and was shipped off to the Middle East.

There life ignited. Deserts, antiquities,
Marvels to write of in his letters home:
"The murals in the Valley of the Kings,
Their colors still so fresh!" And everywhere
A cameraderie not known before:
"We're smartening up. Tonight we go on leave."

Then Crete. Here life ignited once again
But with more certain glory. This was his place,
The final recognition of his hopes. At Suda Bay
Waiting for rescue by the allied ships
He stuffed his pack with flower-seeds, the pledge
Of his return to Crete. They grew.

His mother saw to it. My grandmother.
He gave them to her when he disembarked.
All else is painful. Private H.L.C.
Sent with his ambulance at once up north
Was in New Guinea for the final push. Was killed
On stretcher duty, bringing in the dead.

## DYING RACE

A forest in flames
retreated from me

I'm half asleep
I told myself

and let my eyes
flow back to sleep

All the colors
left me slowly

Sleep was thicker
than my blanket

more fathoms down
than any ocean

more certain
than a spotless sky

But I woke up
struck by panic

Burning broken black
a few people had returned.

R. A. SIMPSON

## TALL SHIPS, POINT LONSDALE

Daggy as a provincial vote of thanks, &
by all means even slower, we glimpse for
history everywhere, but there's no long view.
Industrial haze has staunched the glitter of
wet lit light up the bay to fuzzed sepia,
like bushfire smoke seen from a distance,
Melbourne's scorched water welcome, & above,
huge cerulean blue of flapless cricket scores.
Only close-up yachts go about in
zinc-bright white, wait in struts for an ocean
barely opening seams through smog-alert heads.
But hang on, we're dizzy with desire to be
transported, steam through face-paint,
lean on our listening to five conversations
at once.

As if on cue, something like
Errol Flynn's dawn patrol, buffeting the thermals,
vibrates into view, strafed by a thousand twiddling
binoculars, so miniature & old world
this fly-past, didn't we hold it once on wires
in childhood, making us a wobbly epicentre
of all our seeing? A low black helicopter,
rescue cavalry or stake-out you can't be sure,
shudders across our Mexican wave, the grandstand
rocks in its tangled cordage, someone has spotted
a high spear, at last, on the world's low rim.

VAUGHAN PRAIN

## STILL LIFE

He lives out his retirement on his property
in the seat that was his for twenty five years.
The sport of kings's his caper, likes the jumps:
took the big one once; drives
an elderly **Statesman.**

I was at school with young John Cain
and Mollison and Dawe. It jolts to realise
*A Victorian hangman tells his love*
was written in the heat of sixty-seven.
Young men become old women,
left-liberal, at least. Thank Christ for confession.

A private life's still life;
dying might be, death is not.
Madam Soso finds the missing card.
He swings back in the saddle at election time,
desperately flogging a dead horse.
Conservatives are not what they were.

LEON SLADE

## HOME ON THE EDGE

The night plays like a stoned saxophonist,
Motes floating on the band's absence.
In our house, the butter will be round-shouldered,
Too yellow for its own good.

On the long beach waves butter up the shore
Creaming on our ankles
Then lick back in langor, coarse-tongued.
At our house, the cat will be spread-bellied,
Full fur to cool tile.

The black dunes as we walk
Occasionally titter or flash buttocks,
Globing in moonlight
That alloys lead and silver from water.
The house will be a bank
Vaulted with unspent heat.

We are five kilometres from sweat and suction;
The verdigris of sex.
Or we might take our track
From this saxophonist's beach
To a pot of pale tea,
And let our cool smiles rest.

ROD USHER

## THE LADY AT THE PARTY

Donna is the friendliest
at first of all these people.
I like her. She has done
the Assertiveness Course
at the Tech, & goes faithfully
to Weight Watchers (believing
in it, but not
in people who exploit it).
She has never really never
been timid of fat. She has
strong legs & eyes, black slacks,
Laurel & Hardy earrings,
a good salary & knows
enough about stats, & real estate.
She has thick eyeshadow, & no
real shadows under that. She laughs
& rolls her eyes:
"These people rule the earth."

JENNIFER MAIDEN

## BERLIN

*"Ich bin ein Berliner."* J. F. Kennedy

Four times Troy
the siege lines have lasted
where History stopped in its tracks
and rusted
  twisted back gothic
as high towers locked in brambling
curses where reason sleeps
with no sign of princes
or ominous horses.

In youth I defended
the indefensible, at 0300
heard my ardent voice rebound
from the Funkturm in the crackle
of Cold War frost which keeps
Achilles keen, Hector hot,
the world in slogan simplicity . . .

I was appalled to find their defences
faced out, not in: *"Video ergo sum."*
*"Berlin, Ich bin."*

So the materialist frontiers hold
leaf, lake and mind; concepts turn
cul-de-sac blank; passwords fail;
at the border-posts meaning is
smashed upon the page

SELWYN PRITCHARD

## PATHOLOGY

Because I am not prolific

Because I was never invited
into the Sacristy of Art,
but hung round foyers
bitching about syntax

Because the boy at the door recognized me,
but in the wrong context

Because my footsteps in the corridor
are stealthy, obsequious

Because I never married a bronchial woman with
taste

Because I was led up a Golden Staircase
by a cicerone trailing fire

Because my address
is unfashionable nothingness,
a cobalt square in which nothing happens,
not even nature

Because I was never baptized

Because I was guilty of making disrespectful
noises
in the Pantheon of Imagining,
with its pay-phones and baldaquins

Because I long ago eschewed wristwatches

Because the priest in the confessional
spoke always the wrong language

Because I give decent, boring dinner parties

Because as a youth
I was too easily flattered
by *roués* in Chevrolets

Because my excuses are my memories,
and vice versa

Because, held captive in the Monumental City,
I lost all reason,
dipped my camera in the holy water

Because there was never enough seating in the
plaza

Because my follies were legion,
my *faux pas* threefold,
at the Great Cocktail Party

Because I am always several things,
never one

Because the dove bludgeoned
excites neither pity nor revulsion

Because,
in a trance of metamorphic love,
I preferred the company of beggars

Because this poem alters nothing –

For these and excellent other reasons
I know we are condemned
to sit throughout the night,
waiting for dawn
to wash the leaves white

And I know of bruter fates
gavotting in the mind,
exploited and refined,
to be sold everywhere,
on street corners,
in miniature

PETER ROSE

## LUNCH

what becomes of them

the red napkin, the soup
her nervous nail polish
tapping the marble table

her insulted mouth
closing on lasagna and salad

the chilled dew of chablis
on her peach-colored lips

her sceptical shoulders
when she speaks

and her skin
shimmering resentment
when he speaks

what becomes of them
when the table is cleared
and she leaves to invent
a life without miracles

JOHN DAVIES

## DRIVING OUT OF DIMBOOLA

This is good country: dry
after summer, wanting cool nights,
autumn rain for a new ploughing:
a country of delicate shade

Light streams through a thin river
of trees pacing the road. Cream
and gold and flame, their trunks
writhe towards cloudy leaves. A silo
tops the trees now. The tumescent road,
like a dark scar, claims that flat country.

Morning shadows probe the proud
flesh of bleached ochres crumbling
by the weal of bitumen. Houses,
fences, cut the horizon and lines
of sight. Heaviness inhabits
those fragile structures. Trees
shine in the sun; their sadness falls
across the road. You can see this was good
country.

CONNIE BARBER

## PROUD AMIGO

Working on my nurse list the ones who had a
prod
for this proud amigo – turn them over as they
me, searching out with their winking lights
of usherettes my star-struck king whose want
was to hide
in a queen's capricious curls
& found
with their wands instead my children on their
way
to captains courageous whose want was to
hide in the Myth
of the Great Dirty War while traditional
drowning
handed me down like outgrown clothes –
pratfalls, over
& over. Them over too.

PHILIP HAMMIAL

JOHN HEROUVIM

# Civilizing Australia

## I

*"It wasn't idealism," Norman said clearly, "that made me, from the beginning, want a more secure and more rational society. It was an intellectual judgement, to which I still hold. When I was young its name was socialism. We can be deflected by names. But the need was absolute, and is still absolute. So many dangerous and powerful forces are loose, more dangerous and more powerful than we can ever fully understand. So in intelligence and conscience we are bound to oppose them, by such means as we can find."*

(Raymond Williams, *Loyalties*)

More than most Australians writing about socialism's prospects, Bob Connell can explain eloquently why the present order is wrong, wasteful and dangerous, and why, despite this, the vision of "a more secure and more rational society" fails to move people. But his chapter in *Moving Left* is pervaded by a sense of impasse. It is controlled and understated, but it is unquestionably there.

British socialists, whose ideas fill half the pages of the booklet *Socialism in Australia*, impart the same cheerless sentiment. So, too, in America.[1]

Socialism remains little more than a piece of fluff in the bellybutton of the body politic. There is no real Opposition in Australia.

The discussion which follows assumes two things: that civilization, as Aldous Huxley wrote, constitutes a thin crust of decency, reason and tolerance; and that the ethic of greed which underpins social life in Australia today is de-civilizing our country.

The challenge, then, is to break the de-civilizing momentum of the new secular faith which presently infests the Australian mind. This challenge faces all civilized Australians of whatever shade.

## II

The articles by British socialists in *Socialism in Australia* are engrossing, thought-provoking, elegant and blunt. They review the major class and cultural shifts in postwar Britain, and admit that the traditional Left's response has been myopic and hidebound. In almost all essentials they describe Australia.

Gregor McLennan concludes that "the idea of a spontaneous class politics arising from a typical kind of labour is much less convincing that it once was." He argues that the conscious Left must build organic connections with "the plethora of democratic concerns, gender issues and peace", and anticipates that pluralistic coalitions will be the form assumed by the radical struggles to come.

Here McLennan gives voice to the prevailing strategic nostrum prescribed by the Left. In *Moving Left* Jim Falk presents an appealing prospectus for such a coalition. He suggests a movement called Alternative Australia. Its central concern would be "to project and work for a genuine alternative for Australians".

What Falk proposes might work. But it can only crystallise around a new consciousness, a new mood. Such a mood can be fanned from existing embers, and needs a transitional organisational form to create it. This form would have a chiefly ideological function. Before proceeding to limn the features of such an organisation I had best try to explain this mood of mine.

The best way I can find is to compare it to the element of working-class consciousness which socialists love most – the sense that the system is not yours, that the game is rigged to benefit a different class of people, almost an alien species in human form. It is a sense of being Other. For Alternative Australia to thrive, a more widespread mood of Otherness is required. It is the Otherness not of class consciousness but of civilized consciousness.

This civilized consciousness is a rejection of the dominant uncivilized assumptions of this society. In most who possess it, civilized consciousness is nascent. In millions of Australians it is dormant and may prove impossible to rouse.

Nascent civilized consciousness is phenomenological in its focus. It squats in empty houses, sponsors an Asian child, complains about the withdrawal of funds

from a community literacy program. Its voice is heard on talkback shows, ingenuously saying awkward things.

I hear that voice everywhere.

It is the voice of a retired Greek laborer who now supervises a school crossing and tells pedestrians that the Russian public transport system is better and cheaper than ours.

It is the voice of a middle-aged woman whose husband sells insurance from his home. Nothing in her house, street, suburb or appearance prepared me for the ideas she expressed in a conversation which occupied me for several hours during a birthday party.

The same voice belongs to another woman, whose daughter recognised the word "capitalistic" in our study of the 1916 conscription debate and told me that her mum yells out "capitalistic pigs!" when she watches the news.

I met the mum on parent-teacher night and told her Tracey's response when she read "capitalistic". She said some embarrassed words, then finished with, "Well that's my viewpoint, anyway. They make me sick."

I don't think Tracey's mum is a socialist, a member of a social movement, or an 'alternative type'. I could continue with more examples, thoughts expressed by others who are neither politically sophisticated nor politically active: a bank manager, an accountant, a personnel manager in a trans-national petrochemical company, a self-employed glazier and many school-teachers. Their impulses and responses are in direct opposition to the ascendant morality. A radical organisation without its taproot in this source of social energy has not the faintest prospect of success.

The ground will not be prepared for such an organisation until the potential which hibernates in these responses is consciously, or at least emotionally, realised—until previously unconnected reflexes form into a mood. When this happens, the constituency of Others will expand.

This mood already has a solid base. Max Teichmann described it nicely when he wrote of those with "a conscious preference for a world of generous feelings rather than power systems, money changers and number crunchers."[2] There are tens of thousands of people with such a conscious preference in Australia. Twenty thousand might call themselves socialists. They feel Other to the values of technocratic amorality on which the ugly Australia of today depends for its survival. These values, and the structures they are raising, bring them laughter, sadness, tedium, anger, depression, even resignation. Each response is a subversive refusal to become uncivilized.

The transitional organisation I mentioned would establish a network to gather up this scattered subversiveness, concentrate it, and transmit it into the broader society, there to do battle with de-civilizing ideology. Such an organisation would be a think-tank, media consultancy, peak council, advertising agency, command post and ideological bomb factory, a Confederation of Australian Humanity, a Chamber of Civilization.

Its purpose would be that expressed by the Barrier Social Democratic Club, formed in the far west of NSW in 1903: "... to impart information, arouse sympathy, encourage activity, and inspire enthusiasm in the cause of human betterment".[3]

Before proceeding, this organisation should be provisionally named, something innocuous like Second Opinion.

Second Opinion will need imagination, intelligence and irreverence. Civilized people possess these qualities in abundance. It will also need lots of money, which will come once Second Opinion does things which cheer and inspirit Australia's Others. (If every Nuclear Disarmament Party voter contributed a dollar, Second Opinion would have half a million dollars. A similar amount would quickly accumulate if middle-class left-wing intellectuals like me all gave up one restaurant meal a month.)

To establish a presence, Second Opinion will have to arouse controversy. The mass media's fascination with conflict and visual images can be exploited to ensure that people talk about issues and facts which are presently the subject of de facto media censorship.

Here are two scripts to this end which, in recent times, might have launched second opinions into people's living rooms.

1. The insurance industry campaign against the Victorian Government's workers' compensation amendments depicted chaotic health and rail systems and said that this is what happens when governments run things. Using sympathetic technicians, film archivists and editors, Second Opinion produced a counter-advertisement. Scenes including Australian farmers shooting their cattle, the collapse of Melbourne's Westgate Bridge, the Bhopal chemical plant explosion, poisoned rivers full of dead fish, urban slums and mutilated process workers were presented with the slogan, "This is what happens when private industry is allowed to run things." The advertisement appeared only a dozen times, but provoked an enormous debate.

2. When the Treasurer arrived at parliament to deliver his May 1987 budget cuts statement, he was accosted by demonstrators. They carried prominently positioned placards displaying the latest annual percentage increase in corporate profits and the amount spent by government in industry assistance, and sprayed the Treasurer with aerosol anti-bullshit cans.

We will return later to deal with more extensive campaigns which Second Opinion might conduct.

Lies are being told about the economy and the human order. A consensual trance is being induced which will

brutally transform human values. Yet while this Colossus of Untruth is erected, and decent people, hypnotised, chant Economystical Voodoo they don't understand, socialists debate what they should do about it and other civilized people experience private disgust. The very act of offering truth, of systematically, directly, simply and skilfully contesting the most vulnerable lies, will disrupt the consensual spell and stomp on the clay toes of the Colossus.

If the private disgusts of civilized Australians are connected, even in a loose but efficient network, there will be talent, ideas and finance enough to mount a challenge. This challenge could upstage respectable liars in front of the cameras by asking the unanswerable. It could arrange sound thinkers and good communicators, including the odd celebrity, to challenge Greed to public debate. It could address school classes and clubs. It could, in short, practically confront the cornerstone of the consensual edifice—that there is only one way of seeing, the way of the speculator.

III

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice meets Tweedledum and Tweedledee, two identical brothers. I first met them as an analogy for the essential sameness of the Liberal and Labor parties. When I read *Through the Looking Glass* a different analogy suggested itself.

Whenever Alice's road divided she found two signposts. One showed the way to Tweedledum's house, the other to Tweedledee's. Both, however, pointed down the same road. The signs were put there to misdirect her and she did not pause to ask herself why things were so arranged that only one road seemed to lead anywhere. Most Australian socialists, like Alice, follow signs put there to misdirect them, and end up a long way down a useless road, the ALP road. Nailed to this road's signposts are many other signs, none of which suggest a socialist terminus.

So why are Australian socialists consumed by the ALP?

The socialist objective in its platform is a lie and has no bearing on what the party actually does. (Rarely is the fate of ultimate objectives otherwise, in party platforms and elsewhere.) Those who periodically sweat to retain it perpetuate a pointless fiction believed by nobody except the most egregiously uncomplicated right-wingers. The socialist plank is about as meaningful as a red flag over the Trades Hall on May Day, the use of "dear comrade" as a salutation in ALP correspondence, and the occasional singing of "Solidarity Forever" by Labor politicians when they're pissed.

No serious historian or political scientist thinks the ALP was ever a socialist party. Hawke has not turned the ALP into something else. Rather he has, like Whitlam, made his party relevant to the ascendant forms of social consciousness and international economic and political relations. Gough recognised China, chopped tariffs and participated in the New Nationalism. Bob appoints a disarmament ambassador, chops wages and gets excited over yacht races.

Historically the Labor Party has been more liberal, compassionate and clear-headed than its parliamentary competitors. It has been nationalist, centralist, occasionally redistributivist, but never socialist.

A small minority of ALP backbenchers have entered parliament as socialists. Some remained socialists; almost all remained backbenchers. A few became Ministers but were unable to achieve anything socialistic.

In *Moving Left* there is a chapter by the Socialist Left Social Security Minister, Brian Howe. It is a sad, brave, self-delusive piece of casuistry. He is like the Green Party's Minister for the Environment in the West German state of Hessen, "who has no power to decide whether the local nuclear plant may operate, but must decide how to dispose of the nuclear waste."[4]

Yet Australian socialists remain transfixed by the ALP. This is most vividly seen in Connell. Here is a humane, erudite and analytical scholar, able to write clearly and compellingly about our society, the things which shaped and shape it, and the processes at work within it. But he seems unable to view the ALP with anything approaching detachment. As soon as he turns to consider the ALP, his arguments become facile. Nothing he says justifies the time and thought socialists devote to that party, and one can only marvel at the sieve of irrationality he creates in the attempt.

Truth or repose, said Emerson: you cannot have both. The truth, I am convinced, is that the ALP is a mental condom on the penis of socialist strategy. It provides an alibi and a balm for socialists who baulk at perspectives like those of Joe Camilleri. Camilleri, like many socialists, has discarded the ALP. The task which I call civilizing Australia he calls building an alternative culture. "The rebuilding of a political culture", he rightly observes, "has to be measured in decades, not months or even years."[5]

Almost always, written history is the concerns of the present dressed up in period costume. One of the most striking features of Verity Burgmann's *In Our Time* is its coverage of debates about the ALP. The debates began in the 1890s and persist unchanged to this day. There's nothing new under the Southern Cross.

*In Our Time* is a lively, engaging, openly polemical and sensitively written account of early Australian socialist organisations and their role in the foundation and initial development of the ALP.

Burgmann sets out to show that "first-wave socialism provided both theoretical and practical leadership to the labour movement" between 1885 and

1905. She establishes this, but also establishes that, while socialists provided leadership, they never got to be the key leaders (except briefly in Queensland). Although *In Our Time* is subtitled "socialism and the rise of Labor", it is really about Labor's immediate headlong plummet from socialist grace.

The first-wave Australian socialists couldn't make the ALP socialist. Those in the ALP Socialist Left who are still trying ninety years later either have imperfect thinking equipment or are like the people ridiculed by the Australian Socialist League in 1905: "socialists who don't want socialism".[6]

This seems harsh. Many argue that the ALP is the closest thing to socialism that has any mass following. By the same argument they would try to freeze meat with an airconditioner if it was the closest thing available to a fridge. This is not optimism or pragmatism, it is stupidity.

The 'closest thing we've got' argument presupposes that radical social change can be achieved through participation in what an Englishman called "the gross conforming idiocy of two-party parliamentary routines" and an American termed, more corporeally, "a choice between eating warm shit or cold shit".[7]

Serious socialists should therefore leave the ALP. Perhaps this is rather too unsettling for many, but it is nevertheless inescapable. There are still differences between the Tweedles, and one may be preferable to the other.[8] It does not follow that socialists should fritter away their lives in an institution which swallows their time and talents, assimilates what it needs (albeit with occasional indigestion), excretes the rest and, in the process, absorbs and neutralises energy and ideas which would be better devoted to endeavours that have something to do with socialism.

There is another reason why socialists should leave the ALP. If they ever realise their undying pipedream and get the numbers within the party, then Australians will not vote for their party because Australians don't want socialism.

> . . . Socialists were disappointed with the Labor Parties within months of their parliamentary debuts. The attitudes and responses acquired with such startling rapidity by Labor MPs appalled and distressed the state socialists in the extra-parliamentary Labor Parties.
>
> (*In Our Time*)

Ah, the Labor Rats. A despicable bunch, yes, but an old and easy target for socialist anathemas. As soon as socialists enter parliament they are in moral danger. Burgmann details the inexorable pattern of degeneration, duplicity and desertion, the same pattern identified and described by V. Gordon Childe in *How Labour Governs* (1923).

But Burgmann leaves too much unsaid. Principally, there is not a word about the sound logic in which Labor Rattery is anchored.

The Labor Party is elected to manage the nation and our nation is a capitalist one. Encroachments on the prerogatives and profits of capital trigger violent economic reactions and political mobilisations which Labor is unable to deal with. If a government's existence depends on economic stability, then why should it do things which will frighten the people whose economy it is? Why provoke the Big Australian, the Quiet Australian, Rupert the Image King and Sir Elders Bond à Court?

Labor governments are beholden to capital, not because they're staffed by Rats but because, as Belinda Probert puts it in *Moving Left*, the ALP "sees itself as a natural party of government in a social order dominated by capital . . ." Hawke is not the first Labor Prime Minister whose tenure hinges on the goodwill of capital. He's merely the first Labor leader in a climate where there's no need to pretend otherwise. Civilized people must change this climate.

## IV

Hegemony is an invisible force, a climate of opinion, and climates don't change like the weather. It is the engineered consent that people give to social relations which almost always stunt and oppress them. The word is normally used by socialists to denote the process by which the self-interested lies of the ruling class seep into the mass mind and hold sway there as revealed truth.

The term and its concepts were developed by the brilliant Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, who died in 1937. Although people other than socialists employ Gramsci's ideas,[9] socialist thinking today sets much store by Gramsci.

They thus see the socialist undertaking as essentially a counter-hegemonic one. Its success depends on the answer to this question:

> Does a movement of dissent, which challenges not this or that policy of the parties but the *kind of politics* in which all parties are implicated, stand any chance of breaking into the world of actual political decisions?[10]

Two years ago one of my Year 12 Politics students chose to write a research essay about the Cuban Revolution. She concluded that the pre-revolutionary government deserved to be overthrown because it didn't look after the Cuban people, but said that Castro's government should not have "stolen" the factories and farms of the capitalists. The owners had risked their money and were entitled to their assets.

How did it eventuate that she spoke the same words and had the same ideas as so many other people I've talked with? No-one taught this working-class girl these ideas. It wasn't necessary, because hegemonic ideas are not learned like a catechism, they are absorbed like radiation.

As teachers are not supposed to voice unpopular political truths I could not explain to Dianne that huge investments are less risky than sunbaking, and most small investments produce either modest success or bankruptcy. But I did reflect inwardly that for Dianne her false assumptions were self-evidently true. She had no inkling that an alternative way of seeing existed.

The counter-hegemonic task has been defined in a variety of similar ways. For McKnight the Left must "organise itself, win popular support and project an appealing vision of socialist society and the strategy to achieve it". Eric Aarons believes socialists must "develop a coherent, offensively oriented social philosophy" and an "interventionist strategy". Such a strategy entails struggling for reforms in ways which alter the social division of power "in structural/institutional as well as ideological terms." Dennis Altman's strategy involves "the *subversion* of existing values, the *mobilizing* of potential support, the *confrontation* of existing structures and practices and the *prefiguring* of new values and institutions".[11]

I accept the above but doubt to my core that it is capable of achievement. Before it is even undertaken some of the biggest lies must be exposed and the capitalist ethic divested of its human mask, so that its sores are exposed to the public gaze. Those with nascent civilized consciousness will then see its ugliness and recoil.

More ambitious strategies do not take account of how close we all are to the fall of darkness. E. P. Thompson puts it beautifully:

> What is new, in the last two decades, is the dulling of the nerve of resistance and of outrage. Familiarity has bred contempt—not for the state and for the specious alarms and rationalizations of power, but contempt for any possible alternative. And in this moment a new danger appears.[12]

There is space to list a few civilizing counter-hegemonic proposals, the sorts of activities that Second Opinion could co-ordinate. These activities will not have their intended effect unless they are planned and executed in ways that *engage* hegemonic ideas.

*Truth of the Month.* Each month a lie broadcast by the Murfax public address system is selected and a co-ordinated assault is launched upon it. Big Lies only need apply. For instance, there's the one about high wages retarding investment and thus aggravating unemployment. The specific truth: capital's share of national production has risen, labor's has fallen. The funds transferred to capitalists have not been invested to create employment but have gone into non-productive takeovers, overseas ventures, speculative currency and property deals and high profit, low employment capital-intensive industries. The general truth: employment is a *byproduct* of investment, not its purpose.

Its purpose is profit. Buying things produces employment too, but that doesn't mean my *purpose* in shopping is to create jobs. Conclusion: capitalists can't be trusted to make wise investments for Australia. (Next month: government expenditure.)

*Proper-ganda.* A worker who distributed literature by the Queensland Social Democratic Vanguard made this complaint a few years into this century:

> I give the men who come to my camp socialistic leaflets to read, but they can't understand them until I explain them in simple language, when they see things clear enough. "But why the blazes ain't it wrote that way?" they ask.[13]

Yes, why the blazes ain't it! Everything distributed by Second Opinion is carefully prepared. Whether it entertains, vexes or informs it gives a lie an *effective* shake. An address and an all-hours telephone number are provided with it. Civilized people who write and ring, and who are willing, are told how they can be of most assistance.

*Subversive Videos.* Each video refutes a selected lie or pack of lies. The range includes outstanding and popularly-presented documentaries, selected editions of existing programs, and Second Opinion's own productions, which usually involve professionals who volunteer some time. The videos develop a bad name among those who promote lies, and the ensuing controversy reminds many that there is another side to every major issue.

*Selling Disbelief.* Second Opinion advertises. Immediately after a number of public *tours de force* establish Second Opinion's existence in the public mind, fifteen-second advertisements appear on television and radio. Television: an animated presentation. An ailing Australia swallows an array of pills from bottles labelled "budget cuts", "deregulation", "privatisation", "Accord Mk. II", naming each as it does so. Australia speaks: "I've been taking these for years but they only make me feel worse." Voiceover: "You're entitled to a second opinion." The name and contact details of Second Opinion appear briefly. Radio text: "The national debt. Nobody seems to mention that most of it's produced by private companies. What else are they forgetting to tell you? It's still a democracy. You're entitled to a second opinion." The lawsuits which follow the "Spot the Bludger" bus and billboard advertisements prove a publicity bonanza and Second Opinion is asked to handle publicity and marketing for a growing number of organisations including the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australian Council of Social Service and the twenty-seven federal unions which resign from the ACTU. The material produced by Second Opinion for its clients is effective, but does not accept the opponent's assumptions.

*Second Opinion Polls.* Second Opinion's market research activities also expand to meet demand. The fees received finance the main work: people's responses to innocuously phrased subversive propositions are collected and analyzed; the effectiveness of the Truth of the Month campaign is monitored; information is communicated in "were you aware . . .?" questions and immediate responses recorded; hegemony's unprotected parts are located for future laceration. Morgan Opinion Polls challenges the methods by which the Second Opinion Poll reached its finding that fifty-seven percent of Australians don't trust opinion polls. The Morgan organisation accepts the challenge to hold a joint news conference. Here heat and publicity are generated. So is an audience interested in how headlines and polls create public opinion. The Sydney Bulletin runs the Second Opinion Poll in two successive issues before its own market research reveals that the many letters asking for the Poll were not from devoted readers but from civilized people.

*Civilized Commandos.* At a press conference a Second Opinion spokesperson denies any association with the Civilized Commandos group:

> *Q.* Is it true that the Civilized Commandos include members of the Buga-Up organisation?
>
> *A.* I have no idea. I haven't seen the leaked Crime Intelligence documents. It would seem to make sense though. Our polls show that most people feel cheered up by the activities of both groups.
>
> *Q.* Was your organisation . . .
>
> *A.* It's called Second Opinion.
>
> *Q.* Was Second Opinion involved in the events which took place this morning at the Arbitration Commission?
>
> *A.* No, I read in the paper that the Civilized Commandos did that. We're not associated with them. But people were still talking about it in the pubs this afternoon.

*Seditious Satire.* It's hard to convince people of anything when you're seen as ridiculous. Ask Tsar Nicholas II or Billy McMahon. With Barry Humphries busy elsewhere, every satirist of calibre in Australia would seem to be a leftie. For every prominent hypocrite and liar there's a name and an image that will stick. The civilized need only find it.

The underlying aim of every ideological blow struck by the civilized must presently be to establish that there is another way of seeing. With that, the nascently civilized will become conscious and Alternative Australia can try to win them.

As I've said, I doubt that more can be achieved. I do not anticipate a socialist future. Those who do must first find a way into the mainstream. Unless the limits of legitimate politics are extended, any socialist endeavor will be cut off at the roots.

## V

The concept of hegemony—and this embraces counter-hegemonic strategies—assumes that people are manipulable. The only parts of the human psyche which can be manipulated to make a socialist society are the civilized parts, those in which decency, reason and tolerance reside.

In the Australian psyche these parts have been numbed. People have been frightened, not out of their wits, but out of their decency, reason and tolerance, by the omnipresent and awesome Colossus of Crisis. While society gapes in paralysed fascination at Crisis, a new hegemony is being constructed. It is almost finished. It provides no way in for judgements of right and wrong.

How have things come to this? It is necessary at this point to backtrack and pick up certain explanatory strands.

We are in a cultural malaise whose origins lie in America in the 1950s, when capitalism became consumer capitalism. Today there is talk of information consumers, health consumers, education consumers. Consumptivitis is the most enduring, pervasive and original contribution to human culture since the Enlightenment.

Consumptivitis spread at a fiendish rate, because it arrived oozing prosperity. Its principal symptom was found to be the association of personal desires with commodities. It was found that people could be persuaded that happiness, intelligence, success, approval, beauty and potency could be bought.

In order to proliferate, consumptivitis had to overcome the normative antibodies of the existing morality. Material, physical and sensual gratification had to be cut from their moral moorings.

The postwar consumption-led recovery indiscriminately uprooted any values incompatible with it. The Labor Day Parade in Melbourne became Moomba. Its motto: "Let's get together and have fun." Fun was socially defined as buying, consuming. Western industrial humanity, liberated from the old morality, rushed head-long into the hitherto forbidden territory of mindless hedonism.

It ought to be stressed that the new values were fostered with sedulous, methodical, scientific care. When psychiatry paired with advertising, its misbegotten offspring was unstoppable.[14]

Many people bade good riddance to the old values. They were reactionary, narrow and persecutory. They offended not only consumptivitis, but also decency, reason and tolerance. What came to be called the counter-culture tried to replace the old values with new ones. It even tried to wrestle with consumptivitis for control of the hearts and minds of industrial humanity. It lost.

Three things ensured that consumptivitis would defeat the counter-culture. First, consumptivitis made the counter-culture itself an object of consumption. Fashion, music, sensation, even dissent can be packaged and sold. Second, the counter-cultural ethos of individualism, self-expression and personal freedom over-lapped with the psychological pitch of the advertiser; it was itself host to a strain of the consumptivitis bacillus. Third, the counter-culture challenge accepted the killing embrace of nominal reforms. When the social order appeared to be embracing some of the subversive values of the counter-culture, it was absorbing them into its logic and re-ordering them in terms of its own assumptions, concepts and procedures. It turned one value into an Environmental Impact Study, another into a school text that didn't look boring, another into a body language seminar for trainee managers.

With the old values dying and the new ones being absorbed, society was left without a common morality.

We saw that consumptivitis spread because it seemed to dispense prosperity. The consumptivitis sufferer needs ever-increasing material fortunes. For about fifteen years in its two centuries of existence capitalist society was able to provide most of its members with a relative surfeit of food, clothing and shelter. Employment, leisure, education, entertainment, physical and social mobility, hot water, sewered dunnies and live telecasts of the Grand Final—never in human history had the common people known its like.

Then it all started to change. The driving force of capitalism, the endless pursuit of maximum profit (and no-one denies this is its driving force) remained the same. But in the international economy which had emerged, this drive no longer produced ever-increasing living standards. The brief co-incidence of capital accumulation and spiralling affluence had run its course. For one ring of society after another, the future no longer guaranteed a constant improvement in material living standards.

Transnational capital was impelled in directions no longer compatible with near-universal prosperity. It would require more space than I have to relate the details of the systemic imbalances which precipitated this change. And they need not divert us. Let us continue with our synoptic flight over postwar Australia, and observe the social and cultural effects of the recession.

The bulk of the population was profoundly stricken with consumptivitis and identified personal worth and fulfilment with money and property. Unhappiness and restiveness were generated by the tension between the promise and performance of consumer capitalism. There no longer existed an overarching, socially authoritative code—religion, an acceptance of one's lot and station in life, moderate expectations, family and community-centred horizons—to regulate who got what. People now looked to governments.

In the global rampage of accelerated capital accumula-

tion which followed the war, governments of national reconstruction acquired previously unknown responsibilities and power in the management of national economies. With them came previously unknown popular expectations. Australians now expected governments to maintain and improve their real incomes, and provide a welfare net to catch those who fell out of the labor market. Moreover, government services and benefits, usually provided as vote-buying measures in the fight for the spoils of parliamentary office, had burgeoned, creating new popular expectations.

All these expectations could be met with relative ease while the international economic structure was one in which the drive for profit co-incidentally produced rising living standards. Governments did not so much manage the economy as watch it do its work.

When the economy started to go wrong, and governments tried to fix it, they found themselves powerless.

What could they do? They couldn't stand gaping in the path of the steamroller of profit. They were elected to manage and must appear to be doing so. To tell people the truth—that a conflict had developed between the requirements of capital accumulation and the things they had come to expect from life—would be to explode the myth on which the postwar consensus depended. Yet while people still believed this consensus they continued to demand what they felt themselves entitled to. They became perplexed and frustrated when these things were not automatically provided, and when the established methods for securing them—strikes, public campaigns, changes of government—no longer worked. How long before perplexity and frustration hardened into a mood which questioned the whole system?

The problem was solved by a new consensus, a consensus of crisis and declining expectations to replace the consensus of prosperity. The new consensus produced opposition, but on the whole it is working.

And so we return to the place at which our synoptic flight over postwar Australia began—the place where people stand and gape at the Colossus of Crisis.

Like King Kong, Crisis is displayed so that those who brought him among us can make money while we gasp at the spectacle. These entrepreneurs see no prospect of Crisis getting out of control. Even if he does, they will escape with their profits.

Nor is Crisis only displayed in a theatre to those who buy a ticket. The whole nation is now enclosed in a theatre owned by Murfax. At first the show is free, but if you want to keep watching you must buy a ticket. Everyone keeps watching because it is the only show playing. Soon the hegemonic ticket sellers come to collect the price of a ticket—the new consensus. (Don't get up to pay, just keep watching the show. Our specially trained staff can get their hands into your pocket without you even noticing.)

Some people don't like the show and ask to see the manager, Mr Accord. He is too busy to argue the point, but gives them a program. It contains the five things they need to know to understand the show, or at least accept it.

1. Things are still basically normal. The achievement of personal satisfaction and fulfilment still depends on buying and owning things.
2. Because of Crisis some of us can't buy and own as much as we used to before he appeared.
3. Only the magical Free Market Forces know how to handle and control Crisis.
4. We don't like them either, but you must leave Crisis to them. If you try to tell them what to do they will be offended and will go somewhere else.
5. Then Crisis will be free and will attack all of us and soon no-one will be able to buy things and be happy anymore.

Thus are the complaints of those with nascent civilized consciousness, most of whom vote ALP, met and silenced. What they want is defined as impracticable and then, as it passes through the incomparably tangled logic of the new consensus, the impracticable becomes the impossible. Those who continue to question the new consensus (socialists) are transmogrified into impossible people. And it's pointless listening to that sort.

Before Alternative Australia can convince people of anything at all, they must first be prepared to listen to the voice of impracticability. The function of Second Opinion is to open their ears to that voice, to offer a different way of hearing—a moral way.

In the present circumstances, the very purpose of government is redefined as economic crisis management, a realm where the ought has no place. The hegemonic citadel of the crisis consensus is a structure from which right and wrong are excluded. Unless morality musters a frontal assault on this edifice—and unless it forces entry—decency, tolerance and reason will wither and die outside the citadel walls. With them die the possibilities which incubate in the impulses and responses of those with nascent civilized consciousness.

Hegemony is braced for the moral attack and has a vicious, snarling immorality of its own to set upon morality. It is the stock-in-trade immorality of grab what you can, life is a jungle, every bastard for themselves, and other such hegemonic poison. It is an immorality with a mania for renaming things: greed becomes incentive or market forces; anarchy becomes free enterprise; oligopoly becomes competition; inexpedient becomes impossible. It is an immorality which suits only the very rich, but which is presented as unchangeable human nature so we will all think it's normal to be immoral.

Once people accept immorality as normal they can see all sorts of things as normal. It becomes normal for

people to trick you into buying something; normal for greedy tradesmen not to turn up when they said they would, because they've taken on too many jobs; normal for trash to be on television during the non-ratings season; normal for a four dollar bunch of flowers to cost eight dollars by the roadside on Mother's Day; normal for cynical promises to be the discourse in which the supreme democratic act, the election, is conducted. These are prosaic examples which could be multiplied without end, but they are the everyday moral texture of the capitalist fabric.

A particularly irksome exhibition of capitalist immorality was the vociferous bleating of restaurateurs. In a nation awash with cries for sacrifice, they unblushingly opposed the end of the free lunch tax racket on which they and some of their customers had fattened. So atrophied had become the public sense of right and wrong that it was not scandalised by the only argument which they offered: it would cost jobs. In the moral universe of the new consensus, any activity which provides employment is given a government pass exempting it from moral inspection. The moral exemptions list has grown so big that every question of economic morality is now on it.

Victorian nurses provide a ready example. I am not interested here in their claims but in the way those claims were treated by the government and the media, which purport to speak for Australia. At no time was the issue treated as one of justice or equity. Words like that have nothing to do with public policy nowadays. The only issue that was discussed by the government and media was what the claims would cost. In the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association, to which I belong, this process has been streamlined to save time. The union executive assesses teachers' claims and vetoes any that might cost something, because "the money just isn't there". When you talk about what's right and wrong they become impatient.

It has nothing to do with whether or not unions enjoy public sympathy, for $120 million was found to mollify the banks and $160 million for NSW surgeons, groups which attracted less public sympathy than nurses, the unemployed, pensioners and people on low wages. It has everything to do with morality.

Questions of right and wrong must elbow their way into political discourse. The ethical approach must be placed on the list of legitimate approaches to matters of public policy. A moral offensive must bring the simmering remainders of decency, tolerance and reason to the boil before hegemony cuts off the gas. If the possibilities presented by the impulses and responses of the nascently civilized conscious are to be realised, then these people must come to see their impulses and responses as legitimate ones.

The danger, otherwise, is that the Colossus of Crisis—and all its attendant imagery of men in shirt sleeves making the dollar go up and down—will produce in these people a complete withdrawal from a world too complex to contemplate, a world into which decency, reason and tolerance are embarrassed and frightened to venture lest they appear foolish and anachronistic.

## VI

> When we see Dad and Dave we feel angry with you and Lawson. When we contemplate the alternative we are thankful for you and your ideal. I wonder what we will do.
>
> (Manning Clark, "A Letter to Tom Collins")[15]

I wonder.

Nationalism is a recurring motif in the new hegemony. National pride and national spirit are used to sell bedding, biscuits and belt-tightening. I suggest civilized people can use them for more desirable purposes.

The Australian Legend—that there is a distinctively Australian ethos which includes egalitarianism, a low bullshit threshold, solidarity and an antipathy towards the powerful and privileged among its defining characteristics—is a readily available, nationally recognisable source of images which can assist Australians to discover another way of seeing.

I know that to say this is to commit a left-wing solecism, except among old-fashioned and working-class radicals. The New Left severely wounded Australian radicalism when it undermined the radical nationalism and egalitarianism of the Australian Legend. Sure Jack is as good as his master in Australia, one argument went, but Jack remains Jack and capitalist social relations based on worker and boss thus remain unchallenged. The New Left threw out the only popularly-based source of challenge to capitalist values because it saw it as inadequate. Nothing of comparable power has replaced it, which leaves us with no challenge at all.

I believe that the Australian tradition, even if it has become rusty and blunt through lack of use, can still hew out a place for alternative ideas in the Australian mind. The crisis pushers and merchandisers have no exclusive claim to national feeling. Indeed, they are traitors, in league with the foreign pirates, profiteers and protectionists who are savaging our country.

No matter that the Legend's roots lie in the 1890s. The worm-eaten economic theories of Adam Smith date from the 1770s. They are economically useless yet are used to great ideological effect to this day.

The Australian Legend has helped to shape many of the practices and organisations in Australian society which the new hegemony has found most intractable. It glows as a subversive ember in most people with nascent civilized consciousness. It can facilitate the transmission of alternative values and ideas into the mainstream of political debate. Most importantly, it can grip, move and rouse people with sentiments

against which the new hegemony has but feeble defences.

Present in the Legend are alternative myths, symbols and images to those which currently dominate the Australian mind. Worked skilfully they could supply a bridge between being ordinary and saying no to the status quo. It seems only fitting, as the centenary of the mythical bushman of the 1890s approaches, that we put aside his shortcomings and ask him for a hand in a just venture. The word justice is known to move him. Perhaps he'll use his legendary stature to stand toe to toe with the Colossus of Crisis and give him a whopping great smack in the ear'ole.

Some of the very things for which the Legend has been criticised may, in the new situation, prove to be its strengths. Its non-class populism may reach ears which are deaf to class-based appeals. And its pre-industrial flavor could attract Australians disturbed by the monstrous effects of industrialism.

Altogether, I find the Australian Legend provides much better material to work with than any alternative I have yet encountered on the Left. It is far more likely to wean Australians away from the big lies of the new hegemony than are post-structuralism or deconstructionism.

## VII

I have had time in this discussion to visit many places but not to map them. As a result, some arguments are presented as assertions, bare and vulnerable. This is because reading books about the crisis (that word again!) of socialism set off ideas like a string of firecrackers, and my paramount concern was to set down these ideas in the available space.

I belong to no party or political organisation and have become very fond of being that way. I have written because of two angers.

First, because I have felt for several years that the whole tone of this country and its culture is becoming dangerously uncivilized. The ideologues of greed, those meritricious swindlers, fill me with an inner rage. I am fed up with beer commercials about success, with sycophantic bilge in the press about millionaire hooligans, with children being turned into pseudo-entrepreneurial epigones, with people for whom profit and power are the purpose of existence being reified as The Market. And I'm fed up with the people Barry Humphries dubbed Yabbies (Young Australian Boring Businessmen) and their shrivelled view of life.

I have written, secondly, because socialists who write about socialism have not said anything new for years, but have only become better and better at identifying the same problems. It conjures up a picture of people sitting on the banks staring into the forest for answers, while opportunity flows past behind them. I am fed up with their interminable, repetitive, incestuous hand-wringing. It is not going to establish conduits into the community through which alternative ideas can be conducted.

The new hegemony seeks to replace the postwar social consensus. It was a consumerist consensus composed of the welfare state, Keynesian economics and improving living standards. It is not a defence of this consensus that is required but a defence of the moral judgement which this consensus expressed, albeit within the confines of the existing hegemony. No matter how the good things were defined, there was a moral judgement that all members of a society should share in them, and that a civilized nation looks after its people.

A population so paralysed by Crisis, so morally housebroken by it, that it can forget it is civilized, is a population not yet ready to listen to socialists.

*John Herouvim teaches at Deer Park High School in Melbourne.*

The books discussed here are Verity Burgmann: *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor 1885-1905* (Allen & Unwin, $29.95 and $15.95); David McKnight (ed.): *Socialism in Australia—Toward Renewal?* (Box A716, Sydney South 2000, $3); David McKnight (ed.): *Moving Left: The Future of Socialism in Australia* (Pluto Press, $11.95).

1. See, for example, Irving Howe, *The Lost Cause: Socialism and America.*
2. Australian Society, May 1986, p. 46.
3. *In Our Time*, p. 103.
4. *Moving Left*, pp. 129-30.
5. Arena, no. 77, p. 73.
6. *In Our Time*, p. 99.
7. E. P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London, 1980), p. 2; Charles Bukowski, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (San Francisco, 1973), p. 77.
8. At the time of writing, Liberal media and identity card policies are more civilized than Labor's. Most of the rest look worse, but we must remember that the whole parliamentary troupe has taken a few steps to the right. Relativities remain largely undisturbed.
9. For example, see John Mathews' chapter in *Moving Left.*
10. Thompson, loc. cit., emphasis in original.
11. *Socialism in Australia*, pp. 3, 13 & 14. Dennis Altman, *Rehearsals for Change*, p. 134, emphasis in original.
12. Thompson, op. cit., p. 163.
13. *In Our Time*, p. 187.
14. For the feeling of being present during the conception, gestation and birth of the offspring read Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders.*
15. Ian Turner (ed.), *The Australian Dream*, 1968, p. 347.

RAY CARMICHAEL

# Cossack Food

The first astronaut passed everybody by after he had upset and inspired many people.

The great Russian flew into the void and came back to be illuminated on the television sets of everybody in the world. He was a handsome man. All over the world women wanted to be close to him.

In England a girl succeeded in breaking through a cordon and kissing the Russian, not by way of greeting, but by way of passion. For the connoisseur, it was an excellent and full-bodied kiss. It angered Mr Marenkoff, who I used to visit. He was a White Russian who had fought the Reds.

The tramcar ride from my office was often tiring, and Mr Marenkoff would be home in his flat on the ground floor of the house where I lodged. Sometimes I brought Time magazine for him. I loved the rich Russian food he prepared.

He had white hair and blue-grey eyes and he stood tall with an unmistakeable officer's stance. The striped riding-breeches, and striped battle-tunics with royal insignia, were now replaced by loose khaki shorts and sloppy short-sleeved shirts, which hung on him in an upright manner.

Mr Marenkoff was reading at the kitchen table when I tapped on the open door. He put the paper down. "Yes, yes, Neil. We will have some coffee. Or would you like a whisky?"

"A small one, please."

Drinking with him was easy and civilized, and I never saw him disgraced. When my friends were with me he would tell them I was a good man, adding "Only once have I seen him drunk." To the best of my recollection this was true, though I am uncertain about one time when we both drank deeply into the morning.

He lifted the newspaper before he poured the whisky, examining the front page in disbelief and disgust. He put it down and shook his head. He poured a little tonic into my whisky.

"We won't drink to the astronaut," I said, needlessly.

"These bastards. They will betray you." On the table, on the front page, the girl in the photograph was joined to the astronaut.

"I would like to be a magistrate," said Mr Marenkoff.

"To your new ambition." We touched glasses.

"Then I would make a sentence. I would lock her up in a room."

"Solitary confinement."

"No. With twenty riff-raff. These petty criminals. You call them hooligans. *Twenty* of them."

"It's an achievement. Circling the earth."

"They are in front only because they do things Americans won't do. There is a suspicion now they put men up before and killed them. With a pill. The way they killed their dog in space. Haven't you read?" Perhaps it was in one of the Time magazines I had given him. Or the occasional Newsweek. Or it may simply have been in the newspapers. "They would do this, bloody bastards."

"I had a letter from Alex," said Mr Marenkoff. Alex, his son, was away at military college. "He talks of the things he misses. His mates, his car. Girls."

"And you. He wrote to me too. They have a rough time down there."

"Always. We had to know horses in my time. How to lance another horseman when you are both charging. Retaining the lance." He showed me how with his raised arm.

"Neil. Are you writing?"

"To Alex?"

"No. Your writing."

"I have been."

"You are tired."

"Tonight I am."

"Will you come to eat? Tonight?"

"I'd like to. Let me clean up upstairs first. I won't be long."

When I came back he was frying steak in the Australian way, in a shallow pan. I told him it was the Australian way. "It is a good way for the middle of the week," he said.

"Can I bring some rabbit for the week-end?"

"Oh yes. Can you get me brown vinegar?"

"I'll get some tomorrow."

The rice was simmering with the red cabbage. He

took some frozen pelmeni from the refrigerator. The mince inside the thin bubbles of dough would be cut fine with all else, holding its juice in the hot soup. "I want to look at the bugles," I said; I went into the lounge-room while he cooked the pelmeni, or Cossack food, as he called them; they could be carried through the snow frozen in saddle-bags.

The bugles were lined big to small in a glass case across the wall. They were decorated with orange cloth with black stripes. Mr Marenkoff had been given them to mind in Shanghai by their German owner, who had never returned. They stood silver and silent. Beside the case was an Iron Cross which, oddly, I never asked about. Leaning in a corner of the room was a Russian riot gun, its trigger and chamber welded and sealed.

"Neil. We will have some soup."

The Russians bought buckwheat from Woolloongabba to put in their soup. Mr Marenkoff usually cooked shredded ham with it, or small cuts of mutton. It was adventurous to know that Woolloongabba, one of the high-density places of Australia, with its conjunction of traffic and trains, its delicatessens and crammed shops and pubs, had introduced a grain which grew wild in Siberia. And no Russian I knew had seen the proverbial salt mines of Siberia, which was a place of fish-crammed rivers and robust boys who sallied from county to county when the snows melted. There were enormous crops, and wild fields and forests.

"Did you read the article on the power-stations?" I asked. Time had written about the projects of Siberia. "There is a photograph of a man in Omsk. He fought in the civil war." Omsk was Mr Marenkoff's hometown.

"I saw him. We are the same age. I don't know him."

"Just as well. You might hate him."

"No. He was a soldier. Like me. We didn't want what happened." Nor did the Georgians, I thought. The Georgians had once fought the Siberians bitterly and now, at dinner at Mr Marenkoff's, they sang together.

"But you hate the girl," I said, carelessly; she remained kissing the astronaut on the front of the newspaper.

"A traitor. The old man in Time is no traitor. But here, in this newspaper—Neil, do you remember when Podgorny defected?"

"Everybody does." Everybody did. Podgorny had defected from the Russian embassy in Canberra, and then there was an incident at the airport in Darwin when two Russian embassy officials were challenged as they escorted Podgorny's wife to fly her back to Russia. There was a scuffle involving a policeman; the photograph of a headlocked Russian was eclipsed only by the headlines; it was as prominent then as the photograph of the girl of the moment, who applied another headlock.

"When they brought Mrs Podgorny back," said Mr Marenkoff, "I was visiting the Woolloongabba police station to renew my driving licence. The desk sergeant and the others, when they found I was Russian, asked me what did I think of Podgorny. I said, 'I would shoot him.' They laughed and did not understand. 'Why?' they asked. 'You are a *White* Russian.' 'I am. And I would shoot him. He betrayed *them*. He would betray *you*.' I have seen these bastards many times, Neil. In Shanghai, when I was a policeman and the Japanese were there, I saw many betrayals. Shoot him and save lives."

We ate the steak and rice and had another whisky. I needed an early night. "I'm going to go to bed and read for a while."

"Do you know if Alex is flying up for Easter?"

"I honestly don't. But he'd tell you."

"Yes. I know." Mr Marenkoff had a moment of self-consciousness. It had to do with the time I have mentioned, when he may have seen me drunk a second time he preferred not to acknowledge. The first time I was drunk for sure. But the possible second time came after talking and eating and drinking together into the morning. He had asked me over and over about Alex, who was having an affair with a girl he had followed to Sydney. This happened a year before Alex joined the officer training school. Mr Marenkoff, concerned, asked time and again "And what about Alex? Is he coming back to Brisbane?" I was aware of this intermittent technique in interrogation; but the truth was I had no idea how Alex was going with the girl or what he intended to do about returning to Brisbane. He hadn't written for a while.

"What are you reading?" asked Mr Marenkoff now, as his self-consciousness left him.

"*Anna Karenin.*"

"Oh. He is our best. Tolstoy. Our best writer. And our silliest bastard. The lies he told—such lies about Sebastopol. So many excellent officers told me. A good writer. And the silliest."

"Would you like some help with the washing-up?"

"Thank you. But you know me. In ten minutes you will not know there was a meal. Sometimes I am like the German. Always, in the morning, the place is spotless."

"Yes. It is. I'm going to read that silly book."

"Only the writer is silly, Neil. The writer. That book wrote itself. You should read it."

When I went upstairs to my room I tried to let the book read itself to me, just as it had written itself for Tolstoy. But something was not flowing in me, though it overflowed from the wonderful book.

When I turned off the light I lay awake for a long time. It was hard to think about Mr Marenkoff without seeing his double-edge of anger and kindness.

On the second possible time he had seen me drunk he had been upset in the evening as soon as I walked in. This time the newspaper had a story about an old

man who died in a house fire. "Do you know why this poor old man died?" he asked. "He died for his wife—a very silly woman. Everybody was safe on the footpath when this bloody woman became worried about her galah. All her dogs and cats and even her budgerigar were safe on the footpath and then she started moaning and scratching for this galah. What is a galah, Neil?"

"A cockatoo. They look very nice. Pink and grey."

"This *nice* bird couldn't help the old man. *She* killed this poor old man. And do you know what I would do? I would build a big pyre, with the best combustible timber. I would find huge pine-trees. And on top I would put her with all her cats and dogs and bloody birds. *She* killed this old man."

So we drank a little brandy; he showed me the moderate way to have three before a meal, a good-mannered custom which, I suspected, could change a man's direction and fortune. I asked him why he never drank vodka; he told me the vodka here was an inferior drink with a borrowed label, and try as they may, the Soviets could never export the taste of the original.

"Have you heard from Alex?" he asked, when we were halfway through the soup.

"Nothing."

"There is some bullshit going on with the Russian community. Some say he is engaged. Some say the girl is pregnant."

"I haven't heard anything."

"He will write to you. I hope it is a better correspondence than I had once. With my brother. Long after we had retreated. My brother had then become a high official in the Education Department. He wrote to me to return to Russia. With my aptitude he would find a good job for me in education. I wrote to tell him I would return—but as his *con*queror."

We had some pelmeni separately with soy sauce. I bit into the captive mince and juices. My glass was full again, I noticed. But everybody's glass was full when they ate at his table.

He asked about Alex again; had *any*body heard from him. They hadn't, none that I knew anyway. For the first time I noticed Mr Marenkoff wore a wedding ring. His young wife had left him years ago. She too had come through Shanghai, and was a bride of sixteen when he was forty-two.

"Would you like to try some caviar?" It was a good black caviar which he could not afford. The taste was something I had tried but not acquired. "I am a peasant," I said. "I like fish-paste"—which I reached for—"but not caviar." The paste was made from mullet roe and was steamed a deep orange color. It spread thickly across the dark bread.

Peasants were rarely discussed by the royalists. It was Alex who told me what had been mentioned in passing by one of Mr Marenkoff's compatriots.

The peasants lived in quarters which, in the summer, became open huts with the shutters removed. Even parts of the walls were taken down. On the off-days from the fields there were drunken revels.

The sons of the gentry, at the age of puberty, crossed the fields to hide outside the peasants' huts, and watch. They saw the sex which was as cheap and human as any of the sex they saw later in the brothels of Shanghai before the communists took over.

Alex told me about his father's cousin, Sergei—a cousin closer than any brother. When they were boys they sometimes hid under a wagon and watched a young married couple at the peasants' quarters. The girl was beautiful with the cool-weathered hair of slim blond Russians. Her husband had the unburdened body of a young laborer. Mr Marenkoff and his cousin lay and watched and ached with the longing for perfect sex which binds a friendship between pubescent boys.

During the long night when I ate and talked and drank and was interrogated by Mr Marenkoff I learnt more about his cousin. Mr Marenkoff had questioned me, out of the blue and often, about Alex. "You're sure you haven't heard?" "Do you know if Alex is to be married?" "What do you think of the girl?" But the later the night went, the more obvious were the intervals between each question. He seemed on the verge of telling me something.

He poured some final coffee from a saucepan just after five a.m. Then he told me: his cousin Sergei was a classical scholar who became influenced by the Reds. He became a speaker who caused the coal-miners to strike. They had been very close, but he saw Sergei only once after entering military college.

Mr Marenkoff showed me a photograph of men from his unit. They were in the prime of youth, except for their eyes, which were quite old.

Sergei was found hiding one night in a fodder shed which was in the path of their retreat. The Reds were coming and would ford the river upstream. There was barely time to take quietly to the hills. But Sergei could not be left to give away their plans. Even his warm dead body would inform on them. So Mr Marenkoff saw his cousin bound to an anvil which was lowered from an embankment to the water and down, down, until the ropes were slipped. They remounted and retreated; he rode through the endless night wishing his heart were as frozen as the food he carried in his saddle-bags.

His loyalties and judgments later reached out to tangle themselves around Tolstoy's book, becoming something for me to unravel in my middle years.

By then I had to work out how to make pelmeni by myself.

CASSANDRA PYBUS

# History as Myth

*G. A. Robinson and the Tasmanian Aboriginals.*

"The past is never dead. It's not even past".
William Faulkner

The dispossession and virtual destruction of the Aboriginal people of mainland Tasmania, achieved in the first four decades of the nineteenth century, has forged a special place for Tasmania in the national consciousness. The Tasmanian experience—so complete, so remote, so utterly past—has long been a focus for the racial guilt of white Australia, uncomplicated by problematic issues of reparations and land rights. The emergence of Michael Mansell as a spokesman for Aboriginal rights has confounded many Australians and unsettled complacent perceptions of the Tasmanian past. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the island State itself, where Mansell is continually the subject of vitriolic and hysterical abuse for daring to call himself Aboriginal. It is clear that, despite their discomfort about references to 'genocide', most Tasmanians are profoundly attached to the belief that Aboriginality became extinct with the death of Truganini in 1876. Having woven the tragedy of the "last Tasmanian" into the mythology of the island, few white Tasmanians can make the psychological leap and accept the survival of Aboriginal culture and identity in their midst.

As witness to the death of tribal society in Tasmania, George Augustus Robinson recognized the potential in the moment. Robinson, himself a primary agent in the ultimate dispossession of the Aboriginal Tasmanians, kept detailed journals which remain the only substantial record we have of the people who had inhabited the island for 40,000 years. Robinson's anticipation of future interest in the tragedy of the Aboriginal Tasmanians ensured that most of these journals were preserved for posterity. Thanks to the exhaustive scholarly work of N. J. B. Plomley, all Robinson's Tasmanian journals have now been annotated and published. The journals 1829 to 1834, encompassing Robinson's missions to "conciliate" the Aboriginal tribes were published as *Friendly Mission* in 1966. This seminal work has now been complemented by another monumental piece of scholarship, *Weep in Silence*, which includes the Flinders Island journals, 1835 to 1839.[1] Together these two works make an outstanding contribution to an understanding of the Tasmanian past and, indirectly, its relationship to the present. In particular, Plomley's meticulous editing has made accessible the complex and culpable character at the heart of the tragedy. As we approach the bicentennial of white settlement, it is fitting that we take a closer look at George Augustus Robinson, the protector and conciliator of the Tasmanian Aboriginals.

George Augustus Robinson was an intriguing fellow. He was born in England in 1788. He had little formal education and his trade was that of bricklayer. Energetic and ambitious, he migrated to the colony of Van Diemen's Land in 1824, in the hope of finding himself a more comfortable niche in society. In Hobart he was painfully aware of his lack of social standing as an uneducated artisan, with no recognizable position, in a society sharply deliniated by class and caste. His vulnerability on this score was to torture him throughout his time in Australia. It also continued to fuel his relentless drive for upward mobility. In this particular quest he must be judged successful, since he was able to live out his final years in Europe a gentleman of leisure and refinement.

In 1829 Robinson was appointed storekeeper to a proposed Aboriginal settlement on Bruny Island at a salary of £50 a year, which he had raised to £100, showing a capacity to haggle that would serve him well. By 1839 he was Chief Protector of Aborigines in N.S.W., located at Port Phillip. He retired to England in 1852 on the proceeds of land investment and handsome government pensions from both colonies. There he married into polite and learned society with his match to Rose Pyne (having worn out his first wife in Australia). He and his wife travelled in Europe for six years before settling in Bath, where Robinson found acceptance among the elite of arts and science with papers and talks on Aboriginal society. He died in 1866.

Among colonial Europeans, Robinson was almost

universally disliked. Even his admirer, James Bonwick, had to admit to his having certain weaknesses of character. He was undoubtedly a man of energy, courage and humane feeling, but these characteristics were overwhelmed by the vanity, righteousness and self-interest he possessed in abundance.

In rounding up the Aboriginal tribes of mainland Tasmania, Robinson saw himself as a hero of almost Olympian proportion, engaged in a great moral enterprise involving fortitude, fearlessness and self-sacrifice. Concerned that only the silent bush, a few truculent convicts and a handful of childlike savages were witness to his heroic feats, Robinson besieged his superiors with voluminous and grandiloquent reports which, according to one contemporary reader, "cast into the shade altogether the official bulletins of Napoleon, Wellington and others".[2] These interminable exercises in self-promotion, with their endless denigration of other Europeans involved in the process, were for the most part ignored. But it was Robinson's intention to exhibit his heroism before a larger audience than venal and unappreciative colonists. In this regard his journals served two purposes: a record of daily events from which to draw his dispatches to officialdom, and the source material for an intended book which would present his great enterprise to the world.

Robinson not only wrote continually, so much that Governor Gipps doubted he ever did anything else, he also read with an eye to shaping his craft. In the wilds of Cape Grim we find Robinson reading Ellis' *Polynesian Researches* and complaining that Ellis' attention to descriptive detail and his anonymity as the narrator make the book tedious and dry. "Most readers", he notes, "are anxious to follow the hero, or author, of the narrative" (19 February 1834). Some of Robinson's own descriptive prose leaves little doubt as to his literary pretensions. On 13 July 1831, covered in skin disease, reduced to subsisting on rotten potatoes and forced to walk into the night in search of water, he is able to observe that "darkness had enveloped the face of nature and the winged songster was slumbering in secure repose".

So, while Robinson is recording the daily trials and tribulations of months in the inclement and rugged Tasmanian wilderness, the perfidity of his convict retainers, the idiosyncrasies of his black guides, the brutality of the sealers and shepherds, the elusiveness of his quarry, he invariably has an eye to the story he wants to tell. As Colin Johnson has argued recently, Robinson's journals reveal him to be "engaging in a quest to fictionalize himself, to rebuild a personality in keeping with the ideology he espouses".[3] This is not to claim that the journals are only imaginative constructs. They are clearly more than that. Rather, what we find in the journals is a constant tension between what Robinson sees and experiences and what he will allow himself to have seen and experienced. Thus, his reading of events is wildly inconsistent and contradictory, while his total inability to grasp what is happening to the Aboriginals around him suggest a capacity for self-deception that is truly awesome.

George Augustus Robinson spent six years, on and off, in a series of arduous treks through the Tasmanian bush in the intimate company of a handful of Aboriginals, his "sable adherents", as he liked to call them. These people led him through the wilderness, supplied him with food, located and persuaded other tribes to surrender to him and, on several occasions, saved his life. He was totally dependent on them. He slept with them, hunted with them, learnt their language and marvelled at their mental and physical adaptation to the natural environment.

*George Augustus Robinson*

Yet he never ceased to describe them as wretched, passive, simple-minded creatures, lost without the care and protection he gave them. His attitude to them did not change from the time that he stepped ashore at Bruny Island: he was the father, they were his children. On 12 August 1831 Robinson made a lengthy entry about his immense good fortune in persuading Mannalargenna to find the Big River Tribe for him. (For the capture of this tribe there was a big reward and much kudos.) He recorded that Mannalargenna's power and prowess were critical for the success of the mission. The entry closes with a reference to the Aboriginal belief that Mannalargenna had psychic powers, and he concludes: "Poor creatures, they are objects of great commiseration and want teaching".

Robinson's habit of regarding his black associates

and captives as children becomes more and more insistent once he begins the process of removing them from mainland Tasmania. Against their palpable resistance and despair he asserts:

> I feel satisfied that they are in the position of children not capable of knowing what is best for themselves. I feel I am doing them good although they know it not, and I know there are thousands and tens of thousands in my own country that would change places with them (21 October 1832).

By the time he has them penned up on Flinders Island this view of the Aboriginals serves him well, as he sets out to repress their native culture and make them into something akin to European serfs.

Thirty years later, comfortably retired in Bath, Robinson penned an introduction to the book he never produced. He wrote of a debased and simple-minded people, prey to the depraved white population yet capable of being " . . . brought to a sense of the obligations [sic] and made useful members of society".[4] Into this role stepped George Augustus Robinson, reminding his would-be readers that there were things worth living for other than money (and neglecting to tell them how he had haggled to double his fee). "I was actuated solely by a desire to serve the Aborigines", he wrote, "to do them good, to ameliorate their wretched conditions and raise them in the scale of civilization". This, after all but five of the original three hundred he conciliated were dead. Here, at least, we have consistency.

Of course, children must love and obey their father, and Robinson's journals constantly record the unquestioning respect, admiration and affection his sable adherents have for him. The most telling evidence given is their enthusiasm to accompany Robinson on his long journeys. The daily accounts, however, record the difficulty he has in controlling the blacks, his constant fear they will abscond and the fact that nearly all their time is spent in hunting and other traditional pursuits. Given that the alternative to accompanying Robinson was death, gaol or Flinders Island, it is clear that Robinson's missions offered the Aboriginals the only hope of life as they understood it. Robinson's misperception is understandable, given his vanity and the dissembling of some blacks, but it becomes quite bizarre during the last two missions, for which the monetary stakes were very much higher.

As it became clear to the Aboriginals that Robinson's intentions were to remove all the black inhabitants to the Bass Strait islands, the friendly blacks were less willing to be the agent of capture for other tribes. They were, nonetheless, desperate to avoid institutionalization. So they led Robinson around in circles for months, attempting to incorporate him into their own cultural system. They hunted, held ceremonies, told stories, but they did not find any Aboriginal people. Robinson faithfully records all of this, and his own frustrations about it. Such things as the repeated lighting of warning fires are dealt with as superstition or stupidity. As Robinson's anxiety rises, he continually remonstrates with his people "to exert themselves and find the [Big River] tribe, that our object was not to do them any harm but good and to save their lives, and if they have any love of their countrymen I felt persuaded they would get to them; that the Governor did not want kangaroo, but he wanted us to look out for natives" (15 November 1831). He is forced to conclude that "the natives appear less diligent, less arduous, less obedient than on former occasions" (19 November 1831).

Still, no hint that he is being misled ever creeps into Robinson's journal pages, though it is patently clear to the reader that while Robinson is using the Aboriginals to advance his standing, they are using him to buy time and sustain their culture. Nonetheless, at some subconscious level Robinson is well aware of what is going on, as revealed by the promise he made to Mannalargenna that, if the chief and his people found the Big River tribe, "they would be allowed to remain in their respective districts . . . and that a good white man would dwell with them who would take care of them and not allow any bad man to shoot them, and he would go about in the bush like myself and they could hunt" (6 August 1831). This, of course, was a promise Robinson had no intention of honoring, since he was committed to removing all Aboriginals from Van Diemen's Land and civilizing them. Some ten months later, while all the Aboriginals are away hunting, Robinson confides the following to his journal:

> I feel doubtful whether I shall succeed in removing them from the main territory or no. I practice no deception nor indeed have I at any time. To have done so would have been infamous . . . to my not having deceived these at any time and to my having acted faithfully toward them I attribute under God my successes. I explained to them they would have to live upon the islands and eat mutton birds, but how to get them away at the present time I know not. There is no inducement: the birds are not in (18 July 1832).

As for those he conciliated the story is much the same. We read of the trust Robinson inspires and the willingness of his captives to co-operate, as with the first lot of people he sent to Swan Island: "Here was no force; no violence; no tying of hands; no muskets etc. I said come and they came, go and they went" (4 November 1830). Relationships became less trusting once Robinson's intentions became known. Capture of the western tribes, for which Robinson had negotiated a reward of £1000, required the assistance of firearms. But, as he argued to himself in his journal

of 21 May 1833, "what signified firearms if God had made them willing to go". He admits that "when I first undertook the work of conciliation it would have annihilated my scheme had I in the slightest degree used restraint". But now, he argued, the situation was different. In any case, he had "the satisfaction of knowing their removal is for their own good". As he explains:

> Although they are naturally suspicious, which is a characteristic quality of all savages, yet when they are kindly treated and properly fed they will highly appreciate the change. Patriotism is a distinquishing trait in the aboriginal character, yet for all the love they bear their country the aboriginal settlement will soon become their adopted country and they will find protection which they cannot find in their own land . . .

Having captured the Port Davey people and the Pieman people, Robinson was able to proclaim with pride: "Providence has crowned my labours . . . and with me the motto veni, vidi, vici was applicable" (24 July 1833). Perhaps it was for, within seventeen days, two children were all that remained of the Pieman River tribe.

In a narrative saturated with death and duplicity the mission to the western tribes is especially poignant. It was undertaken at Robinson's insistence and it was to be his crowning glory, as these were the last tribal people of mainland Tasmania. Governor Arthur had doubts that these people should be removed, and was inclined to agree with the Chief Justice that they would pine away if taken from their country. Robinson, despite his recognition that "the love of liberty is a ruling passion with these people", was insistent on removing the Aboriginal people of the west for their protection, and so as to bring them the benefits of Christianity and civilization. The great tragedy was that in the west Robinson found a relatively healthy and intact community, which would have survived given that Europeans had quit the region in 1832, and that it remains sparsely settled to this day.

Should Robinson ever have had any misgivings about his rectitude, and if he did he never admitted to them, he need only compare his actions to the gross brutality of the settlers, sealers and shepherds. His journals contain gruesome stories of savagery and slaughter, such as the episode where shepherds of the Van Diemen's Company drove a whole tribe over the cliffs of "Victory Hill" at Cape Grim in 1826. This ample evidence of murderous intent on the part of the white population genuinely horrified Robinson, but it also provided him the opportunity to take the moral high ground:

> Can I imagine for a moment that the white man, my fellow man, has murdered their countrymen, their kindred and their friends, has violated their daughters, and has forcibly taken their children under pretext of taking care of them? Yes, it is only too true. Regardless of all laws, human or divine, they have imbued their hands in the blood of these poor unoffending people (19 April 1830).

Robinson, on the other hand, was the Aboriginal savior; he alone stood between them and total annihilation. The consistent focus of his outrage were the sealers of the Bass Strait islands who had forcibly abducted women from the mainland during the past forty years. Robinson almost gloats over the tales of torture and barbarity circulated about these ageing pariahs, and he never ceased to rail at his failure to wrest these women away from their "cruel and galling slavery". While some of the sealer's women did go with Robinson, many of them stayed, preferring hard work and ill-treatment to what they regarded as the place of death at Wybalena. Others regularly absconded from Flinders Island to join them. These women had their own lingua franca, their own ceremonies, and many had children by the sealers.

Moreover, the men—Mansell, Munro, Everett, Beedon, Maynard and others—were aged and growing mellow. However harsh life with the sealers was, it was a life with a future and, in fact, these women and their children sustained a viable Aboriginal community in Bass Strait quite independent of the Flinders Island settlement. In 1842, when the forty-six survivors at Wybalena sailed for their final destination at Oyster Cove, they left behind some fifty Aboriginal people scattered among the Furneaux Group of islands. Left largely to their own devices, and bereft of Robinson's "civilization", these people developed a unique community which ensured the survival of Aboriginality in Tasmania long after the death of the last of Robinson's "sable adherents".

In 1861, Robinson gave a paper at Bath on his achievements in the conciliation and civilization of the Aboriginal population of Van Diemen's land, in which he conceded that the only serious drawback to his scheme "was the great mortality among them. Had the poor creatures survived to become a numerous people", he continued, "I am convinced they would have formed a contented and useful community."[5] Even the admiring Bonwick finds this sentiment too much to swallow. "Alas," he wrote in response, "it is the story of the Frenchman's horse that died just when he had acquired the power of living without eating."[6] It is odd that Bonwick should express indignation at this statement, since it is quite in keeping with everything else about Robinson. Robinson was confronted with the alarming capacity of apparently healthy Aboriginals to die suddenly under his protection, from his first days establishing a settlement on Bruny Island in 1829. Here he observed that "the dire mortality

which had taken place . . . generally arose from natural causes but chiefly the extreme vigour and inclemency of the late season" (26 November 1829). Aboriginals, he concluded, were extremely susceptible to cold.

This was a position Robinson was to hold to without waver for the next ten years. The Aboriginals who died in their droves on Grummet Island and Flinders Island did so because of inadequate clothing and shelter, as well as poor medical attention, Robinson insisted. The fact that many of these same people had spent years with him in the bush, entirely without clothing, enduring bitterly cold and inclement weather, and in excellent health, in no way deterred him. His response to the disastrous mortality at Wybalena was to construct more substantial dwellings for the blacks. He appeared quite insensible to Truganini's astute observation that soon there would be no blackfellows left to live in the houses. Robinson was not about to let all these deaths diminish his glory as "the honoured instrument of removing them from the main territory . . . After all it is the will of providence, and better they died here where they are kindly treated than shot at and inhumanly destroyed by the depraved portion of the white community" (7 December 1835).

The Flinders Island journals, covering the years 1835 to 1839, become in places little more than a litany of death, about which Robinson, for the most part, remains strangely detached. But the death of Mannalargenna, the "faithful attendant", to whom he owed so much, did genuinely move Robinson, though not enough to cause him to reflect on his massive deception of this great man, whose tribal locks he had insisted on having cut off and to whom he forbade dancing, the use of ochre and other cultural practices. Once again cold was the culprit, Robinson knew, probably exacerbated by the hair cut on Green Island (4 December 1835).

Robinson was touchy about how the high mortality might reflect on himself, especially as the number of deaths rose dramatically during the time of his control of Flinders Island. On 21 September 1836 he was anxious to play down the number of deaths at Flinders in his meeting with the Governor. But it is apparent that not long after this incident Robinson formed the opinion that the race was doomed to extinction. Always a keen observer at autopsies on Flinders, where he found comforting evidence of inflamed lungs or enlarged spleens, Robinson began collecting skulls in 1838. Some of these were sent to Government House, others stayed in his own collection of Aboriginal skeletal remains. His perception of the imminent extinction of the Tasmanian people may have prompted Robinson's efforts to take the remnants with him to Port Phillip. In his correspondence on this matter we find the fascinating admission that the Aboriginal deaths on Flinders appeared to be caused by a mental irritation at being removed from their homeland. In New Holland Robinson hoped they would be so far from their homeland that this irritation would cease. James Stephens, a secretary of the Colonial Office, disapproved of Robinson's motives in this instance, believing that his intention was not to arrest the mortality, but to "throw a veil over an event which he thought it desirable to withdraw from the knowledge of mankind."[7]

Whatever Robinson's perceptions about the survival of the race, by 1836 he clearly saw that it was as the great conciliator, rather than the architect of Aboriginal Christian community, on which his reputation would rest. Flinders Island was one great graveyard, and he was itching to be off to the virgin colonies of New Holland. Though he was to remain on at Flinders for two more years, Robinson had already written his obituary for the Aboriginal people, on Christmas Day 1835:

> This is their repository of the dead—no white man lies here. . . . These numerous graves contain only the bodies of aboriginies. God's will be done. To these poor people the affliction is heavy indeed. Look back, my friends, you who have only known them for a short time, look back you who have known them a longer period and I will look to the time when I knew them in their native wildness when we were first known to each other. Let us give full scope to our recollections and call to mind the incidents and associations connected there with, and then turn to those memories of our dear departed friends and weep in silence.

Like so many of these rhetorical passages found throughout the journals, these fine words are presumably intended for the reader of some later work. The dwindling business of life is still to be carried on but, despite the drilling in catechism, the planting of potatoes, and the sewing classes, Robinson knows what the end of his story is going to be. Heroism and moral stature is now found to reside in the one who smoothes the dying brow; who labors mightily to bring these savages to God before they, each and every one, quit this realm. This was not the role Robinson had intended for himself but, as it happens, it was very well adapted to the times. It was much easier to mourn the tragedy of a doomed and defenceless people than deal with the awkward reality of a made-over race of dispossessed blacks.

Robinson never did write his book. Perhaps, in the long run, he did not need to, since his persistent self-promotion did finally achieve for him the status he had craved when he set out for the new world. He was immortalized as a hero of a great moral crusade in a famous painting by Duterrau, and James Bonwick described him as "a rising sun" and his mission the

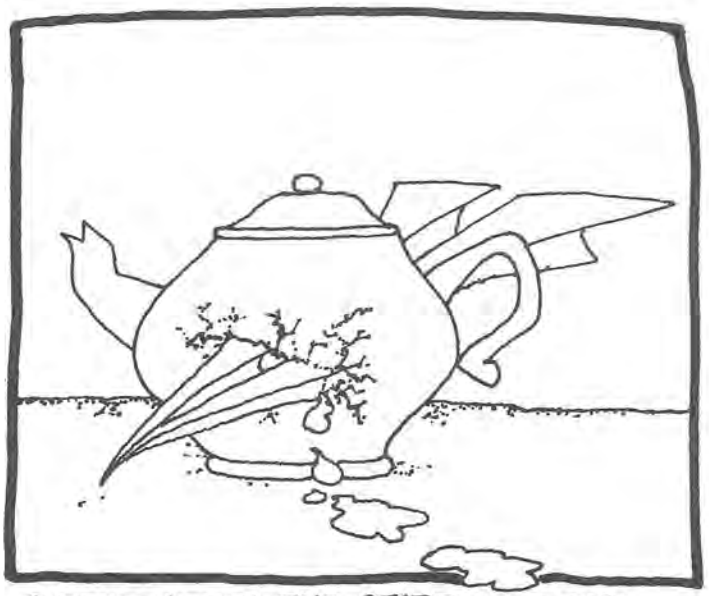
"crowning glory" of race relations in the colony. These worthy gentlemen, and much of genteel society, now found in Robinson's exploits an ideal myth for Victorian sensibilities. The Tasmanian Aboriginals were no longer the savages on the doorstep, but became sentimentalized as harmless, childlike creatures who lacked the capacity to adapt, and were tragically susceptible to disease. Despite the best intentions of the humane Mr Robinson they were no more. A terrible business, but that was the past. Bonwick caught the sentiment perfectly when he wrote in 1870:

> The woolly-haired Tasmanian no longer sings blithely on the stringy-bark tiers, or twines the snowy Clematis blossom for his bride's garland. The bell awakened for his condition comes too late. The bell but tolls his knell and the aeolian music of the sheoak is his hymn and requiem . . . Oh! If he were here now, how kindly would we speak to him! Would we not smile upon that dark sister of the forest and joy in the prattle of the piccaninny boy? And would not the Christian cheek, once pale with reproaches and tearful with penitence, glow with delight to tell of a found saviour to a lost savage? But now the burden of each saddened spirit is, *Would I have loved him more.*[8]

That myth has served Tasmanians well for another one hundred and ten years. Tasmanians are still taught that there are no Aboriginal people in Tasmania. This circumstance is presented as a matter of great regret, but one that could not be helped. After all, George Augustus Robinson did his best.

*Cassandra Pybus is a social historian and consultant on education and employment. She lives near Oyster Cove, south of Hobart, and is working on the history of the Aboriginal settlement there.*

1. N. J. B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission* (Hobart, 1966); *Weep in Silence* (Hobart, 1987). All references to Robinson's journals are from these publications.
2. J. E. Calder, *Some Accounts of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, Etc. of the Native Tribes of Tasmania* (Hobart, 1875), p. 21.
3. Colin Johnson, "The Journals of George Augustus Robinson" unpublished paper, 1986. Forthcoming in **Island Magazine**.
4. *Friendly Mission*, Introduction, pp. 51-52.
5. James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians* (London, 1870), p. 255.
6. Ibid.
7. Jan Roberts, *Jack of Cape Grim* (Melbourne, 1986), p. 13. As Roberts' book documents, Robinson did take sixteen of his closest associates with him to Port Phillip, where he abandoned them with tragic consequences.
8. Bonwick, op. cit., pp. 399-400.




*Donald Greenfield*

BRIAN PLOMLEY

# Who Was the Real Robinson?

*A review of Vivienne Rae-Ellis's* Black Robinson *(Melbourne University Press, $39.95).*

There is an old saying "De mortuis nil nisi bonum", which may be translated "of the dead speak nothing but good"; and as well there were three wise monkeys who saw no evil, listened to no evil and spoke no evil. So far as those monkeys were concerned, they were not wise but just plain foolish, because such a state of mind cannot lead to a realistic interpretation of events. As for speaking only good of the dead, that leads to the absurdity of a biography of John Batman, a contemporary of Black Robinson, which was published a few years ago, and made him out to have been a sort of Saint John the Batman.

However, while it is unrealistic to speak nothing but good of the dead, it is also unrealistic to speak nothing but evil of the dead, as Mrs Ellis does. To put it bluntly, her book is a hatchet job. Although there were many flaws in his character, George Augustus Robinson does deserve our remembrance, not as a rogue, but as a man who tried to do something to help his fellow man. He was one of the very few men of his time, if not the only one, who thought of the Australian Aboriginals—and that includes those of Tasmania—as human beings, and acted to present them as such to his fellow colonists. He didn't know how to tackle the problem they presented, but do we?

In her Preface, Mrs Ellis points out that Robinson's records fall into two groups, one his official correspondence and reports, and the other his private correspondence and journals, and she remarks, quite correctly, that there are inconsistencies between the two, with the official records revealing that "many of Robinson's actions are reprehensible". This seems to be a character evaluation which is warranted only in certain respects. She also points out that the private journals were never intended for publication, again true, but with the small qualification that almost from the time of starting his work among the Tasmanian Aboriginals Robinson had intended to make use of them in writing a book about those people. However, so anxious is Mrs Ellis to show that Robinson was an out-and-out rogue that, when considering the situation at the Aboriginal settlement on Flinders Island, she says that "the information in the diary entries was all fictitious", and that from the moment he took up his appointment there "his official reports, correspondence and private journal entries became deliberately misleading if not downright dishonest." Well, while the official reports and correspondence were often deliberately misleading, there is no doubt that the private journal did not set out to deceive—if it were a *private* journal who was it meant to deceive?—though naturally it showed a bias in reporting because it reflects his own views and not those of someone else. If Mrs Ellis should keep a private journal and someone reads it in 2088, I should hope that they will not think it contrived, though they may believe it to be biassed.

It is Vivienne Rae-Ellis's presentation of Robinson the man which I have found so unpleasant in reading her book. Everything about him is evil, and this is the path which he has chosen deliberately. In her eagerness to present him in that light she is sometimes absurd. Very early in her book, Ellis has this to say—

> At the time of his marriage, Robinson was almost twenty-three. He was thick-set, about 169 cm tall and overweight. His lips were full and sensuous. He was an extremely vain young man and one of his greatest personal worries centred on the top of his head. By the age of thirty-four he was as bald as an egg.

Rae-Ellis gives Bonwick as her authority for the statement that "he was thick-set, about 169 cm tall"; the remainder of the comment appears to be the author's conclusion from other statements. It is unlikely that Bonwick met Robinson before 1850, and possible he never met him. Moreover, Bonwick's description of Robinson was based probably on information given him by the artist Benjamin Duterrau, and he could not have described Robinson's appearance when he was twenty-three; nor is Ellis justified in remarking that he was an extremely vain young man because he was quite bald when he was thirty-four. Robinson evidently

suffered from the condition known as "early baldness", and although such a person may be thin on top at the age of twenty-three it is unlikely that baldness is pronounced at that age. It might be added that the earliest known picture of Robinson is that painted by Duterrau when he was about forty-four.

Rae-Ellis then remarks that Robinson "had a healthy sexual appetite, made the most of chance encounters, and never lost his admiration for a pretty face or figure." There is nothing unexpected about this, and it is as true today of people as it must have been then. She goes on to say that shortly before he emigrated, Robinson seems to have been involved in a financial scandal, which inspired his departure from England. This may well have been so, because we know that later, at any rate, there were a number of petty dishonesties. Yet, in a letter to his wife sent her from Tenerife during the voyage, he wrote "I undertake this voyage to make you and the family comfortable"—the fact that the author ignores this statement perhaps means that she believes it to be one of his "deliberate falsehoods". Mrs Rae-Ellis has also been selective in another matter, because while she refers later to Robinson's sexual and other links with the Tasmanian woman Trucanini, she does not report the several references in Robinson's Flinders Island journal to a flirtation with the wife of the storekeeper.

Wishing no doubt to emphasise Robinson's sexual appetites, Mrs Ellis comes to the conclusion that he contracted syphilis as a young man. She bases this upon a comment in the journal of his voyage to the Australian colonies on the *Triton* in 1823/24 that "the boil which had formed in the ureter [=urethra] and which had been so painful broke and discharged, which gave me some ease." This happened on 29 December 1823, a little more than three weeks after leaving Cape Town. Mrs Ellis obtained medical opinion to the effect that this "was probably a syphilitic abscess in the penile urethra." This diagnosis is far from certain. The abscess has been interpreted as being a symptom of secondary syphilis—the primary symptom is a chancre on the glans penis—but if so is not typical. Moreover, there is no evidence at all that Robinson ever suffered from the tertiary stages of the disease, and every indication that he didn't. If Robinson had been infected with gonorrhoea rather than syphilis, and again there is no evidence for it, an abscess in the urethra is not typical of that. On the whole, it seems more likely that Robinson had suffered from some infection unrelated to the venereal diseases.

It would indeed be interesting to know what aroused Robinson's interest in the Tasmanian Aboriginals. It is clear, as Ellis points out, that at the time of his arrival in Hobart he did not show any particular interest in them; and she suggests that the missionary Ralph Mansfield may have led to its development. However, Mansfield had left Hobart by June 1825 or close to then, at which time Robinson was not yet showing any particular interest in the Aboriginals. It is a pity that Mrs Ellis has not explored the question—she missed another chance of worthwhile study when writing her earlier book about Trucanini, to which she gave the sub-title "queen or traitor", but failed to examine those two questions, both of considerable interest.

This review would stretch on and on if one took the text point by point, so I shall refer only one or two matters. Ellis states more than once that Robinson had great difficulty in maintaining authority over the convicts, and punished them viciously. Does it need a reminder that Van Diemen's Land was a convict colony and that most of those who had convicts under their charge, or should I say at their mercy, took it out of them whenever they could? The convicts were regarded generally as vicious, lazy, dishonest and solely concerned with their own advantage, and so every attempt was made to subdue them, by punishing them on any excuse, and blaming them for every unpleasant happening. Thus, it was natural for the settlers to transfer their own guilt towards the Aboriginals to the convicts, stock-keepers, sealers and others of the lower orders, who could neither answer back nor give a blameless account of themselves. The buck passed down and down and stopped with them. Robinson, a man of humble origins, was very conscious of them, and all his life felt he must justify himself. Most of the things that Ellis accuses him of had their roots there.

This brings me to the next point. Ellis makes much of "the astute manipulation of official records to his own advantage—which was soon to become his practice." If advantage means "pecuniary advantage", there is no doubt that Robinson was not above fiddling the books, but there was never any large scale defalcation. It was quite normal to profit from the system; even the Reverend Thomas Dove was caught receiving goods from a shipwreck; and what difference from present practices such as rigging one's travel expenses or the personal use of government cars! All are quite reprehensible, but these are minor evils in a world where crimes against humanity are usual, and ignored.

One theme that receives attention again and again in Rae-Ellis's book is the deceit and misrepresentation to be found in Robinson's official reports and correspondence. In one way or another his statements are directed either to maintaining his supremacy against all others as the leading authority on matters concerning the Aboriginals, or to putting forward a false picture as to the progress of Christianising and civilising the Aboriginals. With regard to the first, it can truly be said that Robinson did know more about the Aboriginals than any other person, and he should have

been listened to. However, there was a tendency, at all levels of government, not only to believe others rather than Robinson but to hold the view that he was an ignorant, opinionated upstart trying to lord it over his betters. His humble origins certainly plagued Robinson all his life, and led him into countless attempts to boost his image, and gave him an ever-present feeling that he was not getting his due and that others looked down on him. All his life lack of education and stupidity prevented him solving that problem except probably in his last years, after his marriage with Rose Pyne. The disbelief in Robinson and belief in others is less easy to understand. Why were rogues like Batman, Gilbert Robertson, McGeary, McKay, the sealers and others believed rather than Robinson? It was recognised that these people were self-seeking. I can only suggest that Robinson's mannerisms must have been so antipathetic that there was a wish to oppose him.

The second matter, the falsity of the picture Robinson presented about the Christianising and civilising of the Aboriginals in particular events at the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement, clearly had its roots in his belief that the Aboriginals were part of mankind and could therefore be brought to a state where they were not inferior to the Europeans who had seized their territory. To prove this Robinson had to present them as having become Christians and as well able to read, write and cipher, and to be engaging in agricultural pursuits. This necessity, not to mention wishful thinking, led to the absurdity of his statements and to the falsity of the public record. Although no excuse for Robinson's excesses, it must be pointed out that the whole Flinders Island record is bedevilled by untruths and exaggerations. Moreover, it has to be admitted that the absence of a rosy picture of progress—that word sounds grand but is actually meaningless—at the settlement, would have meant that it would have been disbanded and the sufferings of the Aboriginals would have been even greater.

The story of Robinson as commandant of the Aboriginal Settlement on Flinders Island is made much of to Robinson's disadvantage, and Mrs Ellis can find no good in anything he did there. However, not all that she brings up to his disadvantage is quite as she makes out. For example, it cannot be inferred from a letter which Surgeon Allen wrote to Robinson when he was visiting Hobart (p. 115) that he had gone there for his own pleasure; and it is more likely that Allen's threat to resign if a hospital nurse were not sent to the settlement was directed at the Colonial Surgeon rather than at Robinson.

Another unwarranted statement is that Robinson's claims in his private journal to have supervised the manufacture of thousands of bricks, and that the bricklayers and labourers had all the improvements well under way by December 1835, were all fictitious.

In December 1835 Robinson had been at the settlement for only two and a half months, and in that time he had at least made a start in improving the huts occupied by the natives by bricking up doorways exposed to westerly weather and carrying out other alterations to make them warmer; and he had converted a large hut into a chapel and schoolroom—this is not the building still standing at Wybalenna, in which the first service was preached on 1 July 1838, the work on it having been begun on 4 December 1837. The manufacture of bricks is first noted in Robinson's diary for 1 January 1836, and other burnings are noted in entries on 17 June 1836 (Allen's report), 5 April 1837 and 24 May 1837 (settlement journal). Judging only by the amount of building work carried out at the settlement—the terrace houses for the Aboriginals, the new chapel and many repairs and renovations to existing buildings, including accommodation for Robinson and the civil officers—a lot of bricks were needed. Lastly, there is Mrs Ellis' assertion that Robinson only began "a feverish schedule of work" late in 1837 so as to have something to show Sir John Franklin when he visited the settlement—this visit took place late in January 1838—by building new houses for the Aboriginals and the officers. Of the many works carried out earlier, the first of the terrace houses had been occupied by the middle of July and in his diary for 18 July 1837 Robinson lists the occupants of the seven which had been completed by then, the building having been started in March. Altogether, Robinson carried out a good deal of building work at Wybalenna, his only serious neglect being to build tanks and provide a supply of running water, a neglect for which there is no excuse.

To conclude this comment on Mrs Ellis's presentation of Robinson at Flinders Island with some reference to the appalling death rate there, it must be emphasised that it could not have been prevented in the then state of medical knowledge. Death was thought of as a visitation of God. The Aboriginals were suffering from diseases of European origin to which they had no immunity and for which there was no cure. The most the medical officers at the settlement could have done was to lessen the sufferings of the sick, showing them care and attention, and this is where their neglect is so culpable. They were incompetent and uncaring, one at least being sent to the island because he was useless—that man suffered the final ignominy of being dismissed because he neglected the sick Aboriginals! The real horror is that these men showed no care for their patients, neglected them and caused them needless suffering when they were ill and gave them no comfort when they were dying.

To come now to the Port Phillip Protectorate, it can only be said that it was a total disaster. The main problem was the antagonism of the settlers to anything which hindered or prevented their appropriation of the land. Added to this was the fact that no one had any real idea how to help the Aboriginals. Robinson had some realisation of the difficulties inherent in any plan for assistance, for the Aboriginals were a wandering people and could not adapt to life in a restricted area, but he was quite unable to deal with this problem. In fact, Robinson had no plan at all for his work at Port Phillip, and nobody would or could help him to devise one that would give any real help to the Aboriginals. He was out of his depth, and so too were the sub-protectors, in part because they received no direction from Robinson and in part because they were unsuited for work among the Aboriginals. Moreover, aged forty-eight when he went to Port Phillip, Robinson now no longer had the will to do anything but go off on his bush treks in order to escape from the need to deal with the problems of the Protectorate. It is here that Mrs Ellis speaks well of Robinson, one of the few occasions she does so:

> Throughout his time as Chief Protector, Robinson cared deeply about the plight of the Aborigines but his efforts to assist them were feeble and he rarely took positive action on Aboriginal matters. Nevertheless, he had well-reasoned and forward-looking suggestions that were invariably to the advantage of the Aborigines, unlike most of the plans put forward by other government officials and by settlers whose vested interest in the land almost always coloured their concern. The only issue Robinson backed with obstinate determination was the case for legal rights for Aborigines, and he gave this matter practical support by appearing frequently in court on behalf of Aboriginal offenders, and by regularly visiting black prisoners in gaol.

Mrs Ellis comments on Robinson's failings in personal relationships and to his neglect of his wife Maria and their children. Such situations seem often to be found in families, and from them very few emerge with honor. Why bring the matter up? More serious is her accusation that Robinson neglected this Aboriginal or that, and there is no doubt that he had little thought for individuals, showing his regard for the group rather than for the person.

It is unfortunate, and certainly unfair to Robinson's memory, that Mrs Ellis should have stressed his failings almost to the exclusion of what he did accomplish. The likelihood of anyone else writing about Robinson is remote and so her book will be accepted as the last word on the man, especially as it gives the impression of being an authoritative study. But it is seriously flawed by its bias, which seems almost a personal antipathy. Why? Does not Robinson deserve our remembrance for what he tried to do? Mrs Ellis refuses to see him as a man of his time and wants to isolate him for sensure as a petty crook. She

even tries to make out that he was not really interested in the Aboriginals. Nearly all of Robinson's contemporaries regarded the Aboriginals as non-people and firmly believed in their right to dispossess them, whereas he treated them as people and showed them kindness and tried to preserve them. Neither Robinson, nor Governor Arthur, nor anyone else had any idea how to solve the basic problem of the living together of a hunter-gatherer people with one having a high technology and a quite different way of life, laws and customs. The handout was conceived as the only compensation for the destruction of everything Aboriginal. That it still is follows from the refusal by both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals to give any thought to finding a solution which is mutually acceptable to both parties, and allows both to retain their cultural freedoms.

In concluding this review, I must confess that I have found it a most unpleasant chore. Personally, I find myself in the position that should I consider Mrs Ellis's book to have little merit—as I do—I lay myself open to the accusation that my view is based on a belief in the correctness of my own interpretation of the man's life. In my opinion, this is a very bad book because of its bias against Robinson—I use the word bias as meaning a point of view which holds evidence to be subservient to the end desired. My training as a scientist has led me to view an historical situation first in terms of the evidence available and then as to whether it is likely or probable under the conditions of the period. As for Robinson himself, it is obvious that, to use the description which A. A. Milne applied to the late King John seventy or more years ago, he "was not a nice man". But if an absence of niceness were the only yardstick to a man's performance during his life, how few would be worthy of record!

Admitting Robinson's baseness, there is still much that he did which deserves our remembrance. Even if he soon became absorbed in gaining rewards, there is still the fact that he took up the Aboriginal cause almost disinterestedly because he believed them to be human beings—which nobody else did—and because he wanted to help them. In hindsight, we must admit that rounding up the Aboriginals and incarcerating them on Flinders Island did them little good and probably hastened their deaths, but Robinson saw it as the only solution at the time to wholesale killing. His idea—and it was really that of Governor Arthur, not to mention the colonists generally—that the Aboriginals must be converted into God-fearing black peasant Englishmen was simply rubbish, because no people can lose its culture and survive. In spite of the stupidities of Flinders Island, Robinson did improve living conditions for the Aboriginals there.

The Port Phillip Protectorate was a disaster, and though Robinson was ineffective in nearly everything, he did try to alleviate the disgraceful legal impediments under which the Aboriginals suffered. Altogether, I must adhere to my view, which in my opinion is in keeping with the evidence, that George Augustus Robinson was the friend of the Aboriginals and one who had their cause at heart.

*Brian Plomley lives in Launceston, where he is working on Bruny D'Entrecasteaux and the Tasmanian Aboriginals. His history of the Flinders Island Aboriginal settlement,* Weep in Silence, *appeared in 1987.*


*Rolf Heimann*

DAVID KERR

# The Last Tasmanians as Tragic Heroes

Australians remain, with few exceptions, appallingly ignorant of the impact of white settlement on the Aboriginals. As Henry Reynolds points out, until quite recently historians either overlooked or played down the ravages caused by many years of frontier warfare. It was not, of course, seen as warfare. After all, the Aboriginals had been declared, unilaterally, to be British subjects. Their resistance, therefore, was "mere criminality".[1]

In effect, the Aboriginals were rendered invisible: their rights were little more than a convenient fiction, and the assumption that their society was debased and degraded went almost unchallenged.

In contemporary Australia, despite the work of N. J. B. Plomley, M. L. Christie, Lyndall Ryan and others, for the majority of Australians the cloak of invisibility persists. In particular, the assumptions underlying the words *primitive* and *savage* are difficult to dislodge.

How difficult emerged for me through reading two novels, in large measure constructed from information contained in the diaries of George Augustus Robinson and made available to the general reader through N. J. B. Plomley's *Friendly Mission*. The earlier of the two, *The Savage Crows* by Robert Drewe, uses a complex narrative technique to counterpoint a contemporary story, of white tribal savagery and capitalist exploitation and hypocrisy, against the story of the extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines as seen by Robinson. The more recent publication, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* by Colin Johnson, tells the Tasmanian part of the story from the point of view of Wooreddy, the last male of Bruny Island.

The tone of the two works contrasts sharply. Drewe's outrage at the sufferings inflicted on the Aboriginals is not matched by understanding of their situation. Too often he distorts or sentimentalises their lives by turning them into helpless victims.

Colin Johnson, however, with detached irony, offers the reader the Tasmanian point of view of what Wooreddy calls "the ending of the world." His novel is structured to show the substance and value of what it was that was dying, alongside a portrait of the degenerate version of British culture that acted as the cause of death.

Neither the Aboriginals nor the whites escape the irony. Attempts by Robinson and Wooreddy to interpret the other culture according to their own system of thought are shown to yield equally absurd results. For example, Doctor Wooreddy, with great seriousness, applies abstract reasoning in an effort to explain the depraved behavior of sealers who were raping Trugernanna. He "wondered if the ghosts had honorifics and specific forms of address. Perhaps it was not even a real language?—but each and every species of animal had a language, and so it must be!"[2]

Wooreddy's initial views represent the beginning of his spiritual journey, which embraces both a recognition that the life of his people is facing extinction, and that his view of the world must be enlarged or altered in ways he had never previously considered. By the end of the novel he has passed through the stage of seeing the whites as men—evil men—and not ghosts, and reached a point of mystical reconciliation where the unity of all creation has come to transcend the black and white opposition that had till that moment been unquestioned. His precarious vision of unity, achieved at the approach of death from senile dementia, is a source of some ambiguity. The note is tragic, in that the vision seems to belong to death rather than life. Further, to compound the sense of tragedy, all the positive values in the book, expressed through the life and culture of the Aboriginals, are equally doomed. Above all, the tragedy is felt the more acutely because the Aboriginals, recognizing the inevitability of their extinction, nevertheless choose the manner of their going.

The reader is conscious of a tragedy working on three levels—the communal, the individual and, binding the first two, the mystical. Each level is explored through the lives of four characters, Wooreddy, Ummarrah, Trugernanna (Truganini) and Walyer, each representing a major stance taken by the Aboriginals in response to their fate. Wooreddy, the philosopher, is juxtaposed against Ummarrah, the

man of action who, as Wooreddy remarks, is determined to live in the old way or die. Similarly, Trugernanna, the pragmatist, adapts to situations as they arise, only towards the end choosing an aggressive course. Finally, Walyer, the guerilla fighter, is paradoxically seduced into captivity by promises of a new land and dies there. It is as if Trugernanna, seeing Walyer's fate, determines not to die in that way. Each of these figures corresponds to the historic person except Ummarrah, who died in 1832. Johnson keeps him alive and assigns him a modified version of Tunnerminnerwait's fate, as will emerge.

In Johnson's novel, the central series of events in the personal tragedy affecting three of the four main characters begins with the rape of Trugernanna by some sealers at Bruny Island when she was about sixteen years of age, and ends many years later with the hanging of Ummarrah for the murder of two whalers near Cape Paterson in Victoria in November 1841. Drewe also pays attention to these events, though he does not link the murder with the rape as Johnson seeks to do. In addition, he opts for having both Ummarrah and Wooreddy hanged for the crime. The modifications both novelists make to the history of this affair prove to be, despite the obvious dangers of arguing in this way, a useful guide to the evaluation of the novels both as works of literature and as imaginative reworkings of history.

Neither Wooreddy nor Ummarrah was involved with the murder. Ummarrah died much earlier in Western Tasmania and Wooreddy was suffering from senile dementia.

The only person from either fictional account who actually played a part in the murder of the whalers was Trugernanna. The killers were Maulboyheener and Tunnerminnerwait. Also present were Plorenernoopener and Maytepueminner (Tunnerminnerwait's wife). The victims, as far as can be determined, were two whalers, William Cook, and a man known as "Yankee". The leader of the rebel group, according to a contemporary diarist, was Napoleon, that is Tunnerminnerwait, a man of considerable stature:

> There was a man among them superior in every respect to the others, he had been a leading man, a chief, in his own country . . . his name was Napoleon [Tunnerminnerwait]. He talked about what they had suffered at the hands of the white man, how many of their tribe had been slain, how they had been hunted down in Tasmania—now was the time for revenge. . . .[3]

Johnson gives the role of Tunnerminnerwait to Ummarrah and suppresses Maulboyheener altogether. Further, he substitutes Dray, who was never married to Ummarrah and never went to Port Phillip, for the two women, no doubt to provide continuity between the West Coast episodes from the early part of the novel and its ending at Port Phillip. He achieves a sense of fictive unity through blending historic identities so that key roles may be enacted. Further he is faithful to Wooreddy's historical death, which occurred on board the boat returning to Flinders Island. His soul departs as a shooting star as the world symbolically "vanishes"—which it literally has for the tribal Tasmanian Aborigines.

Drewe's choices were more arbitrary. In a letter he attributes to Robinson he describes the execution of Wooreddy and Ummarrah, supplying details gleaned from the Port Phillip Herald. He assigns Tunnerminnerwait's proud defiance to Wooreddy and shows Ummarrah overcome by fear. Johnson, on the other hand, gives Tunnerminnerwait's reported "unconcerned and even gay spirits" to Ummarrah, while Drewe shows Ummarrah behaving as Maulboyheener was said to have done—"groaning and crying bitterly".

In giving the minor and abject role to Ummarrah, Drewe indicates a lack of interest in the historical characters he portrays, as revealed in Robinson's diaries, where Ummarrah was said to have been afraid of the fabled chief, Mannalargenner, whom no spear could touch, but no-one else.

Johnson uses the hanging to show that, within the limits imposed on them by circumstances, the Tasmanian Aboriginals chose their own destiny.

Just before Ummarrah is executed Wooreddy says: "You know, they don't even believe we can speak like this or choose our own destiny. We have chosen to go away and we are going. Soon everything will end and they will have only ashes." There is a resonance here with Tunnerminnerwait's actual words: "He said he had three heads, one for the scaffold, one for the grave, and one for V.D. Land." (Port Phillip Herald, 21 January 1842)

The identity of one of the victims, officially "Yankee" in the records, provides Johnson with the opportunity to strengthen Trugernanna's destined role by giving her a motive for the killing. It also symbolizes the attitudes responsible for the numerous rapes and murders committed against female (and male) Aboriginals.

Johnson identifies him as Paddy O'Neill, who, according to Moorina (Trugernanna's elder sister) had been married to Walyer. Paddy O'Neill decided, says Johnson, that she "spent too much time with her baby and did not collect enough skins, so he took the baby and drowned it in the ocean. She went and got a gun, shot at him, but missed!". At this point Trugernanna swears "she would not muff" a chance to kill the "Paddy ghost", as he had raped her and killed her intended husband years earlier. According to *Friendly Mission*, Walyer was married to John Williams, described by Robinson as "a reprobate". Consequently, Johnson's substitution of Paddy O'Neill for

Williams links the beginning and the end of Trugernanna's story, and allows the "Paddy ghost" to stand for other rapists and murderers—Jem Everitt, for example.

Oddly enough, Drewe identifies one of the men involved in the rape of Trugernanna as "Paddy Newall".[4] To complete the circle of strange coincidence, the court reporter at the trial for the Cape Paterson murders quotes Thomas Robins as saying:

> There was a man named Cook and another who was called Yankee; never knew him by any other name . . . I saw them dead and assisted to bury them; when at the hut I heard two shots nearly together as possible . . . while in the hut one or two men came in with Mr Watson, we told them our mate was gone and we heard two shots fired; *a man named Paddy went out*, and upon returning they all went out about two or three hundreds yards from the hut; they found the bodies; *Paddy was shot right through the head*; Cook's head looked as though it had been beaten by sticks . . . (Port Phillip Gazette, 21 December 1841)

In addition to the above garbled evidence, Inspector Powlett could not swear there was only two bodies in the grave! Johnson certainly read these records and grasped at the hint of a motive for Trugernanna, as well as the symbolic embodiment of the malevolent spirit of white society.

Drewe, in his version, presents the two men as murdered for attempting to entice Trugernanna away. He quotes from what purports to be a letter by Robinson, in which he speaks of Trugernanna as being in total subjection to the will of the men (this was the argument actually put by Robinson at the trial), and therefore not responsible.

Johnson's aim in constructing a motive is to overcome the stereotyped view of the Aboriginals as 'ignorant savages' who killed without reason. Drewe, by contrast, concentrates on a broad sweep of events, using key figures as symbolic representatives of the extinction of a race of people. He quotes Robinson's judgement that Trugernanna is "the blueprint for the larger tragedy of her people". Her life is depicted as a seamless web of violence *both within her own society* and through her contact with the whites. She is shown marrying Wooreddy out of fear for him—"she was compelled to submit . . . or risk the violent consequences." In the same passage we learn "her mother . . . had been stabbed to death by white settlers . . . her elder sister Leena [Lowernunhe] had been raped and carried off by sealers. [She had seen] . . . whites chop off [her lover's] hands with hatchets. The Europeans were free to do as they pleased with her."

While her suffering at the hands of the sealers is historically accurate, by suggesting she was also afraid of Wooreddy she is shown solely in the role as victim.

What attracts Stephen Crisp (Drewe's narrator) in his study of the Tasmanian Aboriginals is the violence inflicted on the last survivors, Billy Lanney (whose story we never follow) and Trugernanna. Lanney's grave was robbed and his head taken as an object of curiosity. Trugernanna is shown near the close of Drewe's novel, "her body exhumed and stapled to the museum wall". This is not the note of tragedy, and says more about white attitudes than the reality of the Aboriginals.

Johnson's portrait, by contrast, is in every way a richer one. He shows Trugernanna as a survivor. When she marries Wooreddy, after much ritual pantomime and demonstrations of hunting prowess, it is not from fear of Wooreddy but because she needs protection from others. Her devotion to Robinson is similarly motivated. There is little sexual warmth to be had, though Robinson, in his Journal, notes with surprise Wooreddy's affectionate regard for her when her legs are swollen from an injury. Drewe, who draws his material from Robinson's blinkered portrait of his "sable friends", never enquires into the motives for Trugernanna's actions. It is only from Johnson we learn that Trugernanna's and Wooreddy's loyalty to Robinson is largely because they know he is their best guarantee of safety.

The depth of Trugernanna's tragedy emerges in the final paragraph of Johnson's novel. She is punished by her success: she has survived and is destined to outlive all others.

> Trugernanna stared towards the shore. The last male of Bruny Island was dead. There was a great hole in her which could never be filled. She tried to think of the people who might be alive at Wybalenna, but all she could see were the faces of the dead passing before her eyes. Each face passed, sunk in death, and each face bore a name that had once been a living person. What was life. It seemed all she had ever known was death.

For her the world had "vanished". Doctor Wooreddy's prophetic vision had been fulfilled.

Johnson's novel shows us the essence of this vanished world. The process of change and decay is filtered through the stoical gaze of Wooreddy, who concludes "the principle of uncertainty rules where once there had been certainty." He saw families broken apart by rape and abduction and murder; he lost his own wife and children from the effects of white man's disease; he observed the fruitless struggle of the Aboriginals against the more numerous whites with their firearms. In the end the remnants of the Aboriginals were helpless to prevent traditional life fall into decay.

The tragedy which permeates Johnson's narrative

is emphasised by the decay of language. All inter-racial communication took place in crude versions of English or of the Aboriginal languages. Johnson makes high comedy of Wooreddy's attempt to interpret Robinson's version of Christian teaching spoken in bastardized Bruny!

The process worked both ways. In the middle stages of the novel Wooreddy laments that they have allowed so many *num* (white man's) words to enter their speech, symbolizing how impossible a return to the old ways has become.

At Wybalenna Ummarrah tries to recover the past through songs and ceremonies. Johnson's sleight-of-hand in bringing back Warnita, his wife, with a bag of best-grade ceremonial ochre attempts to throw the narrative back into the early thirties when they were both still alive. Within a page Dray is being given as Ummarrah's wife, and the past has been absorbed into the fictional present.

The past cannot be written or wished or danced back into more than momentary existence:

> The ghosts sigh, . . .
> . . . they shamble out of the darkness,
> Longing and crying for that drink, but the way is not for them,
> . . . Chant the magic words, sing them away from us, sing them away.

The "ghosts" will never drink from the mystical fountain of spirituality that nourished the Aboriginals. Their life was based on living in and with the land that nourished them—ours is based on exploiting it. But they cannot be sung away, nor has the creation dance power any longer to "give strength to both halves of the community."

If the world cannot begin anew, then it must end: so goes Wooreddy's vision of Armageddon in which forces of evil overcome good. In the end he transcends that vision when, in a cave he sees:

> Great spears fell from the roof. Great Ancestor casting down his spears to keep *Ria Warrawah* at bay—but other spears rose from the floor to join them in a oneness. They met and there was no conflict as he always thought there should be! . . . *Ria Warrawah* and Great Ancestor came from a single source and somewhere was that source he had always been seeking in his dream . . .

What Wooreddy sees represents the essential challenge of the novel—to integrate the various "schemes of life" by which we live into a larger scheme that embraces them all. The enormity of the vision contributes to tipping Wooreddy over the edge into senile dementia.

Robinson cannot conceive of such a possibility, and unlike Wooreddy, who is assaulted in the mind, Robinson, when Ummarrah is executed, gives a cry of horror and vomits.

Robinson, in Johnson's novel, is a comic buffoon, prone to posturing self-aggrandizement and sermonising. On the one hand the guardian of conventional Christian morality, on the other attracted to the "lewd" posturings of the Aboriginal women, and excited by the very ritual dances he seeks to suppress, driven equally by what seems to be a genuine if patriarchal desire to protect his "sable companions" and to profit from them through the pursuit of money and status: Robinson is a model of self-deception and a fit target for ridicule.

Robinson's reflections, in which he seeks to place the Aborigines in the larger universal scheme, are double-edged:

> He could almost picture them as primordial parents, though this was absurd. These people had fallen from the heights of civilization that had begun with the construction of the tower of Babel. Why had they fallen so low. Had their ancestors been the very leaders who inspired the mad folly of attempting to conquer heaven? Suddenly, for an instant, he saw Wooreddy, Ummarrah and the others in a new light. They might be degraded, but they could not be primitive!

Against the background of white degradation Robinson's pompous musings appear ridiculous. He is trying to rescue the Aborigines from the label of "primitive savage" without having to concede them equality.

What is most instructive to today's reader, and should act as a warning, is Robinson's inability to see the Aboriginals squarely. He can see their displays of emotion and tenderness towards each other—but finds that extraordinary in savage people in need of civilizing. His own safety he attributes to the hand of God.

> When I reflect how these people had been calumniated and had every vice attributed to them, when I reflect upon the dire alarm that pervades the settlements of this island on account of them, it may appear a matter of surprise to many that I should sojourn with thirty-three of them for nights together, the only white man . . . far from my people and the means of protection. "Oh, thou preserver of all men, it is to thee I look."[5]

In Drewe's novel Robinson is both an object of satire *and* a source of his fictive materials. In recreating Robinson's diaries Drewe has adopted several strategies. Sometimes he has merely cut and pasted accounts of important incidents, at others he has produced pieces in Robinson's style, usually to

accentuate his religious posturing and moralising, or he has sought to modify Robinson's account by adding or altering details. Finally, he has produced in some passages a dramatized version of Robinson's story.

Each option offers Drewe a different kind of scope for commentary. Straight lifting of Robinson's words allows those words to speak for themselves, and may only be re-interpreted through learning what has been omitted. Again and again Drewe fails to include accounts of the skill of the Aboriginals in bushcraft, and of Robinson's dependence on these skills. Wooreddy's construction of a catamaran is overlooked, the role of Trugernanna, Dray and Wooreddy as ambassadors and guides is never more than incidental.

More significantly, Drewe's modification of Robinson's words gives a false impression of the Aboriginals by sentimentalising them. The most glaring example is to be found in his treatment of Dray. She had been, for a number of weeks, Robinson's guide and interpreter at a time when he was exhausted and extremely ill. One morning, at 5 a.m. Dray left his camp without warning, leaving Robinson temporarily at a loss. When Robinson is later asked by a group of Aboriginals where she had gone he gives, by his own admission, "vague replies". In Drewe's version of this diary entry it appears as if the Aboriginals gave "vague replies" to Robinson's questioning. Further, Robinson's confession that "I poured out my soul in prayer to God for support under this trial, for such I considered it, as I had placed too much dependence on this woman" (*Friendly Mission*, p. 146), is modified by Drewe to the vaguer "dependence on others". He then shows her, in a supposed diary entry, "running naked with the *toogee*", thus suggesting a stereotyped motive for her desertion of Robinson. Her real motive may have been much more complex, and Robinson's evasiveness suggests that for some reason he felt implicated in her desertion.

Drewe is, of course, entitled to do whatever he likes with fictional characters. However, in a novel which purports to be a cry of rage against the virtual extinction of a race of people, it is a pity that the people were not given more human dignity, and their culture and capacities given more sympathetic treatment.

Johnson, as an Aboriginal (though an outsider to the culture of the Tasmanians), took considerable pains to do both, as well as exploring with complex irony the tragedy of an act of genocide that we have pushed to the back of our collective mind. His novel may be read as an admonition to mankind in the twentieth century to recover the values of vanished cultures and absorb them into a new society yet to be built. The colors of the Aboriginal flag—red, yellow, and black—that are woven into the final apocalyptic paragraph hint at the source of the values that must prevail if human society is to survive on this planet.

Johnson and Drewe both express horror at the way we blindly exploit each other and the planet. But whereas Drewe in the end gives a resigned shrug, Johnson retains the vision of harmonious coexistence, which despite the awful fate of the Tasmanians, is the value which informs the novel.

*David Kerr teaches literature at the Chisholm Institute, Frankston, Victoria.*

1. H. Reynolds, "Progress, Morality and the Dispossession of the Aborigine", *Meanjin*, 1974, vol 4, p. 306-312.
2. Colin Johnson, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1983, p. 21. (All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.)
3. M. L. Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835-86*, Sydney University Press, 1979, p. 59.
4. Robert Drewe, *The Savage Crows*, Collins, Fontana Books, 1978, p. 94. (All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from the above edition.)
5. N. J. B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission; the Tasmanian journals and papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-34*. Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966, p. 137. I wish to thank Mr Plomley, whose research into the names and histories of the Tasmanian Aborigines has been of inestimable value in the preparation of this paper.

# floating fund

STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH writes: One muckle in this quarter's donations, but also a lot of mickles, and our thanks to both the muckler and the micklers for a handsome total of $2688. It gives us hope we may yet see the year through. Note the increased number of pages this issue, due not only to confidence but to the large amount of good stuff we have to print and our desire to let you have it, even beyond the bounds of financial prudence. Specific thanks to: $2000, Anon.; $50, Anon. J.M.; $30, A.C., L.C., R.M., B.CS., M.D., C. & J.C.; $20, J.C., E.R., J.L., E.S., W.C., P.Mc; $15, P.D., M.V.; $11, D.S.; $10, R.P., E.C., H.H., G.S., R.G., B.M., A.S., C.M., L.F., J.S., D.D., C.O., D.S.; $5, G.E., J.K., P.M., B.G., A.J., J.B., D.R., R.N., R.N., L.B., L.E., W.W., S.D., A.K., R.W., A.P., A.B., J.V., P.MS., J.M., P.G.; $4, H.H., N.A., R.S.

MICHAEL SHARKEY

# An Interview with Eric Beach

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*Michael Sharkey*: Let's start off with a question about the sort of New Zealand you grew up in.

*Eric Beach*: A state house—a lot of blocks of state houses on the edge of Hastings. A large family; one of the oldest kids on the street, so I told stories a lot to keep them amused; and then I worked, and sent stuff off to the **New Zealand Listener**, and they sent all seventeen poems back with one comment, "Too many adjectives", so I've been wary of adjectives ever since. That was when I was at high school.

MS: And later?

EB: I blundered around; most of the people I knew who were writing were at university, so it was a bit hard to crack the scene—but I met them at pubs, and in the folk scene. That was the crossover. This guy Arthur Baysting used to muck around with folk-singers, and he put out a movie and a book—*The Younger New Zealand Poets*—and stuck me in it. This came out about '72, but it was in the late sixties I was mucking around with bands, with some rock bands that never got very far, and some jazz bands in Wellington. I used to go to the Attic in Wellington, and they'd get you to do poetry to the music.

MS: What were you doing to make a living?

EB: At first it was laboring, and then I had office jobs—Touch and Go—T & G—Temperance and General. And I worked on computers when I got married, and then ended up doing the night shift so I could write. I was supposed to be going to the university in the daytime, but I was a bit tired. And then I quit. I did English—failed English—and I did Education: I started that when I was in the Education Department; they gave me time off. When I first got married I was getting twenty-nine bucks a week: it wasn't much to feed a wife and kid on, so I was working on weekends sometimes too. I used to bump into all these writers, even when I was eighteen or nineteen, mucking around living in houses. I ran into this bloke Rowley Habib, who used to write down in this back shed. I used to live with this bloke who was a sculptor; this bloke called Toss Wollaston used to come around—he was a painter—because his niece used to live in the flat. I decided I was going to be a writer and not work, and just do it, and I blundered around New Zealand for six months and looked up all these writers, who sent me around to see other writers, and they sort of said things like "You're committing suicide, Eric." So one day I just hopped on the plane and went to Australia. Then I was here, and I was still blundering around with the same idea, and people were trying to get me jobs in Melbourne, in RMIT, and some of the other institutes, more than in the universities.

MS: Who did you run into first in Melbourne?

EB: It was Frank Kellaway who gave me my first job, I think—him or Les Kossatz. I met a lot of the people I first met through Barrie Reid, because he used to have people coming up to his house. There was a whole range of different kinds of writers and painters and sculptors that he'd known for a long time—longer than I've been alive, probably. So I ran into playwrights: the Pram Factory was good—though they were a bit hard to crack into; they were very middle-class.

MS: How did you make a living when you got here?

EB: I used to be able to get day jobs down at the railways. I went on the dole on and off—but they kicked me off a few times, for answering back. The dole office was where the **Last Laugh** cabaret is now. I was sharing a flat with John Pinder at one stage there. And I worked as a temporary fettler, in Brisbane, and did the hay-carting, in Wangaratta.

MS: When did you start travelling around?

EB: When I first got here, really. I hadn't been to the tropics before, so I went up north, and I lived on and off in Brisbane for a couple of years, till I thought it wasn't worth the struggle.

MS: What was going on in Brisbane?

EB: Well, I ended up there staying in this place outside Brisbane—Redland Bay, with these people who'd chucked blood on the Stock Exchange, as a protest against Vietnam, and some of the local black radicals used to come out—Denis Walker and Don Brady used to come out a lot. Don was a Methodist minister then, and then he got a job as a project officer with the Aboriginal Affairs Board; he'd stopped being a minister, then, in Spring Hill, but he still had his church and they paid him his stipend because he had so many people living in his house, or underneath it—you know, one of those houses with stilts. They couldn't afford to take his stipend off him because too many people depended on it. So I ended up walking with them—walking down the middle of the road for Land Rights and so on. It was sort of an accident.

MS: Were you doing anything like that in New Zealand?

EB: No; walking down the middle of the road against Vietnam, I suppose—that's about it. Oh, there was Anti-Apartheid: my brother and I were in the same demonstration, except he was a cop. He was chucking people in vans, and I was sitting in the middle of the road, one of the last to leave—not because I was bravest: I didn't want to move, really, because people were getting knocked about a bit.

MS: How many were there in your family?

EB: Six kids; my mother had six kids too, so I had half a family, and my father sort of didn't have a mother, so I had half of half a family on that side. The kids all left school, except for one: one brother stayed and that's the one who became a cop—but he left after a while and worked on computers with me. Then he left, and he went around the world, and came back and jumped off the Sydney Harbor bridge—so it's a bit hard to change classes maybe; I don't know—unless you go straight on to a job, like you're supposed to, like a policeman or a schoolteacher. One of my sisters stayed till School Cert, so she got secretary jobs and things; she sort of married out of the class, I suppose.

MS: Were you conscious of that class thing in New Zealand?

EB: Yeah, really a lot in New Zealand, because it's a matter of—if you travel first-class, on a train, people think you're quite odd; people really stick to their classes there. It's like Max Harris says about Adelaide—I tried living there—"New Zealanders don't need to come to Adelaide; they've already experienced it, only more so."

MS: Who were you interested in, as writers, over there?

EB: I liked Baxter—but I suppose I grew up with him; he had his profane and his sacred sides—and I'm an atheist—but I used to listen to the Lenten Lectures he used to give for the Catholic Church, not because they were sermons, but because of what he was talking about, and the way he talked. I used to bump into him on the street all the time, and lived in the same sort of flats in Montgomery Terrace in Wellington. And he used to stay with mates of mine up in Auckland—he started up houses, too. And Peter Olds—because he did all those pamphlet poems that were readily accessible, and they were really good to read out loud. They were the ones I was interested in. And musicians: Arthur Baysting used to muck around with the folk scene. I hitched up with a magazine called Earwig a bit—that put out poems and sort of rabid ratbagger causes as well, and used to get visits by police with sniffer dogs, and made jokes on the phone about explosives. And there was a psychiatric movement going on too, and a Free Arthur Thomas movement that was all happening with the *Earwig* people involved.

MS: There was a bit of involvement with psychiatric poetry in New Zealand . . .

EB: It's the same here. I'm supposed to be going out to the local nuthouse, and there's blokes in there that used to drink in the Albion. Half the jobs I do in prisons and nuthouses now, there are people I used to drink with in the Albion in there.

MS: What sorts of differences did you run into when you came to Australia? Was there any class-orientation in the magazines you saw?

EB: It was still essentially the same, still the bourgeoisie, but they copped the chip on my shoulder here more easily, perhaps. And there seemed to be more of that egalitarian myth that's supposed to be in Australia, that I really like. It gives you more movement between classes and suburbs.

MS: What about Maori consciousness in New Zealand?

EB: Growing up in state houses, a lot of the street was Maori; three-quarters of the street now, a third to a half then, I suppose, and I used to go fishing, because they had this thing that kids didn't have to start school straightaway. You'd take days off and go off with a family if they were going fishing—and they used to sing while they were fishing. And they used to come to the local church—the Baptist church used to send a bus up to the pa, and the maoris used to sit down the back and sing "A-men" at the wrong time. They had a sense of humor and a way of life that was apart from the rest of the world you were living in.

MS: Sending up pakeha society, or iconoclastic in general?

EB: Oh, both.

MS: When were you first aware that you were gravitating towards song and music?

EB: I always used to sing when I was growing up, to entertain my younger brothers; I used to make up songs, do a dirty version of the school anthem, or "Home on the Range", because I got bored singing the same thing, and I didn't know that many songs anyway.

MS: So, Australia.

EB: I came to Melbourne first, and mucked around and sent a lot of poems out, and got them published in Poetry Australia and Overland and a lot of little magazines. Especially in the smaller magazines. There was a huge range of smaller magazines between say 1972 and 1978 or 1979. People in Melbourne and Sydney would get up magazines; we got up three in a row here, called See Page 207, and Great Australian Whiting and Chook Chook, which were done in a democratic process. We collected all these poems, and people like the Whittle family put on benefits for us—we sold food, and various other things, and raked up enough to put out the magazines. And then we'd go around to someone's house and everybody who'd sent poems in would sit around the lounge and spill into the hallway. And poems would be read out loud, and there were three piles in front of you—Yes, Maybe, and No—and they'd all go into one of those piles. Then some of the Maybes would go back in: that was the only editorial intervention; the editors would add in from the Maybe pile. We used a lot of drawings in those magazines. We pulled out a few stories from people like Morris Lurie or whoever, just to add a bit of tone.

MS: What kinds of differences did you see in terms of subjects or styles between Australian and New Zealand writing?

EB: I found more writers who were using the vernacular, but that might be because it was a bigger place. Because there were people like Glover and Baxter who always used the vernacular over there: they were the ones I was attracted to over there. Perhaps the vernacular was thought of more highly over here; people like Les Murray's first books were coming out—*Lunch Counter Lunch* . . .

MS: Yes; there was some trad of that coming through in New Zealand—Glover, Fairburn, from the thirties, but that seems fairly late.

EB: Yes. Fairburn was another one who always stood up: parody and send-ups—"Polly Tickle Parroty". I suppose a large thing I noticed was a lot more politics had been involved in the literary scene in Australia, and things were divided off: you know, Quadrant is right-wing, get published in Quadrant and wither; Overland came out of that social-realism, and then the democrats won, over the communists, and took it over. The same with the art movement over here—the sort of communist schools. And I suppose in modern writing: I suppose the social realists lost, but they still had an effect, through other people.

MS: Where did you fall into music in Australia?

EB: Ah, another introduction by Barrie Reid. Judy Jaques lived up the road, and so I just started writing songs with her; she picked out a thing I'd written when I was eighteen, about Jesus really being a man—which ended up on Christian TV when she needed a quid once. I got flak from my Marxist friends, and the song got into trouble from Christian listeners because they thought it might be blasphemous. I just worked with her and a lot of jazz musicians that she was working with. She started off with trad jazz/gospel, and was looking for more modern music, and still is—working with people like Brian Brown and Bob Sedergreen now. I was introduced to quite a few jazz musicians through Judy, and the Pram Factory and Captain Matchbox. But then there's about eighty people that've worked with Captain Matchbox, or Matchbox, bands over the years. I've worked with some of them, and put down tapes, got some grants.

MS: How did you get the grants?

EB: At the time—between '72 and '78—I was spending a lot more time writing songs than poems, and I was always trying to get a record out with musicians, but we couldn't interest companies in that. I got three or four grants; then I stopped getting personal grants after Whitlam was sacked and all the people who were leftovers from the Whitlam era had left. And my grants ran out; I got a lot of small grants from State Arts Boards too—or Community Arts Boards—as well as the Literature Board, to start up what I called Mobile Poetry Workshops, where we employed people from Adelaide, and Sydney as well as Melbourne writers, to go round schools and handicapped centres and prisons. I started that up before I was actually employed in it, and then started it up again in Adelaide with State funding to break into prisons. I might start it up again at some stage. It took six months of knocking on people's doors before we were actually allowed (Jenny Boult, Geoff Goodfellow) into the prisons, let alone getting money off them.

MS: You'd been into prisons before?

EB: Yeah, well I started going in about 1975, '76, because I ran into people who'd been working in the Messhall Players in Pentridge—which was their theatre group. A woman friend of mine was a life-member of it. And then I started going to COPE sessions out there, where you sit around in a smoky room and eat prison bread and drink prison coffee and just talk to people. And people started to pass me over some

poems; and then we did a reading there, and we started the Poets Union up. Pi O, and I, and the bloke who was head of the Community Arts Building in Footscray, Robert Hughes, went to a Trades Hall meeting on the arts, and we were really irritated that they were talking about arts as though it was separate from working life; and so we started the Poets Union, and we got George Seelaf to open it. The Poets Union was the first one that organized a whole lot of people to be able to go into Pentridge Prison. And then eventually got money for people to go out there—because people were really broke; a lot of the people going out there on the trams didn't have the tramfare.

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MS: Can we take up the question of the value of poetry—or how poetry's integrated into society?

EB: Well; poetry's only hermetic insofar as you have to lock yourself in a room to finish the stuff off. You get bits of it from all over the place . . . people get touches of poetry in their everyday speech, and love it when someone has a nice turn of phrase. That's a very Australian thing, too.

MS: Not so much a New Zealand thing?

EB: No, it's a bit stiffer—except for the Maori influence—because they didn't have the migrant influx for a start, where poetry is seen as not a *bookish* thing so much; so that's probably why I love Melbourne so much—because I see it as the most cosmopolitan city. You can go to Sydney and live in Newtown, I suppose: I don't seem to come across so much that's much more Anglo over there until recently.

MS: Do you find there are things—or obsessions—you keep coming back to, in your own writing, things you can't get away from?

EB: Alienation; the idea that this country is not owned by us. But that's not because it's owned by multi-nationals: because it's not owned by the vast majority of people here—we're all renters, in a way, and people don't feel much control over their own lives. You can take alienation to extremes, say: when you're just ordinarily the victim, like when you have to go to the VD clinic, or you can go further and say that when the elected government somehow gets the boot, palace *coup d'etat* equals alienation.

MS: Is there any consciousness of being interlopers, or being colonial in your writing?

EB: Yeah, well particularly when I was in Queensland I felt that, because I was feeling it myself, as much as from them—and I found Australia much more racist towards Aboriginals even than I found people were racist towards Maoris: because Aboriginals were so dispossessed and so murdered, and so little was given back to them. Very much third-class citizens, where Maoris are second-class citizens, I guess.

MS: This alienation is a theme or commonplace of the blues, isn't it? There's something basically elegiac about what you're doing?

EB: Yeah; well it's also a way of using metaphors in a really simple way. I'm very wary of metaphors, but if you're saying "On Friday the eagle flies" in the blues, you're saying that's when the dollar arrives: those metaphors are taken off *real* things. It's partly because when I was blundering around Australia when I first arrived here, my audience were the people in the hundred different flats I lived in—sitting down the back-yard or somewhere—so I wrote stuff that would get across to them; people who quite often were illiterate, and I wanted to impress them, I suppose, as much as I wanted to impress editors. So eventually I used to have two streams of writing: one which I saw as performance poetry, and one I saw as 'poetry' poetry. I even used different spellings to keep the two streams separate, and then I just joined them up. My first poems were published under E. A. Beach—that was my 'poetry' poetry.

MS: And "Eric Beach" was the populist, or performer?

EB: Yes; I hung around the folk clubs a lot, in New Zealand, before I left school even, and I used to run into these old reds—who used to wear red ties and play their home-made guitars and sing a lot of American songs, I guess—but occasionally they'd adapt a poem to music, a poem I'd read in a book; and they changed the phrasing a bit and made it into a song.

MS: What is there in blues and jazz songs that operate for you better than in other forms?

EB: Well for a start, rhyme is good for memorising things; it gives you a sort of handbag full of poems in your head, so you don't have to rely on the paper all of the time. And you can work with musicians—and it's more of a conversation going on. I like dialogues; when I've worked in schools, I've used dialogues a lot, and come to poetry in a very round-about way. I used dialogues first, to get people talking to each other, and to get people writing from the conversation. There's an idea that the way you write is different from the way you speak—and poetry comes from *that* world and it's not your own world. But I think that's a false idea.

MS: What's the advantage of jazz for you?

EB: It works well; sometimes I write parts for the audience, which means there are spare lines, which the musicians can repeat if the audience won't. They also relax people a bit, so that they're not afraid of acting like a three-year-old, if there's a saxophone saying

exactly the same thing: "I'll-tell-on-you": they're much more relaxed about doing the same thing themselves.

MS: There's a sense of absurdity too, which fits with the alienation in some of the lines you've written—like some of the earlier poems, "Christchurch", or "Fantasyland"—which still carries through in some of your more relaxed lyrics . . .

EB: Yeah, well if you're in the front bar at a pub you can feel alienated. This bloke gave me these cards for my birthday, that said ERIC BEACH, POET, NO FIXED ADDRESS, and I just handed them around, over the front bars, and people used to *slate* me. In a way, that was good, too, because it meant they had an idea of poetry that they were prepared to defend . . . "You didn't know Madam Lash, you didn't know the Sydney Push": it was very isolating to come over here in some ways, as a New Zealander, because Australians are very nationalistic in a way. New Zealanders who come over here to work often stay on the edge for quite a while. I suppose those things I was writing in Brisbane or Christchurch or Adelaide were trying to find a place. I had to do a lot of work cracking institutions—to just go and *do* it, before I started getting paid. After a while, people get to know you *can* do jobs, and try to rake up jobs that pay money, seeing that you're already doing it.

MS: Have you had much to do with others—expatriates—with the same sort of idea? Or is there the sense that everyone can be . . .?

EB: I see performance as giving the audience something to do; this could be mainly where I've had a bit of an influence—in responses. What people used to leave to musicians, now they write these things into poems. So where you get a mass audience, like the few hundred people who come along to the Harold Park Hotel—it's Melbourne poets generally, like Komninos, who get the audience chanting lines back at them . . .

MS: Do you have a sense of talking predominantly to the working class?

EB: No, it's not who you're talking to, but getting a lot of stories *from* there. I've always pushed the work in western suburbs, where there's less money, but the kind of stories that I like come from there: *how to survive* stories.

MS: Is that because you're trying to survive in the same sense?

EB: Yeah, I suppose so; but it's partly loyalties to where you come from.

MS: Has there been any change in that perception of where the audience for poetry is, in your experience in Australia?

EB: Yeah, there's a lot more company, I find, with people when you do go out and say—like the do at the West Footscray Cricket Club last Christmas: there's a bloke from Adelaide, a bloke from Footscray (Tom Grant), and me that could get up and do it. The bloke from Adelaide—Geoff Goodfellow—when I first met him, was writing working-class stuff, but he was doing it with the old rhymes, rhymes about the pie-cart, which he sells to the pie-cart owner. There's much more freedom, more things going across different lines. You can have modern verse, but talk about urban myths—or a story about the local bouncer. So modernism has combined with the *patois*, I suppose.

MS: So it's not just sitting there on the page and referring to events in Greek history or other myths?

EB: Which I grew up liking as well—*Pears Cyclopaedia.*

MS: What sorts of 'classical' (well-known or traditional) poets were you brought up with?

EB: Oh, everybody I could get hold of in the library; mostly English poets, I suppose, and then as soon as I left school I ran into the American poets as well. Some of the older English poets like Louis MacNeice, Archibald McLeish, George Barker—all those whacking great books—and there's always something there—and W. H. Auden—there's always something in there that's talking about the working class. I always found them slightly false, and coming at it from the outside. And I've always been interested in telling the stories from the *inside*, as far as working-class people are concerned.

MS: Do you take off voices—or 'do' voices? Would you put it that way?

EB: I don't do accents all that well; because, as I said, growing up in New Zealand you don't have the opportunity: what have you got, a few Dalmatians—and it's a bit insulting to take off the way Maoris talk English sometimes, because it's only their second language in a way. But it's more just the way of saying it, just the knack of phrasing, that leaves some kind of echo.

MS: What do you think about trying to resolve political messes or dilemmas, in your poetry?

EB: That's an old frustration, isn't it? Is a writer only a witness? If no one's bearing witness until it's going on, or off, then we're in a worse situation already; so it's worth being a witness anyway, whether you can get to the extent of actually changing things or riding waves in the political world . . . it depends on whether people take you up or not.

MS: Yes; a lot of people have had a go at it—Baxter, with a religious resolution, or R. A. K. Mason going for Marxism: I'm not always convinced that works.

EB: Yeah, that's the trouble with writing: you can like a fascist's writing too; Roy Campbell wrote some good poems,—and Louis MacNeice went across the road to punch him in the snout, over Spain.

MS: What about the senses of place and time in your poetry? There are some clues there, in the way you phrase things, that the poem's about a particular place: do you have any concept of being 'at home' in any particular—imagined or real—kind of society?

EB: No, it's a dance around from one different society to another. You get a job in Warracknabeal and you get all these local tourist things, and talk to all the people about what's going on with the drought, and you might only end up with a haiku—and all this unfinished stuff might end up somewhere else, when you're in another drought. It's the same with going up to Darwin: you get the way the people tell stories and are really defensive toward outsiders, and you can start picking the eyes out of a dozen little put-downs you've been handed, and put it all in the mouth of one character. So it's listening to people and trying to get the knack of the way they say things too.

MS: So there's no concept of any 'ideal' place to be?

EB: No, I end up back in Melbourne. There's more of a range of poetry going on in Melbourne, I find. You've got Mr Pi O, exploring his one suburb he's grown up in; I've stood on street-corners and heard people who've just come out of hospital talking to him in a mixture of English and Greek, and I've seen it end up in a poem. Mine's a lot more scattered than that.

MS: What sort of thing do you go for—as a story? What recommends it to you?

EB: I like stories that give you the feeling that they've happened time and time again, I guess. A lot of my jazz stuff has started off with a really simple idea, and after a while I've got maybe half a dozen riffs that are tied to a musical riff, or a story of a jazz musician who's survived, or not survived the pitfalls of working nights in pubs and travelling—and there's always the booze might get you.

MS: A sense of some situations being fairly constant then?

EB: Happening over and over.

MS: How does that fit in with any notion of 'progress' or history?

EB: I don't know whether 'progress' is one of my favorite words. Oh, if you haven't got a sense of history, then you're a bit lost, aren't you? About half the time, you're backtracking; even now, everyone's backtracking about our general history.

MS: How about personal history: in the sense of working off memory, or childhood concerns; do you think poetry's concerned much with that sense of time? Family?

EB: Yeah, well, Lowell's the obvious example, isn't he? He did all those things off his family; funny thing is they're a family of Boston Brahmins, aren't they? Yeah, I'm gradually working through—as my grandparents die, I suppose. I've always written poems about my mum and dad and brothers and sisters; gradually working through the whole family, when my father died—and then I got all these forty years of letters between him and my grandfather, so sometimes I use them. I've used one letter just as a whole poem—cut it into lines, because of the way my grandfather spoke, a different idea of using English. The division of male and female is quite fascinating in those days too.

MS: So there's some change there?

EB: Yeah; getting back into personal history, I'm not quite seeing myself as alone, I suppose. Maybe that's a result of a bit of exile, leaving your own country: you can talk about some things that might upset your family if they saw them in the New Zealand Listener.

MS: There's a line of exile in New Zealand writing—

Mander, Hyde, right back to Mansfield—leaving the country, to write about it. And in Australia too—Peter Porter, Malouf, Germaine Greer; is there a sense of some constants cropping up in your poems (in your grandparents' lives, your parents' and yours) that seem worth saying?

EB: Well, there's that dispossession, I suppose—you know, my grandfather's farm being lost in the Depression. And people come up—like Barbara Giles, comes up and talks to me about how she likes that poem because that happened to someone in her family. And another one—when I was writing about Warracknabeal, a person came up and said "That's where I did my teaching and I couldn't get married, because they'd sack a woman in those days". Poems are a way of unlinking *old* oppressions too: you get to see how long it's been going on; it sort of becomes less individualistic just by persisting, and telling other people's stories as well as your own. You reach a lot more people and hear a lot more of other people's stories; it keeps on rolling on.

MS: In some of your earlier poems, like "Converse Corolla"—

> Open an umbrella inside
> Your head
> The wing falls off the duck
> The spikes don't touch
> The lid comes off the pot

—the kind of logic that operates is not the kind that we hear on news broadcasts or such . . .

EB: I suppose that ends up with me using juxtaposition: leaving the argument in the poem, but not giving the solutions, so you're saying one thing and then another thing, and the truth should be obvious: not trying to persuade so much as just indicate.

MS: "It all depends on the red wheelbarrow"—or the converse corolla?

EB: Yes.

MS: The same thing happens in the "Christchurch" poem—"I pedal wheels of granite through the cold and clanking streets"—okay, it has a metaphoric truth about it, which connects back with riding a bike.

EB: Yeah, and there's the "Lambton Quay" one, I suppose, which is the same; that was under water once, Lambton Quay, New Zealand, eh? The Shaky Isles.

MS: And there's "The Clerk":

> Long boxed-in days;
> long box
> cut short
> his holidays.

EB: Yeah, that was ten months in the Education Department; that was the only thing I wrote.

MS: What situations are best for your writing? In retrospect, where do you see your best periods for this?

EB: Every time I've had a grant; well, when I travel, a lot comes up. Grants are great, because they give you that time to face your writing-room and clean it all up, to put one thing together with another; you can tie it up, and you can go through your old stuff—and even if you've written it badly at the time, you can see what you were trying to get at. So, when you're on grants you've got the opportunity to empty out your suitcase of your notes—or some of them. I've got a mass of material, and a lot of it's let lie—because if you're doing workshops it takes a lot of your energy. Teaching's like that too: it takes a lot of your creativity up.

MS: Do you do more of that work now than in the past?

EB: Oh, more, but then I don't work on the railways anymore. I've stayed in the same places longer. I've lived as a beggar for years, on and off; I couldn't have survived without my mates with a floor and getting feeds. I didn't have a little black book, like Henry Miller, but I came close!

MS: I don't think many people in the country are leading a happy contented life off poetry . . .

EB: No, you get odd jobs, bit parts, readings; you don't make much money from what's actually printed.

MS: Is there any place for the printed poem?

EB: For sure: it's a way of handing out your poem to someone else; it's a bit of a waste, not having more poets on tape or record: that's a wasted opportunity. Grants generally go to poets who are well-published in the print media, and the ones who are published in other ways are ignored. People complain that the narrative poem is going out of style—but it hasn't, but it isn't. Those people who write it, and are good at writing it, are not taken up. That's the thing about Australia and New Zealand: someone like Peter Olds, who writes a narrative poem, *is* taken up, while over here, someone like Shelton Lea, who writes a narrative poem—at the Premier's Awards he won the audience, and got the booby prize.

MS: A recent poem of yours?

EB: "cabaret colloquy":

> smoke out th blues
> curlin' & fat
> fat cheque at th hat check
> twirlin' a hat

wrap around a bar stool
elbow th bar
whisky's kind of mournful
forgotten cigars

ice burns in his drink
love is cruel
there's a shadow playin' pool
remainin' cool

man of th moment
glass to th light
sad bit of graffitti
in th brasco tonight

'go to th albion
take a girl home
she might be a slut
but you don't sleep alone'

there's a free supper
there's a high hatter
that cat with th patter
has got it down pat

dixie down under
toilet roll jazz
unwinding don't mind me
that's how it was

knock back a bottle
light up th joint
ever'body's swingin' but
they missin' th point

MS: When your blues poems appear on the page they're made up of short lines that suggest they should be taken as discrete breath-units: is that a fair comment?

EB: Yeah, it's partly the phrasing you need to sing things, that's different from writing poems. When I was writing poems that were being changed into songs, I found it was quite different, the way you phrased things for singing. Yes, I suppose 'discrete breath-units' is pretty good; I always liked that bebop stuff that Kerouac did. I mean, a lot of it was poopy-doo, but every now and then he'd get a great little story, and get it exactly right. I always remember this one he did about these guys sitting around a hotplate in the middle of the night, and they're pushing the food in, taking their turn, and he's got the exact rhythm of it. There's that idea you can get more from poems when you read them out loud—it can do more than one thing. The page is a bit dead: the poem's more like a score.

MS: Yes, and reading's liberated poetry from libraries and exams too.

EB: How to kill a poem, line-by-line. Yeah, you've got a job at an Institute with thin walls, and you're teaching poetry, your kind, and then next door they're teaching the dead poets, and through the walls of your class you can hear them asking this guy "What is poetry?" and things like that, the questions he has probably never tried to answer, and he's saying "Oh, well poetry is a kind of mental orgasm". Argh. Why *mental*? There's those stories of people in the islands who go off for three days—and they might just be sitting outside the village—and they draw a big circle and sit there with a bottle of water and a day's rations, and they stay there for three days or whatever the time is, and then they come back with their poem or their song, and they sit down and everyone and they do it. And they get pissed as a newt because they're starving, and they have a party and stay up all night, and everyone's saying "We'll change this", and "This line's flat"—and that's what performance does for you, because lines that fall dead in the sixth row, you get them fixed up.

*Michael Sharkey is a Melbourne poet and teacher. His* A Treasury of Australian Humour *will appear later this year.*

## TWO POEMS BY ERIC BEACH

### SALUTE TH OFFICER

*(for archibald baxter)*

awkward when beaten, shy when sick, we left
him naked & ashamed
refused th uniform so we took back th
underwear, hosed him down
men who took his side were marked for th
Germans, time & again
a man would speak out, knowing that
afterwards th captain would ask for
"volunteers"
10 francs, a rissole, we ignored these
kindnesses from th ranks
they brought back his fear
that he would relent & take an easy berth
starved, th almost dead, conviction th weight
of his own body
slung from rope burns & 2 black hands above
we had th doctor display his friend, Briggs'
back
after he'd been shredded on a wire-netting
duckwalk
we played man-on-man, but th sergeant with
the ready fist
gave up when, ordered to th ammo dump
during th shelling
he stood to attention, th sergeant came in
shivering;
"that man Baxter's mad"
tried putting him in with th men he let down,
C.O. we said
W.A.R.D.

but when we put him in a hut on his own,
they claimed him back
they said we'd have him murdered, they saw
somewhere
a Pontius Pilate washing his hands, an Henry
th 8th thinking out loud
we had men prop against 2 cigarettes, & say,
conversationally;
"they're going to shoot you you know," that
sort of thing
he was strung like a bow to a post tilted
forward
th civilians biked past, eyes averted
men in uniform stared, uniformly carloads of
officers slowed
we don't know how many of th men saved his
life in passing
he became a story, suffering, an army will
always discuss
th refinements of th intolerable /
"what's been done about
that fellow Baxter, that chap Briggs?"
a general shouldn't know th names of his men
we sewed a wound-stripe to his back &
shipped him out
he chewed it off with his teeth
th man's little better than an animal

## HANGI

(for tui junior)

tui senior rings me, my 15th xmas in australia
& I've no money for booze & food – "get down
here"
we drive down th mountain, junior's first hangi
we move th newly planted tree & dig a hole
pack it with stones that speak of hours
in th paddocks, lay beams of fire this hot day,
across
thick eels, pork, chicken, cabbage, spuds,
attend
in their wire-netting baskets, wet sacks waiting
in a bin, it's all in to take th embers out
wrap kai in sacks, pack earth around where it
steams
tui junior is chief today & does his bit
there's a whole lot of shaky isles going on
happiness rolls out over foot-hills, cloudless
hunger rumbles, th cabbage is glorious with th
taste
of everything, we unpack our bellies & laugh
th maori has a word for place "tangawhenua"
it's like th nungas in adelaide said when they
were moved from outside th hilton, replaced
by a fittingly circular flower bed:
"we got to sit our arse somewhere"
(repeated word for word in th local paper)
tui senior's tattoos are bright on his white skin
tui junior is an amber light against sandy's
dark-brown lustre, she & tui go potato-picking
5 a.m. this coming morning, I eat & drink
as much as I can, go home with th stars
glad to be given th chance to bend my back &
sweat
I guess tui senior's maori, I didn't ask his
whakapapa
th naming that makes earth mother, sky father
& love, th white-haired horizon, grand-parents
remembering their grand-parents
watching young tui, I learnt what children
know –
that, without ritual, there's no true memory

## POEM

Well, yes,
I did write that; a long time ago.
I'm surprised that you know it.
Actually,
it's not for poetry
that I'd like to be remembered.
No, not at all.
If anything
I would like to be remembered
as the inventor of
the collapsible walking stick.

True,
I did write of the need
to love one another.
That's right,
I wrote against prejudice,
and war.
Raised some interest at the time.
But look about,
even a cursory glance will show
that things are still the same
as they've always been.

Poetry has no practical value.

However,
a thing like my collapsible walking stick,
that's what humanity needs.

Folded, carried in the pocket,
it is there to give support
in times of need.

Ah, no. It's not readily available.
There are still some technical difficulties to
overcome.
But I will give them my fullest attention
When they take the plasters from off
my wrist and leg.

MAURICE STRANDGARD

## from ZOOM

### I
### KIDNAPPED

I grieved at your birth
the taking away
the giving to the world
your father your aunts and uncles
you no longer my secret one
now many with your private motives
your nets of understanding
your single separate complex
flesh I welcomed
the salutary pain

### II
### ZOOM YOU

I zoom you like a monster
mild and mock angry
like cookie monster like
herry monster like all
our images are taken from TV
like you are taken from me
like I take myself from you
the days zooming past like
a game catch me catch me you
missed

### III
### CAVE

their caved in faces only
a speleologist could love
their cries tear through sleep
small soggy selves weeping
in the dark knowing what it is
to be wombless bereft of habit
out in the unbelieving world
you cannot console them
you have forgotten
everything

### IV
### BELIEVING

a staircase for you
is an act of faith
you step off into the world
assuming parents like a conman
assumes disguises like a politician
assumes numbers one day
someone will forget
or recognise the lie
that huddles in belief
who first you or me

CHRIS MANSELL

## THE WRENS AT KONDALLILLA

Its wrens do not know there are no wrens
  further up the valley;
they lost contact with those families centuries
  back;
and there are no Columbuses among wrens.
They do not know that the men who now
  come
are paler than those who once worshipped the
  great
Fall of Water (which these ones do not),
and that they are only spared out of idleness.

MARK O'CONNOR

## CIRCUS ELEPHANTS

Small flat slapping ears
you want to lay a cheek against

hides dark-dawn grey and wrinkling
moving restless and rhythmic while

railway tracks and peering eyes
of strangers cage them.

Dying for water, trunks flick hoses
throw hay across their backs

relishing the tickle, trickle
stirring the memories of far spaces free.

Trainer shouts abuse, roughly
brushing them to show-ring cleanness

She backs off, spraying hay skyward –
pinch of salt over the shoulder for luck,

but the worn, shrunk tyrant grabs
hooked metal prod jabbing in hard

He spikes her to the knees submissive
shouting "kneel you mole."

And she cries a dolphin squeal high
pleading, childlike begging relief

Wincing, I see how colossal she is
how strong, how dark with her one foot

that strums along the chain binding
her other leg, ringing music from bonds

Just the one great foot, used in times past
to hold umbrellas for the rich, could

crush maggot-small this cruel fleck
thrilling to his prod of power

If only she knew her strength
if only she felt it, was sure of it.

Instead she cries for water, waits the
whip's direction. Chains off, she queues

demurely in line, ready to parade the
ring, doing tricks, dancing for the crowd.

I turn into dusk, the vision weighty
drops heavy like sinker lead.

ROBYN ROWLAND

## VARIATION ON A CHOOK RAFFLE

a gambler
    he always had an eye
for things
    a perfumed girl
    racing form
    deck of cards
    a billiard cue

or something new

& one Saturday
    eyeing the bar
he reckoned he could
fill a book
    & dropped his glass eye
in his beer
    @ 50 cents
most had a look

the eye looked back
    lolling uncontrolled
distorted in a golden haze –
    perhaps through fear
the chance of being sold

& the ladies who withdrew
    goggle-eyed
from that oval sphere
felt threatened when he said
    *i'll take it out  look up*
*your dress*

*oh no!  here's 50 cents*
    *just leave it in y' beer*

& when he drew the winner
    he'd really drunk his fill
& slurred *you'll drink the beer*
*of course my friend?*
    but no one ever has

& each Saturday now

the odds ride with him
    that they never will

GEOFF GOODFELLOW

## THE NIGHTSIDE OF THE HOLIDAY

I wake sweating, still running the track of the dream,
The road a tape, a ribbon fringed with nondescript fur,
Such indeterminate bundles, possum, rabbit, bandicoot,
God knows what – I'm no zoologist, but can't deny
The kangaroo bloating, blood on its snout. "It wasn't me,
It wasn't us," I plead "we drove so carefully." The room's
A box black with the noise of catastrophe. Moanings,
Visceral thuds, screeches pitched too high for the ear's reach
But fracturing nerves. I want the light, I want
To watch your warrior's face smoothed with sleep and love.
Yes love, that reckless destination that we drove to
So conscientiously, taking such scrupulous rights of way –
And still it's pain I'm hearing, unattended, dragged to a dark corner,
Whimpering and whimpering its way towards silence. Silence at last.
I lie here quiet on the nightside of our holiday, cold,
Waiting for sunlight and your voice to warm me.

JENNIFER STRAUSS

## BENDURRA, NEW ENGLAND

My father, a lawyer in that small town
loved wild creatures
Fruit bats, gentle flyers of the night
lived in a colony
that spread wingspans over a melaleuca swamp
in a silence measured against stars
Ate ripe fruit in Fream's orchard
pears their favorite meal
back-yard apples
My father never sprayed his trees.

He defended three young men
who slaughtered half the colony
with twelve-gauge shot guns
on a Sunday when the local football team
was playing the finals
The killing reminded him of Vietnam peasants
taken out and shot by conscripts

He knew the young men well
One escaped the town and ended up dead
a car smash with a girl aged thirteen
beer and a kilo of grass on the back seat
The others remained locked within municipal boundaries
and hard labors of a simple life

A visiting magistrate tried the case
Dismissed the charge
He too owned an orchard
where flying foxes raided over-ripe fruit
leaving half-eaten apples at the base of the trees
Hated the beasts

Two years later during the mating season
it happened again
This time the rest of the colony put down
No information was laid against the boys
or foxes floating dead on the swamp
leaving trees emptied of raucous calls
and night more silent without visiting wings

JOHN MILLETT

## IN MEMORIAM DONOVAN CLARKE

from your father's shoulders
you saw the funeral of king edward,
& watched the last deliberate steps
of old blind europe into that
terrible fire.

in a small inner city backyard
surrounded by families & children
in 1987, far away from the language
of history or myth, the quaint
pomposity of politicians directing
us to consider our mortgages,
i think of you.

you were wise & imperfect,
capable like all of us of silliness
& greed yet always you were eloquent
& able to impart the anguish
of division, the universal need
to seek the wonder of the good
with the courage of the hero,
what it means to survive within
the attainable, humble & human
& elevated.

in your house in the mountains
there was a window where we sat,
staring at the foppish tapestry
of nature as the rains ached
down & the trees creaked & repeated
all the old illusions of mortality
& you talked of the frailty of belief
& how provisional & tenuous,
& how wonderful.

jets poured down the glass
& you read poems against the soft
hum of the gas heater, a game that was grim &
delicate with your sensitive
voice giving shape to the destiny
common to us all, the void shaped
& riven by intellect.

at the end you wanted to be alone
in the mountains, to cultivate the
deep serious calm of one who waits
certain that meaning would come
like an old teacher into the class
to smile with the sober elegance
of the receptive mind.

a child plays near my feet
with a wooden ball which will not
bounce. he holds it to me & asks "what?"
i scratch the surface &
bite the wood inquisitively, then
pass it back, because that is what
you would have done.

RAE DESMOND JONES

## ON FIRST READING PENTHOUSE

after the letters of sodden ecstacy,
which measure potential in length or bulge,
and suggest
from premise of self-adulation
the joys to be gained
from monopeds, hot towels and cucumbers,
i browse through the ads
for hifi and marlboro and scotch,
to michelle,
a would-be mystic
glossed naked and pinkly warm,
out-staring with sultry indifference,
who from her position
supine with legs boosted high
and labia extruded to tunnelling vision,
offers the contemplation:
"the thing i admire in a man . . .
is subtlety."

LAURIE BRADY

KATHERINE GALLAGHER

# London Letter

In a piece, "Imagining Australia", in the Times Literary Supplement (27 November 1987), Murray Bail took a delightfully sober, witty and original look at the land, the place—Australia as fable, as name, as fiction, as idea—an outpost of the universal mind. As Bail showed in his classic style, Australia was imagined by the Europeans long before it was actually discovered by them. It is quite diverting to 'imagine' your own Australia. Schoolchildren and teachers do it all the time. Expatriates do it of necessity.

Yes, and images of Australia have taken a bigger spin than usual over here recently. The yearning for sun that creeps up on the most ardent cold-freak by January or earlier was somewhat appeased this year as T.V.-A.M., the part-Australian-owned and managed breakfast channel, focused in big on the Bicentennial. Morning after morning, in spite of or because of a T.V.-A.M. technicians' strike that threatened to blackout the station, we saw Australia, and Sydney in particular, on British T.V. Sydney, the harbor, the boats, the beaches—it was glorious, breathtaking. One could have been forgiven for thinking that Sydney equalled Australia. It did in a sense. So rapturous was the constant publicity for Sydney that Carmel Callil, of Chatto/Virago fame and an ex-Melburnian, wrote up a column in the Listener to say there was more to Australia than Sydney, and that Melbourne was a big part of it.

The B.B.C. T.V. Breakfast Program launched into the Oz show too, and come January 26th, Australia was talked about/hyped as never before. The question of Aboriginal rights was also much aired and discussed. Ordinary Brits saw Australia afresh and many were surprised—if I can go by my neighbors' comments.

Watching the kaleidoscopic pictures of sun, outdoors and people flash by, I was reminded of a conversation I had with an Australia House officer at a recent conference. To my criticism that Australia House did little or nothing to promote positive images of Australia's cultural identity, he smiled acerbically, "We don't need to. We get a lot of notice. Five minutes on T.V. is worth any number of poems."

Perhaps the British are having more difficulty than usual in 'imagining' their own country. The Thatcher Government's third-term program is gathering momentum, initiating, steamrollering changes: a poll-tax instead of local rates, and radical changes in education that will affect everyone from nursery to university. It's mostly to do with 'better use of taxpayers' money', so we hear, and putting the 'New Britain' stamp on things. Many wonder where it will end. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the Government's 'reforms' is what has become known as *Clause 28*, a section of the local government bill, which bans local authorities from promoting homosexuality. If it weren't so serious, it would be laughable. The Clause, which came into force in May, may in effect lead to all sorts of witch-hunts, including the banning of books and plays. Councils will have to censor libraries and arts collections for fear of prosecution. Individuals may be persecuted and prosecuted. Not surprisingly, broad sections of society have protested against this backward, illiberal and unjust measure. There have been marches and other protests. The arts community has challenged the government as threatening artistic freedom. David Hockney, one of Britain's most respected artists and an expatriate, in a five-page letter to the Sunday Times threatened to withdraw his major retrospective exhibition, scheduled for the Tate next October, as a protest. He referred to the bad old days of censorship, to the "Nanny England" complex, and attacked what he saw as Britain's "meanness of spirit and smallness of imagination." There is some hope that, with sufficient pressure, Clause 28 will be withdrawn, but much depends on how successful protesters are at keeping up opposition.

It is good to see Australian writers being taken more seriously over here. Stead, White, Richardson, Stow, Wright, Porter, Hazzard, Malouf, Keneally, Carey, Murray, Hope and Hughes have long since made their mark. Now too Elizabeth Jolley, who is part-English anyway. B.B.C.2's Bookmark program did what the Observer's T.V. critic John Naughton called an "enchanting portrait" of her in January. With

Carcanet, Penguin, Faber, OUP, Picador, Forest, Virago, Chatto and other publishing houses showing more interest in Australian writers, they should get a better deal and be more known. That there is some way to go though may be gleaned from this extract from Robert Nye's generally favorable Guardian review of Murray Bail's *Faber Book of Contemporary Australian Short Stories.* After stating that Frank Moorhouse's two stories seemed to be the most interesting, Nye added: "My one criticism of the anthology is that it has no biographical or bibliographical notes, so what else Moorhouse has done remains a mystery, but on the evidence in here, British publishers must already be on the telephone to Sydney."

Biographical notes were also lacking in *Australian Poetry, 1986* (Angus & Robertson, edited by Vivian Smith), which was also distributed here. Anyone who has anything to do with discussing or marketing Australian books over here soon learns that the ignorance about our writers, with a few exceptions, is abysmal.

Every week brings more Australian writers before the waiting British. Recently, David Brooks, Tim Winton, Peter Porter, Tom Shapcott, Elizabeth Jolley, Kate Grenville, Rod Jones, Les Murray and Jessica Anderson have been in the reviews, and Jones and Winton have spoken here about their writing. There is a lot of interest in Australian writers shown by small and big publishers (UK and European) and people generally, as I discovered when working on the Australian stand at the London Bookfair. I was often asked about Aboriginal writers such as Colin Johnson and Kath Walker, and about Black writing in general.

In the TLS last November, Clive James chided readers for neglecting Australian poetry. He referred to the *Penguin Book of Australian Women's Poetry* as "a goldmine". This book, which Penguin (UK) decided not to take because there might not be enough demand, may yet be distributed over here.

But when will Australians love poetry as the Macedonians do? The answer is never, I guess. My visit with Vicki Raymond, Alan Wearne and Philip Salom to the 26th Struga International Poetry Evenings was an eye-opener. People there love poetry and respect poets rather like they do in Ireland. The 1987 Festival was specially dedicated to Australian poetry, and they feted us wonderfully. Every year at Struga, they light a flame for poetry, Olympic-style. It's a great, moving dedication – *Vive la Poesie.*

Back in Bicentennial territory there have been, or are, various exhibitions, talks and seminars on aspects of Australia.

Burnam Burnam, an Aboriginal, landed at Dover and claimed Britain for his people. There was a lot of theatre in this but news bulletins carried it. Maybe consciences were stirred. There has been a Commonwealth Institute Conference on "Australia's Black History", and Robbie Thorpe, another well-known Aboriginal activist, has been speaking at various places, including the Australian Studies Centre. John Pilger's T.V. programs, always controversial, have also made their mark. And the South Bank TV Arts program celebrated the work of four Aboriginal artists.

Other conferences lined up include the British-Australian Studies Association Bicentennial Conference, "Australia Towards 2000" (Lincoln, 30 June-2 July); an Australian Studies Centre conference, "British Perspectives on Australia from Dickens to Crocodile Dundee" (May); and a conference in conjunction with the Royal Society, "The Australian Contribution to Britain" (June). There has also been a British Museum lecture series and a Commonwealth Institute lecture program on aspects of Australia over the last couple of months.

Then there was the splendid "First Impressions" exhibition at the Natural History Museum. There has also been the eerily beautiful Fred Williams' exhibition: "Paintings of the Pilbara" at the Serpentine Gallery. To pass through Kensington Gardens, green with early spring and then enter the Serpentine, its white walls featuring Williams' browns, reds, yellows, blues, oranges, was unforgettable. Currently, the I.C.A. Galleries have three Australian shows: a major retrospective of the work of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, an exhibition by Imants Tillers, and a photography show.

From March 31st to May 29th there is an exhibition of nineteenth and twentieth century Australian art at the Commonwealth Institute. It is especially interesting because many of the paintings have been loaned by private collections.

This seems a good moment to mention the contribution made by Jim Hunt with his Australian Flinders bookshop at 45 Burton Street, WC1. Students, program-makers and itinerant readers from different parts of Europe find their way to Flinders, with its range of old and new Australian books. Jim is the driving-force behind the Association of Australian Artists and the Australian Film Society, of which he is founder-chairman. He was also responsible for the setting up of an Australian section at the London Bookfair at Olympia in March. The fair's organisers marked a day to highlight Australian books but unfortunately the Australian Book Publishers' Association pulled out. Happily, there were still a few exhibitors – UQP, Angus & Robertson (UK), University of W.A. Press, Little Hills Press and Flinders Bookshop. This was a golden opportunity missed. The trade weekly Bookdealer commented that the large Australian stand "had the appearance of having been boycotted by most Australian publishers." The Australians are going to have to do better than this, especially as 1992 is approaching, after which trade barriers within Europe will largely disappear.

*Jill Roe and Barry Jones here review* Australians: A Historical Library, *eleven volumes (Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, $695).*

JILL ROE

# Letter to Miles Franklin

*The bicentennial history project*

Sydney, 6 May 1988

Dear Miles,
Dunno what you'd think of this lot. They've sent me what they call the slice volumes of the bicentennial history project for review, and a couple of the reference volumes as well, actually the bibliography and statistics. There's an index volume too, with lists of famous people in politics, sport and the arts. I looked you up immediately of course.

You get nine references, counting two in the index volume to your literary award—Patrick White got it first, in 1957, for *Voss*—and the Australian Film Institute award to *My Brilliant Career* in 1979. I'm afraid *Childhood at Brindabella* is the only book of yours to be mentioned though. It's in the 1888 volume. In the 1938 volume—the slices go at fifty year intervals, except that it doesn't apply to the pre-1788 volume or the post-1938 period—they've used 'pioneers on parade' to highlight the position of Aboriginals at the Sesqui. You and Dymphna meant to show up the convicts, but there's good lively stuff on all that, and I don't suppose you'd mind as the target is the same, the frightful hypocrisy of these events; anyway you are there, in 1938, cheering Xavier along and worrying about another war (atypical, that). In the last volume, from 1939, there's an incidental, or is it symbolic, reference to you: apparently Frank Moorhouse found you and your lot a bit much with all that bush stuff. Fancy that. Not to be hard on Frank, he only gets two references, though he's written a lot and he works hard for Australian writers.

Maybe its cheering that women writers seem to do better than the men. Henry Lawson keeps up wonderfully well, probably because he's a bit of a sook. You won't be pleased to hear that Furphy has all but disappeared again; and few enough of your mates surface. I don't see Katharine Susannah anywhere. (I could huff and puff a bit myself, for Catherine Helen Spence, who never made it to the postage stamp as you hoped, and only just makes it now, to the 1888 slice.) Rose Scott isn't anywhere to be seen, though that is hardly surprising. Practically all the interesting people so far as you and I are concerned got dumped early by the decision to base the 1938 volume on oral history. There's no-one old enough left to remember them.

Mustn't whinge. Its 'history from below' (a position writers do not really care to occupy, wouldn't you agree?). They've really tried to be democratic in approach. There are over four hundred contributors, all pretty much materialists I would say. That's not new: but material culture as an organizing principle in Australian history probably is. (Does democratic culture have to be materialist, do you think?) It certainly works wonderfully well in the pre-1788 volume reconstituting Aboriginal societies during all those thousands of years before the coming of Europeans—as a reviewer I'll have to watch the word I use there, as 1788 is now understood to be an invasion/conquest. Not that it gets much attention as such.

*To 1788* is really interesting, Miles. I'm no expert on Aboriginal history, much less prehistory, but I reckon it's the best thing we've ever seen on the subject. It should be reissued separately immediately, in paperback. I'm sure I'm not the only Australian who thought Bogong moths were something Patrick White made up to add to the delights of *The Twyborn Affair*. The swamp managers of south-western Victoria and the narcotics trade in the Lake Eyre basin stick in my mind too.

Considering what Australian history was like fifty years ago, when you were trying to get Hartley Grattan to breath a bit of American space and life into it, and what's happened since, I think you'd be interested by the 'slice' approach. You'd know better than me that in the late 1930s Australian history was scarcely even governors and explorers. For the last twenty years or so we've been living with a version of the frontier thesis. (Perhaps you knew Russel Ward? His *Australian Legend* came out in 1958.) Now we've got something else.

This mob don't lose a chance to tell you what they're up to. Somewhere we're told that the slice is truly revolutionary. Well, its novel, and if you accept

Croce's famous adage that "all history is contemporary history" you can't complain too much. Each of the three slices reflects, quite vigorously, contemporary approaches to history. *1838* reminds me of a well-fired Wedgwood pot, Etrurian swirls and all. In *1888* it's like the patriarchal knife through the Sunday roast. By *1938* it's the shiny amplifier and the blare of popular culture. All very self-conscious, but it means well, Miles. The most striking shared stance is anti-racism, a significant development when you realize that in 1938 "the discrimination was so thick", though 1988 will probably pass without a just settlement between black and white Australia.

You mustn't mind too much that the end result of slicing doesn't include your tribe (mine neither). Probably, there's no intrinsic reason why not. After all, Edward Miles arrived in 1788; and he died in 1838, which if I remember correctly was also the year the Franklin forebears left county Limerick as bounty immigrants. It wasn't long after that the Lampes and the Bridles set off for the Monaro. It's easy to fit them in later too, with 1888 the sell-up of Brindabella and the end of innocence for everyone. Your mother died in 1938, in suburban Sydney. And you were there for a good bit of the post-1939 period. They note that 1954 was a turning point. You saw it coming, I think.

I looked up your 'diocese'. There's a brilliant 'archipelago' of white occupation at the beginning of the pastoral age opening the 1838 slice. The Monaro features in quite a colorful way with that ex-forger Brodribb making a pile from sheep. Seems like 'Brent of Bin Bin' knew one of the nicer bits of the frontier though; it's the northern frontier and the Myall Creek massacre which matter in 1838. In the 1888 volume there's a beaut map of the regions drawn from Henry Lawson. I know where you got "up the country" from now. There's also a lot of lovely information about distance and movement and energy there—probably the best thing on the horse since *All That Swagger*. They've really tried to encompass the whole country, even 'masters in the tropics' in the 1930s, the cities too—cars and all, in the end. It turns out you're not the only one to disdain the telephone and opinion polls, if *From 1939* is any guide. The old Australia and its pioneers are not celebrated; and the frontier thesis now applies only to race relations. There's still hope that ordinary people will win through, I think, since there's hardly a whiff of empire (or a gesture towards internationalism); but radical nationalism is definitely out, dissolved in "an acid-bath" of analysis, as is pointed out in a look at the writing of Australian history at the beginning of the reference volume on sources.

You get a bit of an idea of what's happened from there incidentally. The sources guide has 3,000 selected references, assembled by sixty contributors, in ten sections. (Don't rush; you'd love all those general reference and fact books, but you'd find it hard to run women to ground, and the final section on culture beginning "English Language and Literature" says "Australia is a colonial society." Glad I'm not writing to 'Inky' Stephensen too!).

While I'm on the reference vols, I might mention the war section in the volume of historical statistics. Grist to your mill, Miles. Imagine, RSL membership is rising in the 1980s. At 269,000 it's nearly back to the 1950 level, partly due to too many small Asian wars since then. You won't have missed the hint that the reference to your worrying about imminent war in 1938 is not entirely flattering. Not representative, a bit elitist perhaps? Reverse snobbery, I'd say; the same old anti-intellectuallism, I hear you mutter. Paradoxically it's easier to talk about foreign policy under sport. Apparently an aim of the project was to get readers to reflect on everyday life in the past. People love to think about themselves, I hear you say, and then they are dead.

In the last, non-slice text volume, *From 1939*, the impact of World War II is memorably done; and there's no nostalgia for the fearful fifties, thank goodness. This one covers my time, and I recognise the bits. There's a fair amount on making a living. What I wished for was more to explain our feeling of a cultural coming-of-age by the sixties, and its terrible setback with the Vietnam war. You can cope with minimal cultural history in the slices because they aren't into it—and there are snippets for which I was grateful, e.g. all those meetings in 1838, self-help at Narrabri in 1888, schooldays in 1938. But this is my generation, done orthodox. Have we really been so dull since the 1950s? Do I detect a fatal flaw?

In the end we're required to "take stock", which is all very bicentennial. Ten prominent and interesting Australians of the period—by definition they can't be representative, things haven't changed that much!—do so in the final section of *From 1939*. Stephen (Murray-Smith) is the only one you'd know, I guess. At the risk of offending everyone, I'll say that Gordon Barton's story probably matters most. There's one characteristically 1980s carnivore, employer Charles Copeman, of new-right notoriety. No doubt you'll think this pretty feeble and herbivorous. You'd have a point. I guess I'm a herbivore too. Time, and the carnivores, will tell.

Trouble is, what I'm getting around to, is that post-slice I'm not really much the wiser as to what framework-cum-interpretation is now being suggested to us. We had it dinned into us that the belief in historical facts existing independently of historical interpretation was a preposterous fallacy. I often find it discouraging or just upsetting to reflect on everyday life, especially on my parents' daily life round 1938. I know that you were grieving around that time too—I don't want to be intrusive, but what did you really feel about

your mother's death, surely some relief along with the guilt?

It's interesting that life-cycle history features so prominently. I like the 'passing away' bits best, but I'm an ageing feminist. I wonder will the younger ones take up the other bits, on marriage, birthing, families etc. They have different problems now, and 'rabbit work' doesn't seem to be one of them. With a bit of creative editing you could get thematic volumes going on such topics. Which reminds me, I must look up rabbits, reproduction rates of; and sheeps' eyes. I know it bugs you when people get the color wrong. I've got to find out about washing wool too. I should know but I don't.

To tell the truth, Miles, I haven't the faintest idea how to weigh much of the new information from these 'survey camps'. But it must be good to have it, and I've met some interesting new people, like Fred Coneybeer. It's not for us to complain that these are the ones who committed crimes, kept diaries, took photos, etc. Well, I will complain a bit, on behalf of Mary Ann. Can you tell me why when so many Australian women have worked as domestic servants they still don't get a guernsey along with all the other workers, including (now happily) Aboriginal workers and canecutters.

Nostalgia is an inevitable response to, and problem in, portraying, 'every-day life'. Thanks to the advertising industry, the box Brownie and all those recollections, it's almost overpowering in the 1938 slice. Some critics say that brilliant reproduction techniques and lavish provision of graphics of all kinds—maps, charts, paintings, line-drawings, posters, photographs, you name it, it's been found and used—must have a distorting effect especially for earlier times. I agree. Sydney was never that nice, least of all in 1838. You'd be astounded at the publishing feat. These days there is so much offshore publishing, in Asia not in Britain, yet *Australians. A historical library* is locally produced, to a scale and sophistication we've not previously seen. It's a pity that amid all those whizz-bang statistics, multicolored, there doesn't seem to be anything on publishing to quote for you.

You'll want the gossip, of course. Well I can't tell all. There've been ten years in the making of these books. From its conception in the late 1970s the project met with opposition, from historians who feared diversion and waste of resources on a dubious concept, from Aboriginals (whose hostility to projects commemorating invasion must be greatly diminished by the consistently anti-racist outcome) and from women, especially in Melbourne. Not Sydney, because there are very few Sydney historians involved fullstop. That's another story and you know the outline anyway—the garrison dies but, ah, how slowly, and I will count myself lucky to live to hear its last gasp. As I write economic historians are fingering airfares for a conference at the Melbourne Hilton to put the entrepreneur back into bicentennial history, and there are two projects devoted to women in the pipeline. (It's not relevant but the only woman to appear in the big celebrations on 26 Jan 1988 was Di Windsor.)

Perhaps I've got bicentennial brain fag already. And it's only May! I seem always to be reviewing history in sets these days, though sets are never meant to be read all through at once, certainly not this one. The advertisements are quite right to show readers in armchairs: you need the support. I didn't dare leave my copies unattended on the beach either, which has been a drag. But you can borrow them now, Miles. I know $695 is far too much on your budget, even at $36 a month, and you can't just buy the ones you fancy. You should write to the publisher complaining about that, but it won't do much good. I hear they're busily making up a condensed set for schools. Give the schools what's left of the big set I say—every school and library should have one anyway—and let's get on with making sense of our history.

As ever,
Jill.

D. J. Mulvaney and Peter White (eds): *Australians To 1788*; Alan Atkinson and Marian Aveling (eds): *Australians 1838*; Graeme Davison, J. W. McCarty and Ailsa McLeary (eds): *Australians 1888*; Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt (eds) and Louise Douglas (Oral History Co-ordinator): *Australians 1938*; Ann Curthoys, A. W. Martin and Tim Rowse (eds): *Australians From 1939*; D. H. Borchardt (ed), and Victor Crittenden (assoc. ed): *Australians. A Guide to Sources*; Wray Vamplew (ed): *Australians. Historial Statistics*; and *Australians. The Guide and Index*; Alan D. Gilbert, K. S. Inglis, Frank Crowley and Peter Spearritt, general editors, *Australians: A Historial Library*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987, 11 vols., $695.00 cloth.

*Jill Roe is associate professor of history at Macquarie University. When she gets a chance she works on* My Congenials. Miles Franklin and friends in letters 1887-1954.

BARRY JONES

# The Bicentennial History

The eleven volume series *Australians: a Historical Library* is the result of a decade of collaboration between hundreds of academics and other specialists in institutions such as National Mapping, the National and Mitchell Libraries and the War Memorial. Timed for the Bicentennial, it was courageously and generously funded by the publishers, with some assistance from the late Australian Research Grants Scheme, but not by the Australian Bicentennial Authority. Reviews follow for three of the volumes.

J. C. R. Camm and John McQuilton (eds.) *Australians: A Historical Atlas*

*Australians: a historical atlas,* is—the publishers say—the "most ambitious of all the reference volumes" in the series and is claimed to be the first historical atlas of Australia. Geographers, archaeologists, anthropologists, historians and other specialists worked on it for six years. The splendid maps were produced under the direction of Steven Yorke by cartographers at the Division of National Mapping in Canberra. There are hundreds of photographs, paintings, cartoons, charts and graphs. The book is beautifully laid out on 280 large pages: many maps and photographs are on a double spread. There are three major sections—Place, People and (the shortest) Landscapes. The first section sets the continental scene, with maps featuring palaeogeography, geology, vegetation, temperature, water, winds and seasonal rainfall, droughts, floods, bush fires and cyclones, then proceeds to "Aboriginal Landscapes", sensitive, effective and reasonably comprehensive, and to "European Discovery and Exploration". Then follows a comparison of rural and urban landscapes, with our almost unique pattern of urbanisation, and an overview of mining, manufacturing and transport, ranging from the gold rush to the decline and fall of Sydney's trams.

The second section—People—covers immigration, demography, religion and education, including interesting illiteracy tables, "convicts, bushrangers and larrikins", our involvement in ten wars (generally gratuitous), the impact of the Great Depression and 'government'. The last includes Australia's maritime boundaries, external territories, new State movements, charts on State boundaries, State and national governments since 1900 and how the franchise was extended.

The third and shortest section—Landscapes—shows the interaction of landscape and humane occupation.

I learned a great deal reading from cover to cover, especially from special articles, giving details taken from the context, for example R. J. Lampert on the Kartan industry, the making of tools on Kangaroo Island, called *Karta* by mainland Aboriginals, before the seas submerged the land bridge. This is followed by material on Aboriginal occupation of the Mallee and the complex social structure at McArthur Creek, near Caramut in Victoria's Western District, with buildings and 'industry' indicating a settled 'village' life. The occupation of Upper Mangrove Creek, not far from Gosford, and an examination of the Wik people in the west of Cape York are among the highlights of the atlas. So is "Aboriginal resistance to European occupation", which rejects the myth that no wars have been fought on Australian soil.

The convict material is one more useful corrective to bicentennial blandness. The contrast between mortality rates in the first three fleets, both before and after landing, is striking. The first fleeters did well—perhaps they were carefully selected, but the second fleeters lost almost half their numbers within two years.

I had never grasped that by 1871 the Germans were the largest group of non-English-speaking settlers. We owe something to King Frederick William III of Prussia, whose reform of the Lutheran Church provoked dissent and emigration to South Australia. The gold rush had the greatest impact and by 1891 there were far more German-born than Chinese-born in Australia.

The public health chapter is fascinating, for example on the bubonic plague, influenza and polio. Sydney recorded 191 plague deaths between 1900 and 1909, followed by Brisbane. The influenza epidemic of 1919, which sounds less sensational, was far more lethal, with 12,000 deaths, more than half in New South Wales.

The superb treatment of the Great Depression puts

Australia in a global context. I was surprised to learn that Australia's decline in the value of exports of primary produce between 1928-33 was less than that of Canada, Brazil and Argentina. The endnotes attribute this to work by S. G. Triantis of Toronto.

I hope the *Atlas* gets to the people who can use it best: no doubt with the miracle of color xerography (and to the cost of the publishers) it will. Nevertheless, there are some disappointments. It was strange to find only three maps, two of them essentially for decoration, about how the early cartographers recorded Australia. The Dauphin Maps are dismissed in a sentence, without any discussion of the controversy about the 'Portuguese primacy'. A map on page 47 has Baudin's 1801-03 expedition travelling overland from Gippsland to Arnhem Land, an odd slip.

The atlas is light on culture. We have migration in detail, but nothing on multiculturism, or the existing language competence. In the index under "radio" there is a cross-reference, "see pedal wireless". Electrification is discussed only from the 1940s. Both film and television are ignored: so are postal services and telephones. Oddest of all, since Fairfax and Syme are co-publishers, is the lack of any reference to newspapers.

Graeme Aplin, S. G. Foster, and Michael McKernan (eds.): *Australians: A Historical Dictionary*

This handsome production is the result of ten years collaboration between hundreds of academics and other specialists. There are 462 pages (including an index), and 1233 entries, divided into two categories, "subject and biographical".

The illustrations are excellent, many in color and drawn from a variety of sources—cartoons by Phil May and George Finey, book and magazine covers (mostly from the Bulletin) advertisements, logos, photographs, postcards, old maps and reproductions (some on foldout pages) of familiar historical paintings. And there are about a thousand biographies.

Current politicians, or those from the recent past, are not well represented. Bob Hawke, Malcolm Fraser, Doug Anthony, Lionel Murphy, Gough Whitlam, Neville Wran, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, John Cain (senior and junior), Joan Child, Jim Cairns, Don Chipp and Neville Bonner are included, but there are no entries on John Bannon, Lance Barnard, Lionel Bowen, Brian Burke, John Button, Rex Connor, Frank or Simon Crean, Don Dunstan, John Howard, Paul Keating, Phillip Lynch, Andrew Peacock, Susan Ryan, Ian Sinclair, Billy Snedden, John Stone or Barrie Unsworth. Zelman Cowen, Ninian Stephen, Harry Gibbs and Anthony Mason are also missing.

The entries for those living at the time of publication are written in the present continuous, so that on death the tense becomes inappropriate. Failure to leave a space to insert year of death, after the year of birth, for example with Tennant, Kathleen (Kylie) (1912-) prevents neat updating by the reader. The use of, presumably, birth certificate names over familiar ones is irritating: how many readers will be looking for **Tennant, Kathleen** (in bold face) with the bracketed Kylie in normal type? Edgeworth David is listed as David, Sir Tannant (*read* Tannatt) William Edgeworth, with no indication of his preferred name. Whoever called Frank Anstey "Francis", other than the editors? Sir Douglas (a.k.a. Frank) Packer is in the same category. Edward Gough Whitlam and Robert Neal (Bob) Dyer are both slightly misleading.

Jean Batten (1909-)—it should be (1909-82)—the New Zealand aviator is there, and so is Amy Johnson (1903-41), although their Australian links were peripheral. Scott and Black, and Parmentier and Moll, whose contribution to the 1934 air race from London to Melbourne proved that Australia could be part of an international trunk route, are not even mentioned in the "Aviation, Commercial" entry.

There are some odd slips. Sir Hubert Opperman (the name "Oppy" does not appear) is given the dates 1904-86, although he is still alive, well and cycling. The composer John Antill was never knighted, receiving a CMG, not a KCMG. Fred Williams's middle name was Ronald, not Roland. Neither Hubert Murray, our patriarchal proconsul in Papua, nor his classicist brother Gilbert are included.

The entry on Stanley Bruce contains this statement: "In 1918 Bruce successfully contested Flinders (Commonwealth) by-election as a Nationalist. His father and several of his wife's relations had won parliamentary seats". Bruce's father was never a member of parliament and his wife's uncle in the House of Representatives died in 1918. The entry suggests that Bruce entered politics with a flying wedge of family support.

The longest biographies appear to be Parkes and Menzies (both by Alan Martin), Mannix, Macquarie, Deakin, Hughes, Lawson, Monash and James McAuley.

There is a comprehensive coverage of figures in film and trade unionism. Muriel Heagney (1885-1974), an important pioneer of statistical analysis in union advocacy, receives well-deserved recognition.

Sport is well covered, and music reasonably so, although Margaret Sutherland's death should have been recorded. The visual arts are less successful: only Sidney Nolan has a long entry. Roger Kemp, John Perceval, Godfrey Miller, Jon Molvig and Lawrence Daws are missing.

Scientists and medical researchers are adequately noticed. Business entries include Peter Abeles, Alan Bond, Kerry Packer and Robert Holmes à Court.

Technology has an entry of its own, but not Science. There are useful histories for each State and long general articles including "Aborigines", "Class", "Economy", "Depression", "Law", "Leisure", "Shopping" and "Women".

Some entries are misleading. "Lucky Country" provides a novel misunderstanding of Donald Horne's classic. "Horne intended the title to be somewhat ironic, arguing that Australia faced a variety of challenges and problems." This misses his whole point, that chance factors, like an idiot winning a lottery, meant that Australian society had never needed to respond to the major challenges.

John Passmore, until recently our most eminent philosopher, is described as a "leading proponent" of John Anderson's ideas – a broad oversimplification.

The entry on the politician-murderer Thomas Ley (1879-1947) – surely Thomas John? – suggests that he bumped off three rival candidates in securing election to the House of Representatives: a wretched excess, although he might have been capable of it.

The 'Dauphin Maps' and the 'Mahogany Ship' receive sympathetic treatment, although dismissed out of hand in the *Historical Atlas* in the series.

Graeme Aplin, S. G. Foster and Michael McKernan (eds): *Australians: Events and Places*

*Australians: events and places* is an attractive combination of fine-grained chronology and gazetteer, on 467 A4 pages. The illustrations, an average of one a page, are excellent, and in the chronology the style is lively and discursive, with an eye for the theatrical.

A weakness is a tendency to pussyfoot on unsavory details, for example the anti-Chinese riots at Lambing Flat in 1861. The East Kimberley (W.A.) massacre of Aboriginals in 1927 is not listed, nor the mysterious mass hangings of Papuans in 1943-44 by Australian forces.

The 1954 entry records that "*Overland*, a Melbourne political and literary quarterly, edited by Stephen Murray-Smith, began publication."

The second part, "A historical account of Australian places," begins with a general account of regions, then short alphabetical listings for each region. The shorter entries (there are twenty-two for the Melbourne region, for example) provide latitude and longitude, population, details of exploration, settlement and economic factors. But there are no population figures for Werribee later than 1966 because it is considered (wrongly) as a Melbourne suburb. Mornington is in exactly the same category, while Frankston is omitted altogether.

*Barry Jones is Minister for Science, Customs and Small Business in the government of Australia.*

# Comment

*Don Aitkin (A.C.T.) writes:*

I like Overland. As small journals go, it's neither too pretentious or self-righteous. But I do feel that some remarks about Rowan Cahill's review article, "Heroes and Villains", in Overland 110 are called for.

Much of Cahill's piece is not reviewing but assertion, and often inaccurate assertion. His first paragraph on the 'hidden erosion' of the notion of a free press in Australia unfortunately betrays a lack of knowledge of the history of the press in Australia, but worse follows. Your readers, for instance, are entitled to know that John Pilger, author of one of the books Cahill covers, is a most controversial figure in his trade. His paragraph on Menzies, quoted by Cahill, is an example of the wild exaggerations of which Pilger is often accused; and we should know about these matters even if Cahill dismisses them.

Cahill's account of Wilfred Burchett is similarly one-eyed. At the least we should have been told of the many-sided debate about Burchett in terms less white-washing than those we were served up with. To depict him as a hero of our times is not even a service to Burchett.

Rowan Cahill gives us a more satisfactory account of Rupert Lockwood, which is just as well, seeing he's writing Lockwood's biography. But the sinister material on Japanese fifth-columnists in Australia surely needed more space or none. Cahill promises much but produces little of substance.

It's a difficult area that Cahill writes about, and at least he is going to the archives. I trust that in his more expansive writing he sets the issues he raises more firmly in place, and is more critical of his "heroes" and more able to make his "villains" convincing or, failing this, less villainous.

# books

## The Pity War Distilled

Clement Semmler

Eric Partridge: *Frank Honywood, Private: A Personal Record of the 1914-1918 War*, introduced and annotated by Geoffrey Serle (Melbourne University Press, $22.50).

John Barrett (ed.): *We Were There: Australian Soldiers of World War II Tell Their Stories* (Viking, $29.95).

Barney Roberts: *A Kind of Cattle* (Australian War Memorial and Collins, $19.95).

Barney Roberts: *Where's Morning Gone?* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin, $8.95).

The preposterous ironies and futilities of war were well demonstrated in World War II and the Vietnam War. The latter hardly needs comment, but it is sometimes forgotten that the Second World War, ostensibly begun to guarantee the sovereignty of Poland, ended by bringing about Poland's bondage and humiliation; and air bombardment, hideously contrived (Coventry, Dresden) to shorten the war, merely stiffened the resolve of the victims and inevitably prolonged it.

But World War I was, in some aspects, the most terrible of all. Monstrously disproportionate to its presumed ends, so that eight million people were destroyed because two persons of a minor European aristocracy were shot, it encouraged the insanely callous decisions of generals like Haig, Foch, Kitchener and their German counterparts. Ensconced in safe chateaux, well away from the scene of battle, they sent hundreds of thousands of young men to their horrific deaths sinking in mud and tangled in barbed wire, to gain for each assault a few metres of useless ground.

Yet this appalling carnage—largely concealed for most of the war's duration from public realization—came to light, imperishably and unforgettably—through post-World War I literature. Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*, Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, David Jones' powerful *In Parenthesis*, the memoirs of Siegfried Sassoon, R. C. Sherriff's famous play *Journey's End* and the poetry of Wilfrid Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Edmund Blunden and others have remained as classics of their kind to haunt memories and consciences.

Certainly deserving of a place among them is Eric Partridge's *Frank Honywood, Private*. First published in 1929 and long out of print, its appearance now is a literary event. The book has had little of the acclaim it deserves. Even the most comprehensive book about the literature of the war, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, does not mention Partridge's book—an astonishing oversight, since the agonies of the common soldier and his pre-occupations and attitudes have seldom been more faithfully depicted in our literature. Partridge, eventually to become a world-famous London-based linguistic scholar and lexicographer, was born in New Zealand in 1894 but educated at Toowoomba Grammar School. At twenty he began studies at the University of Queensland, but almost immediately enlisted and fought throughout the war from Gallipoli to the trenches of France—all of which he miraculously survived. He returned to a brilliant career at the University of Queensland where his contemporaries included "Inky" Stephensen, Herbert Burton and Jack Lindsay. He took first-class honors in modern languages, won a scholarship to Oxford, founded the Scholartis Press in 1927 and during his lifetime (he died in 1979) wrote over fifty books on words, the best-known of which, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, ran into seven editions.

As Geoffrey Serle notes in his perceptive introduction to *Honywood*, Partridge's experiences as an Australian soldier laid the foundations for much of his work: he later wrote that talking and living with diggers from every part of Australia led him to acquire "a considerable store of technical and semi-technical standard Australian-English, as well as a not inconsiderable stock of slangy and colloquial and other unconventional words and phrases and senses and idioms . . . I came therefore to absorb Australian-English and, much more important, unforgettingly to acquire the knowledge invaluable to a student of

speech and literature, that even one language can and does change from clime to clime, from colony to colony, from city to country, from one generation to another, even from one social group to the next. . . ." (D. Crystal: *Eric Partridge in his own words* (1980), p. 54.)

As for the autobiography itself, one is almost spellbound by its ruthless honesty, its depicting, without verbal histrionics, of men in fear and torment, of bravery as a last resort in conditions *horribile narratu.* Its peak is reached in Partridge's grappling to describe the indescribable—the battle of Pozieres. There can be little in World War I literature to rival it:

> Half the men were bogged, some were drowned in the shell-holes on this pitch-black night; those who were not drowned perished either from the bitter cold or from the fan-like fire of the machine guns. Those who reached the enemy had to use their bayonets as daggers and their rifles as clubs, so choked with mud had they become. They despatched a few of the enemy, but the majority of the attackers were slain or captured. Perhaps one in five regained the trench from which he had climbed . . . one does not dare to reflect on what was suffered and thought by the men who, knowing they could not hope to escape from the foul quagmire in which they were held fast, froze slowly to death in No Man's Land that night. What could stretcher-bearers do? They too would have been bogged. They did attempt the impossible but had to desist. The moans of the unfortunate victims made their mates in the trenches squirm in their helplessness, and one of them cried loudly in his agony: "Ah Christ! to die like a bloody dog!"

Wounded in the attack Partridge himself (Honywood) somehow made his way back to the lines:

> . . . he shuddered to come on a private from his own battalion lying prone where, in his probably hurried progress, he had been precipitated to the ground with half his head shot away; other sights were so disgustingly horrible that he had to pull himself together by declaiming with ludicrous yet effectual pedantry: "This was once a man, not a beast of the field." Mangled, mutilated corpses lay exposed to the indifferent sun; hands grasping the rifle in which they had trusted with a foolish pathetic credulity, arms raised protectingly to the brow to ward off the blow that had got the man in the heart; one poor devil, cut to shreds by the explosion of a Mills bomb that had been struck in his pocket by a shrapnel pellet; two legs lying puttee'd a yard from the trunk and gashed head; a gaping wound at the rear of the skull, this victim's hands clawing the earth as they stiffened in the momentary death agony; these sights and others that would have sickened the keeper of a charnel house . . .

I have quoted at length because these passages tell more than can my mere words: it is a voice crying amid desolation to the uncaring gods; add to that an academic exactness and a literariness of style that gives shocking reality to it all and one must agree with Serle's comment that "there are few parallels to this account of a man in torment."

As for *We Were There*, Dr Barrett conceived the idea some years ago of collating into book form extensive questionnaires sent out to some 3700 Australian soldiers of World War II, a project in which he was assisted by Professor Roger Joyce (himself an ex-AIF lieutenant) before the latter's untimely death.

Obviously much enthusiasm and hard work has gone into this book which explores most aspects of the background and experiences of the average serving soldier: why he joined up; the effects on his family life; his battle memories; his views of mateship and army discipline; his attitudes to conscription; how he faced demobilization and so on.

Yet in the end it boils down at best to a melange of anecdotes and reminiscences since, by the very nature of the undertaking, it has little statistical validity. As Dr Barrett admits, "the respondents did *not* form a random sample in the true statistical sense, and the percentage of them falling into various categories should *not* be applied to the army as a whole." One can sympathize with an ex-major in his eighties with a distinguished military career who returned a blank questionnaire with the comment, "Typical academic bullshit", and another respondent who commented, "A friend of mine often claims that the main problem facing Australia is that it has too many professors. After looking at your questionnaire, maybe he's right . . ." Dr Barrett's rejoinder is that nevertheless those who responded are still so large and diverse a group that they can be useful "indicators" and "signposts". But the question remains as to the extent, after forty years and in old age, of the blurring of the writing on the signposts.

Still, social historians of the future may well find the book an interesting terminal moraine in which lie embedded the fragments and detritus of a war which many respondents hope will never be repeated ("war is the ultimate obscenity"; "cruel, senseless hell—pray it's the last" are typical comments). There are some lovely touches, not least the bank clerk who ironically recalls the motivation for his enlistment: "Politically naive, I dimly sensed the need to put the Nazis down, and I'd read the school's Honour Roll. I was always so proud to see the red patches on Mercator's Projection, and I was a sucker for newsreels showing the Royal Navy's battleships butting their way through heavy seas while some band blew its guts out playing

'Land of Hope and Glory'. Oh, yes, I was a believer . . ."

On the other hand there was the awful side of war, too, as in the words of one who witnessed the crash of an American Liberator bomber as it failed to take off:

> Men charging round with clothes on fire would suddenly disappear as the grenades and mortar bombs they were carrying went off. Others, rolling on the ground, would give a quick jerk as their bandoliers exploded. We did our pitiful best, all the time with one eye on an unexploded 500 lb bomb, while horribly burnt men pleaded to be shot; and, as a medical man said to me not long ago, it would have been better so, rather than letting some of them die after weeks of excruciating pain.

And for the voyeuristic, accounts of the sexual proclivities of soldiers on leave, not least the game of "rev on one and coast home on the other", played on the bodies of Arab harlots in a Middle East brothel.

All in all, Dr Barrett's modest assessment of the book is fair enough: " . . . a compilation of the experiences and attitudes of some Australian soldiers, described—with a little help—by the men themselves."

But as a book on World War II, the Tasmanian writer Barney Roberts' *A Kind of Cattle* (with some splendid black-and-white illustrations by Adrian Young) is much more to the point. Here is an intensely personal narrative of a prisoner-of-war's experiences, as against a pastiche of disconnected reminiscences and opinions.

Roberts was taken prisoner in April 1941 at Megara on the Greek mainland—one of the thousands of Australians who were the victims of a dreadful military shambles for which Churchill was largely responsible. By cattle trucks and forced marches Roberts and his companions were taken to a labor camp in northern Yugoslavia. One marvels at his capacity to write so dispassionately of the brutality and cruelty of his captors and of the ordeal of men crammed fifty-six to a truck:

> Suddenly I could smell a new and foul smell. The man to my right was squatting, both hands on the shoulders of the man in front of him. His head was down, chin tucked into his chest. I knew he was shitting, and I knew that even if he knew he was shitting, he didn't care. I hadn't thought about it before, but fifty-six men would all have to piss and those with dysentery, like this man—there was no way—except in a tin hat. Tom Corney, stocky Queenslander, shearer's cook, offered his. Backwards and forwards it went, to and from the window, from hand to hand. The padding on the side tended to stop the slop.

One doubts if the miseries of war captivity have ever been described so movingly. Yet Roberts' humanity and sense of values never deserted him, even in a world where a single-minded sense of self-preservation thrived on distrust and larceny. He was, as he puts it, "bombarded with behavioural patterns which offend my accepted standards of right and wrong." And by lice: "You first felt them crawling over your body, amongst the hairs under your arms, or between your legs. For a long time you tried not to believe it was happening to you . . . Then it became all right to admit you had 'em. Because everybody had 'em. There was no class distinction either with them or their hosts. It became an acceptable custom to scratch your balls in public, much as men tend to stroke their chins or ladies the hair on the back of their necks . . ."

He found inner strength in the reciting of snatches of verse he had learnt at school or his mother had read to him—from Keats and Browning and Yeats—and from the contemplation of ordinary things, as witness this splendid piece of writing:

> I have grown to love that time when the light goes out. Not because I hate the light. When it is time I stare at the white element, waiting, letting it grow in my eyes until it has become an all-consuming fire, cleansing, purifying. Suddenly it is night. I close my eyes, turn my face into my pillow, and the light stays with me. It is a way of communicating with that other world which I left behind. In that deeper blackness which comes with the turning off of a light is a blackness which holds at its core an illuminated promise, a focus, a distant star dragging me into its vortex.

Later his lot improved and he spent the last three years of captivity as a POW farm worker near the village of Eichberg in Austria, where he and his mates developed a typical Australian camaraderie with the local peasantry and managed to sort out a way of life that is entertainingly described. This stay was broken by a remarkable experience of several months, early in 1944, in a so-called "holiday camp" at Genshagen in Berlin. Here he endured and survived the terror of Allied bombing raids—" . . . puff after puff of exploding shells, closing in, direct hits, and flaming debris swirling, spraying fire . . . and always more and more planes until the reverberating durrumbling took hold of the air. The thundering of bombs exploding; light flickering, leaping, glowing as the city burnt anew; and always more planes filling up holes. There were no human cries of anguish or terror. We were mute . . ."

Barney Roberts suspected that the camp, run by one Quartermaster-Sergeant Brown, was a front for pro-Nazi attitudes. He was issued with a pamphlet setting out the aims of a "British Free Corps" to join in "the common fight against Communism". BFC members

would receive all the rights of a German soldier. (In an epilogue he unravels the mystery. Apparently Brown was in fact an MI spy who courageously assumed the cloak of traitor and collaborator as a cover for his subversive activities. He was later a key witness in the German war crimes trials.)

Back at Eichberg rumors came of the steady advance of the Russians early in 1945, and Roberts and his friends planned and executed an escape to join the liberators.

This man can write; one finds it hard to put the book down and it deserved its winning of a NSW Premier's Prize. He has capped it with his more recent *Where's Morning Gone* (the title is from a line in a Gwen Harwood poem)—the story of his boyhood and youth on a farm in the Flowerdale valley of north-west Tasmania in the 1920s and 1930s.

Roberts is indeed a plain writer of plain truths and, just as in his war memoirs, here is an unaffected recital of events and experiences, an artless recall of the sights and sounds that will nostalgically tug the memories of those who were fortunate enough too, to have enjoyed a bush boyhood.

Yet it is much more than a simple narrative. Roberts, as his memory roves back, enters the personas of his family and neighbors—his brothers Henry (Hong), Loch and especially Frank, the rover, who left home and worked his passage as far north as Gympie and Dalby, cutting cane, fencing and wood-chipping—and then suddenly re-appeared. "Always, when we were waiting for his arrival, I would be reminded of the parable, which Mum had often read us, about the prodigal son. All the excitement. Even Dad kept saying things like: 'When Frank is here' or 'I must show Frank—' But it wasn't the same because we never killed a fatted calf and anyway although he had gone off to a far country he hadn't 'wasted his substance with riotous living.' "

Then there was Old Horse, the fettler, wiry, small and tough, who lived in the station yard with his massive wife who had a lovely voice and sang "every Sunday in the Methodist church we didn't go to." Bern (Barney) and his friends wondered "how it would be possible for Old Horse to have sex with Mrs G. As Clarrie Harris had once said, 'Old Horse on top of Mrs G would look like a pimple on a pumpkin.' "

Time and place and atmosphere are enchantingly encapsulated—with always the image of the family paramount. Mum reads from Ecclesiastes one night and from George Borrow's *Lavengro* the next—and engraved forever on Bern's mind is the lovely passage of Borrow's and Mr Petulengro's speculations on the nature of death: "When a man dies he is cast into the earth and his wife and child sorrow over him. If he has neither wife nor child, then his father and mother I suppose; and if he is quite alone in the world, why, then, he is cast onto the earth and there is the end of the matter."

Bern, in his late teens, goes to his first dance, at Moorleah, and I wonder if there is anywhere in our literature a better description of a bush dance—the men clustered outside the hall drinking beer and spoiling for a fight, and inside, awkwardly apart from the girls in their best dresses, sitting along the side, shyly hoping for partners. "Bern went into the hall. He felt everyone would be looking at him. He walked straight across to where the blonde girl and Shirl were sitting. He stopped in front of the blonde. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'May I have the pleasure of a dance?' and bowed slightly as he had been taught.' "

And then at last the wheel is full circle, for the war is upon them and men are wanted "as volunteers to fight for His Majesty the King (one of the Georges, isn't it?) all food and clothing found, free board and lodging, travel paid to lands beyond the baths of all the western stars. It may be they shall touch the Happy Isles. They don't think too much about the may-bes." And Bern enlists in the AIF.

*Clement Semmler, author, critic and broadcaster, recently completed the editing of Kenneth Slessor's* War Diaries *and* War Despatches, *and his biography of A. B. Paterson,* The Banjo of the Bush, *has reached its 7th edition.*

## Two Looks at Oz

Ross Fitzgerald

Howard Jacobson: *In the Land of Oz* (Hamish Hamilton, $24.95).

Ross Terrill: *The Australians: In Search of an Identity* (Bantam, $29.95).

Author of the best and funniest book about academic envy in the English-speaking world—*Coming From Behind*—the self-parodying, self-promoting, English Jew Howard Jacobson has written a brilliant exposé about what stands out to one of nature's outsiders about our not so wondrous land of Oz.

It's so good that most Australian critics will loathe it with a vengeance. Already the ex-editor of the Age, Michael Davie, now in London, has savaged the book in the Spectator as "relentlessly entertaining". This review was repeated in the Sydney Morning Herald without acknowledgement of its being a re-tread. How's that for a put-down: attacking an author for having the audacity to be "entertaining"?

Jacobson's book starts, predictably but well, on the plane from Singapore: " 'You sweet?' our steward asked us as we were barely out of Malaysian airspace. 'You sweet?' is Australian stewardese for, 'Is everything absolutely to your requirements, sir?' ". On arrival in Darwin their suitcase is lost: "Big, blue and heavy" was the best description the Jacobsons could

give the white Australian lost-property clerk:

> He nodded absently and a trifle sceptically, as if he'd heard big, blue and heavy a few too many times before. He was a young, ferrety fellow chosen for his easy charm and lack of sympathy for the suffering of others. He possessed that twinkling callousness which passes in Australia for calm.

Soon the book veers from the predictable to the pleasures of dubious Darwin after the ravages of "Shiklone Troicee" (Cyclone Tracy). As Howard and his Perth-born missus Ros discover, it is a feature of Darwin plumbing that you can never be certain whether you've turned on the cold tap or the hot, so little difference in temperature is there between what comes out of either: "Many was the time in the week or so we were there, that we scalded ourselves in a shower of cold water".

As befits a Leavisite alone on the Arnhem Highway—speargrass and pandanus palm on either side—Jacobson writes evocatively. Admitting to being by nature an anti-nature man ("I go vacant before the miracle of ants"), our hard-nosed, long-limbed adventurer is surprised to discover in himself a strong attraction to the wet tropical landscape:

> Fields of daffodils had always left me dead, but a field of wild water lilies—a sudden temporary flotation of impossibly fragile colour—was an irresistible sight. A hundred magpie geese, twisting their necks like periscopes, and our first glimpse of a brolga, hesitant and retiring, uncertain whether we were worthy to watch her mythical dance, confirmed my new passion. Hereafter I was a waterfowl and wetlands man, a floodplains freak, a sucker for storks and swamps. The symbolism is too obvious even to examine. I cannot speak for anybody else, nor do I wish to plunge into the politics of whether women were ever fish, but I can no longer have any doubts in which element I originated.

The epigrams ("What more melancholy sight is there, in this vast sad country, than a solitary drinker?") conceal a deeply serious intent. Jacobson, outsider and farceur, abetted by a wife longing to redress the injury inflicted on our land and its original peoples, is appalled by the condition of Aboriginal Australians and the schizophrenic, white guilt-hatred in the ungentile land of Oz.

With a wondrous ear for language in a mindless Arcadia, Jacobson's writing ranges from a send-up of senior State policemen frothing with "vitriolic righteousness" to the bust of Socrates, beneath the Winthrop Tower at the University of Western Australia, "resembling an early Australian explorer". He's got the dreadful Bjelke-Petersen and those tarted-up outdoor arcades that Australians increasingly refer to these days as a 'mall' down to a T:

> In the coming months we would see malls going up (or gone up) all over Australia, many of them in the most unlikely or undesirable places of business. They were to become symbols for us of careless and contemptuous free-wheeling capitalism, the expressions—those in Queensland especially—of local political insolence, of vandalism initiated at the very highest level.

But at least in Darwin's case it wasn't a State Premier or Chief Minister who had flattened the old town to put a mall through; Cyclone Tracy, with "an effectiveness that must have made Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen go green with envy, did that in one single night of spectacular devastation on Christmas Eve, 1974."

And in "Expulsion from Paradise", although Jacobson doesn't name him, who else could this be but that ragged old lion of Australian publishing—John Collins of Jacaranda Wiley:

> I found myself sitting opposite a publisher I'd vaguely known in my book repping days in Melbourne. Left to my own devices I might very well not have recognized him. He was perched on the edge of his seat, ginger-haired and bearded, writhing his hands and looking arch, like a well-connected sprite. He *seemed* familiar, but I had been travelling for months and I was seeing what I thought were the faces of old friends everywhere now. So it needed him to say, "So you're back then,"—as if I were a recurrence of some pestiferous minor ailment—for me to remember that I remembered him.

Collins said to Jacobson, "If you're writing about Australia I hope you make it funny."

> "Funny but not farcical," I said. "Why not farcical? The country is a farce." He poured me a red wine, although he was only a guest at the house himself. "It's a nation of fuckwits," he reminded me . . . "You bastard, Jacobson," he said. A warm glow instantly suffused my whole being. I felt as though a dozen little lights had been turned on inside me all at once. "You bastard, Jacobson"—that was it, the very thing, the reason above all others I kept coming back. They were so damned complimentary, Australians. They made you feel you possessed such reserves of badness. "You bastard, Jacobson." Who else but an eastern states Australian was ever going to say that to me? Certainly no New Yorker ever would.

In comparison to Jacobson's brilliant odyssey, Terrill's *The Australians* is a waste of trees. It's boring,

pompous, po-faced and predictable. When I wearily closed page 344 I thought "I've finally won the 'Poor Fellah My Reader' Award." Despite being set in 1984 it's all dated and *passé*—Melbourne/Sydney rivalry, the wonders of tropical Queensland and so on. Dr Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen is admired for his shrewdness and political persistence. "Relentlessly entertaining" this big, bland book is not. Virtually the only time my attention was trapped was by these utterly unselfconscious lines uttered by Lady Fairfax:

> "I think I believe in the greatest good of the greatest number," says Lady Mary Fairfax, wife of Sir Warwick Fairfax, a powerful Sydney publisher, "but people want to retain what they have earned." She sweeps her arm towards the far wall of her sitting-room, one of Sydney's grandest, from which we can see the Harbour Bridge. "Taking away this house from me wouldn't solve any problems. The money from it would last the poor about two days."

This remarkably unreflective paragraph follows on some observations of Bob Santamaria who, expressing his disappointment with trendiness and consumerism, said: "I love this country, but I don't admire Australians very much." That sentence has the touch of truth, unlike the endless talk and chatter that fills up Terrill's disappointing book.

Bland, Jacobson is not. Serious, entertaining, cruel he is. Juxtaposed against the awful emptiness of Brisbane, with masses of young boy cops hanging about shopping precincts, laughing, is this line: "It is always a touching sight, a blind man dressed for a special occasion."

Now there's a tough line, from a writer who can write. A good sentence from an alien who, paradoxically, in his toughness cares about our vast, denuded land and the Aboriginal peoples who inhabited it so creatively for so long.

*Ross Fitzgerald teaches Politics and History at Griffith University in Brisbane. His most recent books are the novels* Pushed From the Wings *and* All About Anthrax.

## The People's Voice

Rafe Champion

Geoffrey de Q. Walker; *Initiative and Referendum: The People's Law* (Centre for Independent Studies, $16.95).

A drafting error in the legislation saved us from the Australia Card and the numbering system that went with it, although to the bitter end the Prime Minister pledged his total commitment to the Card. He claimed to have a mandate, based on the number of seats in the House of Representatives. On the count of primary votes, however, the Coalition and the Democrats, who at least notionally opposed the card, picked up almost five million primary votes at the last elections, compared with 4.3 million for Labor.

Speaking in a more reflective vein in his Boyer Lectures of 1979, Hawke noted that "relevant mandates will only emerge from a concerned electorate". After the last election some Labor supporters took the lead in the public debate which challenged the government case for the Australia Card and, as the electorate began to be concerned, opposition mounted steadily. Hawke was not impressed and vowed to "ignore the decibels" while he proceeded with the legislation.

This was a situation where the government needed to be restrained by the voice of the people in a referendum on the card alone, unconfused by all the other issues of the general election. The episode shows the need for a constitutional reform to allow Citizen Initiated Referendums, as in Switzerland, Austria and many States of the United States. This system enables the people to vote No to legislation that they do not want. It can also be designed to bring forward legislation that has popular support before any party or politician is prepared to take the lead.

The standard procedure for a 'people's vote' is to raise a petition with sufficient names on it to show that concern is not limited to a small minority. Then a referendum must be held within a set period of time to give the people the chance to have their say. If the people's vote is limited to the power of veto then they cast a Yes or No vote on the proposed issue; if they have the power to initiate legislation then the initial petition is presented with a text of the law that is proposed.

Professor Walker's book traces the rise of citizen-initiated referendums in Switzerland and the United States, their rejection in Australia and the recent surge of interest both at home and abroad. He reminds us that Australia was once in the forefront of democratic reforms such as votes for all men, votes for women, votes for acres (the rural gerrymander), the secret ballot and the Constitution itself.

The peoples' vote was in the Labor platform from the 1890s: indeed it was more than a plank, it was a central principle of the party. In Queensland the Labor-controlled lower house passed appropriate legislation in 1915, but the opposition-controlled upper house baulked. The issue faded away and in 1962, on a motion proposed by Don Dunstan, the people's vote was dropped from the ALP platform.

The author claims that citizen initiated referendums (CIRs for short) could revive confidence in the democratic right to a meaningful vote. For many people the vote they cast in a general election is almost worthless if the seat is 'safe' or if none of the major parties have satisfactory policies on some vital issues. This is often the case where major parties have been

captured by special-interest groups who press for special concessions, such as protective tariffs and subsidies of various kinds. The majority of the people lose out under this system but they cannot defend themselves through the ballot box. The citizen-initiated referendum system would enable the people to exert the power of veto over legislation that hands out special favours to sectional interests or violates human rights.

In places where the CIR system operates the people are pleased with it and would not want to lose it. If this is the case one might ask why it is not more widespread. As Walker explains, the answer is very simple. The system has to be brought in by politicians in office and *they are precisely the people who stand to lose some of their power and influence* if CIRs are introduced. Of course they do not actually say this; they usually protest that *they know best*, because they are selected on the basis of their outstanding records for wisdom, vision, honesty and competence. This attitude came to the fore in the Senate when Colin Mason introduced his Bill for CIRs. The Labor, Liberal and National senators united in opposition to the Bill and their arguments had a strong resemblance to those that were brought up against votes for all adult males and votes for women when these changes were first proposed last century.

The virtue of the referendum is that one issue, or a small number of issues, can be treated separately, and each can be treated on its merits. This enables voters to participate in a meaningful way on each issue and the result gives a clear message on the view of the people *on each point.* In contrast, elections rarely give a clear message on any particular issue because voters have to take or leave whole baskets of policies.

Walker provides evidence from Switzerland, the USA and Australia to show that voters are quite capable of understanding the issues, helped by prolonged public debate and the pamphlet that is circulated prior to the poll, spelling out the arguments on each side of the case. Walker argues that *interest* is more important than *ability* in forming well-based opinions: we all know of 'bright' people who have silly ideas that they have never bothered to reconsider, and 'dull' people who are full of information and wisdom on things that they care about.

Those whose power and influence are threatened by moves towards participatory democracy are likely to lead the resistance to CIRs. These are mostly those, such as politicians and lobbyists, whose business is persuading others by writing and talking. The energies and skills of these publicists will ensure that at first the case against CIRs is impressive. They will raise the odd cases where the people made a dreadful mistake in a citizen-initiated vote. To suggest that the system is thus condemned is like suggesting that steamers should have ceased to cross the Atlantic after the loss of the *Titanic.* If the existing Parliamentary system was to be condemned on the basis of a handful of mistakes it would have been thrown out long ago.

The book is clearly written and heavily footnoted. A somewhat conservative tone comes through in places, but this does not prejudice the case that the author makes out for the right of the people to have not only the power of veto but the power to initiate legislation as well.

*Rafe Champion has worked on research and planning in the New South Wales Department of Health and in the Anti-Discrimination Board. He is now a freelance writer.*

## Aboriginals in History

John Mulvaney

Sally Morgan: *My Place* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, $15.00); Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt: *End of an Era Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, $29.95); Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Penguin Books, $12.95).

While Bert Facey uncomplainingly endured his "fortunate" Western Australian life, his contemporaries Arthur, Daisy and Gladys Corunna also lived out their embattled lives of adversity. Sally Morgan's compassionate and deeply moving saga of the deep wrongs and incredible hardships suffered by three generations of her family is another Australian classic published by Facey's discerning publishers. Morgan's detective work in tracing her shadowy past, determined to locate *My Place* despite her grandmother's adamant opposition, should be essential reading for all triumphalist bicentennial white Australians.

Morgan's stark depiction of the inhuman snatching of infants from their black mothers, despite rejection by their white fathers, and the discrimination and economic exploitation visited upon her relatives, regrettably has continent-wide application. Neither was discrimination cosily restricted to outback frontiers, for the grossest inequalities and infringements of human dignity occurred as commonly in suburban Perth as around Marble Bar.

The author overcame all social and psychological barriers to succeed at tertiary education and to produce this compelling story of humanity triumphing over persecution. Ridiculed and humiliated as a schoolgirl artist, her works now hang in the Australian National Gallery. Her striking and colorful pictures synthesise traditional Aboriginal spiritual concepts with simple European folk art, conveying both poignant criticism and hope. Sally Morgan is a bicentennial Australian of stature.

Sally's widowed mother repressed knowledge of their Aboriginality from her children, partly to shield

them from discrimination, but also because of her childhood indoctrination in a 'home', which taught her shame of the taint. I found the most disturbing story of many in this book to be this mother's childhood in an uncaring home for girls during the thirties, where joy and dolls were excluded.

The children believed that their dark complexions resulted from Indian ancestry. Sally was fifteen before she learned the truth. She was not shocked like her sister: "It's a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. Nobody wants to know you . . . You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian, anything, but not Aboriginal".

It took years for Sally to overcome the inhibitions of her mother and grandmother, the latter on her deathbed. The result is a finely written labor of devotion and identification with both her Aboriginal and European inheritance. Her constructive approach contrasts with the negative, strident outpourings of those media activists who claim to speak for their people, but whose intolerance and ignorance is as anti-social as the white evils which they denounce.

Read this book to comprehend why Aboriginals voice such bitterness and demand a place in this land, while fearing or distrusting all arms of administration, even when well-meaning. More importantly, it demonstrates the extent to which spiritual values and kinship ties sustain Aboriginal people even when their cultural bonds are tenuous. It also implicitly answers those cynics who claim that people are coming out of the woodwork to claim Aboriginality simply for financial gain.

I warmed most to Uncle Arthur's story. He remained tolerant, stoic and charitable even when cheated out of his wages, or out of his well-managed farm during the Depression, when the bank unfairly foreclosed. Arthur was an object lesson in human dignity: "I had to take my family and start again on new, uncleared land. It's hard for the black man to get ahead".

*My Place* is testimony to the sad truth that pastoral pioneers in the Pilbara and Kimberley were not as heroic as some proud descendants portray them. Celebrated pastoralists built fortunes on the unpaid labor of Aboriginal men and women; they fathered children, then disowned them, while encouraging authorities to take them to the anonymity and loneliness of a 'home'.

During 1987 Ronald and Catherine Berndt published a study of conditions for Aboriginals on cattle stations on the Northern Territory side of this region. Their sober documentation of Australian Investment Agency (Vestey) properties during 1944-46 makes disturbing reading. They were centred on Wave Hill, southwest of Katherine. Note the similarity there, to Sally Morgan's people:

> In spite of appalling working conditions, the squalor and poverty of many of the camps, endemic malnutrition, and the high rate of infant mortality, there was a strength of character, a sense of common identity among Aborigines which spoke volumes for their tolerance, fortitude, and patience. In many respects they were too tolerant, too patient, too ready to accept 'their lot'.

Even these graduate anthropology authors, invited by the company as expert consultants, lived under extremely trying conditions, were treated abrasively and were provided with transport to stations only haphazardly. For this survey, after the company made sundry deductions, each consultant received between ten and fourteen pounds monthly; their advice was ignored.

Able to work both with men and women, the Berndts documented the basic institution of wages paid in kind, with dubious accounting practices always working in the employer's favor. An inadequate diet (exacted from 'wages') consisted "chiefly of white flour, sugar, and tea, with beef bones and offal". Mouldy porridge was fed to the "niggers" by one manager; drinking water came from the horse-trough at another station. Little wonder that angry, self-righteous pastoralists opposed the 1968 Pastoral Award.

This substantial book is not easy reading and the format results in repetition. The authors deserve high praise, however, for making so much data available. It is invaluable historical source material, especially as it includes comparative data. This was wartime, and military establishments along the Stuart Highway also employed Aboriginal labor. The Berndts found that conditions there were vastly superior so, understandably, pastoralists criticised the army for 'spoiling' Aboriginals.

As the Berndts are indefatigable researchers and have published more than any historians on Aboriginal society, it may seem surprising that this important study only appeared forty years later. The explanation lies with their mentor, A. P. Elkin. It was he who negotiated their Vestey attachment. "What we are aiming at", he told them in 1944, "is to build up a contented aboriginal community in the regions to which they are accustomed, and around the Pastoral Industry which they like. A wealthy firm like Vestey's gives us our opportunity".

If Elkin hoped to manipulate improved labor conditions on Vestey properties, and through their example elsewhere, he failed. That company had other ideas concerning the purpose of the consultancy. Its management expected "a practical anthropologist who should be a Welfare Officer amongst the natives that we were working on our respective stations, also as a recruiting agent to obtain further labour from the tribes". Their recruiting potential, the Berndts found, was the aspect most emphasised by station managers.

This interpretation of their function denied, they

completed their critical report, canvassing many fundamental welfare issues, and submitted it to Elkin for comment. He insisted that it remain unpublished and restricted in its distribution, believing that both the company and government would be more influenced by a private report. He advised the publication only of a sanitised and censored version, which virtually ignored the Australian Investment Agency as a negative factor in the situation. As late as 1978, when the authors again sought Elkin's advice, he persisted in his censorship recommendation.

Quite correctly, the authors felt "no obligation to the AIA in safeguarding its interests or blurring facts which might be prejudicial or distasteful to the firm. Our concern for Aboriginal welfare was paramount, as was . . . the integrity of research".

*End of an Era* as a title refers to Aboriginal labor on cattle stations through the harsh era until after World War II and the changes (still not complete) which followed. It also could apply to the tired, Eurocentric anthropological notions of those times, typified by Elkin. An authoritarian paternalist, who advocated the assimilation policy without ever seeking Aboriginal opinion, he saw his duty as a power broker with governments and industry.

As the authors ruefully reflect, "Professor Elkin who, while being committed to the advancement of Aborigines, preferred to work behind the scenes. Within the climate of the times, his procedure may well have been the right one—and . . . it did appear to have results. But for us it was frustratingly slow". Its dire effects on the cause of Aboriginal welfare were more than frustrating.

Henry Reynolds cannot be accused of hiding behind bureaucratic forms or of protecting the reputations of important people. His approach is direct, committed and lively. *The Law of the Land* is a tract for these times, particularly for the reader with little inclination to read extensively.

Reynolds has promoted the cause of Aboriginal historical studies through his department at James Cook University, Townsville. This research has helped redress the balance within Australian historiography, because Aboriginal social, economic and political life since 1788 had been omitted from conventional Australian history. Even now, however, Aboriginal culture and its regional diversity largely eludes historians, who work from conventional documentary records, rather than incorporating oral sources, material culture and archaeology. Reynolds is best known for *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981) and *Frontier* (1987), both of which are less polemical than the present volume, but all three books enthusiastically advance the cause of Aboriginal history.

*The Law of the Land* is forcefully argued and clearly phrased; it deals with (and claims to settle) one of the most contentious issues in contemporary affairs, Aboriginal land rights. Reynolds disputes the conventional notion of *terra nullius*, the notion that is said to have provided a British justification for annexation without any treaty with the indigenes. Anthropologists and prehistorians already have given the lie to conventional expositions which drew upon John Locke. Locke's doctrine denied title to those who did not cultivate the land. Aboriginals obviously manipulated the land and its resources in ways unfamiliar to European farmers.

Anthropologists also were prominent in the 1971 landmark Gove Land Rights decision. Their evidence conflicted with the understanding of Justice Blackburn. When Reynolds disputes the logic and historical evidence of the Blackburn ruling, therefore, anthropologists and prehistorians applaud. In the light of all this evidence, it seems inescapable that Blackburn's ruling is overdue for reconsideration. As Reynolds acknowledges, because historical scholarship ignored the Gove issues, Blackburn cannot be blamed for his version of history. Had *The Law of the Land* been available to Blackburn, possibly the law of this land would be different today.

Any thesis which challenges historians, lawyers and moral philosophers to reconsider the legal, political and ethical justification for annexation without a treaty is obviously a significant contribution. It underpins knowledge about Aboriginal economic life which has increased rapidly since Gove times.

Despite praise for the innovative qualities of this book, and the fire in its author's belly, I remain uneasy about its total presentation. As this constitutes such a major revisionist thesis, this paperbound opening salvo merits supporting fire from a more exhaustive study. Reynolds cites those eighteenth-century commentators who support his exposition, but how many others accepted the Lockian interpretation? How influential were they? Throughout the book Reynolds refers to Land Rights. This is an unfortunate use of an emotive contemporary term, not used historically. He also implicitly uses the fact that some authorities in the 1830s accepted that Aboriginals "were in possession of their tribal lands" to argue to the situation around 1788.

"One of the most important sentences ever written in the history of white-Aboriginal relations," is the author's opinion of a memo written in 1840 by James Stephen, the Colonial Office Head. "It is an important and unsuspected fact", Stephen wrote, "that these Tribes had Proprietary in the Soil—that is, in particular sections of it which were clearly defined and well understood before the occupation of their Country", Profound words indeed, but what did they signify?

Reynolds does not refer to Alan Frost's useful discussion of *terra nullius* in Historical Studies, 1981. Therein Frost quotes the younger James Stephen (1822) to the effect that New South Wales was

acquired "neither by conquest nor cession, but by the mere occupation of a desert or uninhabited land". Evidently Stephen was wiser in 1840, but some detailed analysis of the intellectual and political context was desirable. My concern is that selective treatment of favorable evidence can establish a case, while endangering its credibility.

The revisionist case would read more convincingly if John Batman's 1835 'treaty' with the Port Phillip Aboriginals had not been ignored. Whatever Batman's motives, here was an historical instance of tacit settler admission of Aboriginal land ownership. It sits within the heyday of the author's so-called "first Land Rights movement", but he fails to examine it. Consult the book's cover, however, and there as a symbol, the publishers illustrate T. W. Burtt's painting of the Batman incident! Was it an inconvenient incident for the Reynolds thesis?

Both Governor Bourke and the high-minded Colonial Office roundly disallowed that treaty. Their reasons were expressed succinctly by Lord Glenelg, Secretary of State for Colonies, in a despatch to Bourke on 10 October 1835 (quoted in A. H. Campbell, *John Batman and the Aborigines*, p. 178). Note that any *rights* which Glenelg conceded to Aboriginals were humanitarian, not land rights:

> I approve of the course which you have hitherto pursued on this subject, and especially of your Proclamation maintaining the right of the Crown to the soil on which these new settlements have been effected. Although many circumstances have contributed to render me anxious that the aborigines should be placed under a zealous and effective protection, and that their rights should be studiously defended, I yet believe that we should consult very ill for the real welfare of that helpless and unfortunate race, by recognizing in them any right to alienate to private adventurers the land of the Colony. It is indeed enough to observe that such a concession would subvert the foundation on which all proprietary rights in New South Wales at present rest and defeat a large part of the most important regulations of the Local Government.

This innovative book merits deeper treatment. It is a useful antidote for bicentennial pomposity, but I suspect that enthusiasm for a meritorious cause has resulted in some propagandist blurring at the expense of niggling footnotes. Reynolds has fallen into a trap similar to those whom he criticises in an acute aside: "There is a tendency among both black and white activists to *want* the past to be as bad as possible in order to strengthen their moral claim on the present generation. It is a case of the worse things were, the better."

*John Mulvaney was professor of Prehistory in the Faculty of Arts, Australian National University, until he retired to write Aboriginal history. His* Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606-1985 *will be published later this year.*

## Country Places, Country Faces

Geoffrey Blainey

Tom Griffiths: *Beechworth: An Australian Country Town and its Past* (Greenhouse, $19.95).
Bill Gammage: *Narrandera Shire* (Narrandera Shire, NSW 2700, $30).
June Phillip: *A Poor Man's Diggings: Mining and Community at Bethanga, Victoria, 1875-1912* (Hyland House, $25).

Thirty years ago browsers were unlikely to find more than a couple of readable local or regional histories in the best Australian bookshops and lending libraries, but now they find scores. There has been a remarkable but uneven quickening of a sense of place—that vital facet of nationalism—and an upsurge of interest in the past, especially the everyday past; and these changes have spurred research on the histories of towns, shires and regions.

Today, somebody keen on Australian local history could read a book a week and still not cover the worthwhile books in the space of a year. On Western Australia, they could read Mary Durack's *Sons in the Saddle*, Donald Garden's *Albany* and Martyn and Audrey Webb's *Edge of Empire*, which is actually the story of Onslow and the west Pilbara, and then have half-a-dozen good histories waiting to be read. On New South Wales they would find stimulus in Eric Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres*, that masterly book on the Pilliga Scrub, and in Sir Keith Hancock's *Discovering Monaro*, Gordon Buxton's *The Riverina 1861-91*, R. B. Walker's *Old New England*, Bobbie Hardy's *West of the Darling* and Brian Kennedy's *Silver, Sin and Sixpenny Ale*, being a social history of Broken Hill up to the big strike just after the First World War.

Victoria probably has produced more of the readable local histories than any other State, and when you think of Hal Porter's *Bairnsdale*, Don Watson's *Caledonia Australis*, Margaret Kiddle's *Men of Yesterday*, and Andrew Lemon on Northcote, Weston Bate on Ballarat, Sayers and Yule on Warrnambool, Mary Turner Shaw on Mount Emu Creek and Bill Bossence on towns of the Goulburn Valley you are only half way towards making a reasonable list. Then there are the other States and territories, with such books as Geoffrey Bolton's *A Thousand Miles Away* calling for notice, as well as all those books, old and new, which I should have read but haven't.

Such is the increased output of local history that some of the major books I probably have not even heard of. In a way I'm glad; more and more academic

historians are moving into this field, treating it quite legitimately as a valuable tributary of knowledge for the wider streams of national history, but writing books that are baffling or dreary to most readers who live in the districts under scrutiny. It is almost a hallmark of the new breed of thesis-turned-book that its arid prose conveys the strong impression that the author has not yet visited the place. Of course I know the author has been there—the acknowledgments and footnotes tell us so—but the book has none of that sense of place which many readers expect to find in the history of a town or region. History departments don't encourage bright students to use their eyes, except when looking at the written and printed page.

Bill Gammage's *Narrandera Shire* is one of the best local histories written in Australia. He knows how to find the buried source material; his interests are wide; he writes with feel and fluency; and above all he knows the place. His grandfather lived in the shire for 68 of his 94 years and reported for the local **Argus**; and "I presume", Bill Gammage writes, "that his reputation led the Shire Council to ask me to write this book". On religion, sport, politics, race, pubs, farming and families he is observant and alive. What pleasure—and no doubt indignation too—his book must be stirring around Grong Grong (it was a "boree fire on a cold night at McKeone's farm near Grong Grong" that prompted Father Hartigan to write "Around the Boree Log") and the edges of the Five Bough Swamp.

It is sad to see the once-busy towns in the shire steadily decaying, and since 1930 Barellan has lost two bakers, two butchers, two banks, two solicitors, two fruiterers, two cafes, two general stores and one each of a host of shops ranging from saddler and blacksmith to barber and fortune teller. In recent years, however, Barellan's population has crawled back to 400, something even the fortune teller could not have foreseen. This fine book ends with a plea for the countryside and its way of life. Somehow the country has to "persuade urban Australians to see that country people should not be left to battle alone."

The two other books reviewed here are on old mining towns in north-eastern Victoria. The name of Bethanga is almost unknown today, except around Wodonga, but in 1875 the discovery of gold nearby gave rise to two villages and a flurry of activity which eventually made Bethanga the main copper producer in Victoria, the scene of a bitter lockout in 1885, and an early example of air pollution by heavy industry. Much of June Philipp's book centres on disputes—the differences between the miners and the big mine-owner, the coatless J. A. Wallace, the quarrel with the Wesleyans over the site of a school, the lockout in which David Syme of the **Age** sided with the men, and above all the long warfare between the metallurgists and the complex orebody with its over-plentiful arsenic and sulphur and its inadequate copper and gold.

Mrs Philipp had been a weekly boarder with her old grandparents in the ghost town of Bethanga in the early 1930s when attending primary school, and she recalls how grandfather on warmer evenings would put on his tussore coat, take his walking stick and go to the public seat outside the deserted saddler's shop to meet his cronies, thus keeping alive an informal version of the incessant public meetings which in the 1880s "dominated the annual calendar during the wet, cold months."

It is something of a feat to produce an illuminating book on disputes and feuds in such a small settlement, especially when the records are pretty humdrum and meagre. I must add that in this guilt-laden year I warm to a book recognising the virtues of simple hill towns which were "humane, tolerant of human frailty, and remarkably careful of human dignity". By the way, "Diggings" should not have been the keyword in the book's title, for hard-rock Bethanga involved relatively less digging than almost any other Victorian mining field.

Tom Griffiths' paperback is a short history of a rich gold field and its magic, including its rise and fall and its heroes, not least of whom are the Kelly Gang and the M.P. of 1855 who reputedly rode a horse shod with gold. *Beechworth* is also a clever commentary on how local people, new residents and the tourist hordes see the golden era in their different ways. Whereas the National Trust and its followers prize the buildings, many of the locals are not sure if their old town should be repainted and preserved as a living fossil. If plate glass and the latest tiles are smart enough for Swanston Street, why not for Beechworth? Even the language of the new restorers is strange:

> Cupolas and tuck-point, filigree and hip-roofs, these were the symbols of the invaders. It was undoubtedly a foreign voice.

The locals often see 'restoration' as the violating of their familiar past. "They are being dispossessed of the past they know", writes Griffiths, not only in the restored buildings but by the new outsiders' way of interpreting Beechworth's history.

I found the book's concepts a little abstract in several places, but the prose is skilled and the author's talent is unmistakeable. I hope it is not infringing some new Equal Opportunity Law to say that he could well go a long way.

*Geoffrey Blainey's next book, on optimism and pessimism in the Western world since 1750, will be published later this year.*

## Walking down the Literary Aisle

John Hanrahan

Garry Disher: *Steal Away* (Angus and Robertson, $12.95).
Jack Beasley: *Widdershins* (Wedgetail Press, $19.95).
Nicholas Jose: *Paper Nautilus* (Penguin, $8.95).
David Parker: *Building on Sand* (Angus and Robertson, $24.95).
Nancy Phelan: *Home is the Sailor* and *The Best of Intentions* (Hyland House, $24.95).
Marion Halligan: *Self Possession* (University of Queensland Press, $19.95).
Margaret McClusky: *Wedlock* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin, $9.95).
Ross Fitzgerald: *All About Anthrax* (Hale and Iremonger, $12.95).
John Macgregor: *Propinquity* (Wakefield Press, $12.95).

Apart from writing, my other job is performing civil marriages. I am often struck by the comparisons between getting married and getting published, and by the important part luck plays in both processes. Most writers are willing to say "I will" to any publisher who shows interest and looks like an even moderately good prospect. Once the marriage contract is signed, the writer then finds out the realities of his or her marriage. The prospects are then tested by the routines of the marriage—editing, design, proof-reading, publicity, distribution. Social success in the literary world also depends on the status of the publisher, on his connections—given the realities of publishing, the stereotype here demands that the publisher is the bridegroom, and the writer the bride, dependent on her husband's prospects.

Small weddings, backyard weddings, sneakers and jeans and cask wine, may be more fun, but they get noticed less and never make it into the Women's Weekly, unless there is an eccentric friend in high places. Backyard books may be more fun, but they don't get noticed much either, unless they get adopted and loved by a magazine like Scripsi. Powerful publishers can control talk-back radio slots, can control festival committees and have been known to work behind the scenes to organise reviews. On a number of occasions publishers have asked me in flattering terms to review a particular author. I'm sure this practice is rare, but it is true that publishers with pull and friendly reviewers do work to create hierarchy and status for authors.

Part of this simply means that some publishers are better than others. It also means that some authors are luckier than others—in their publisher, but also in the time they were born, in the sex they were born, in the way they get adopted by certain groups. An established literary reputation is no more a guarantee of worth than a marriage with an 'ensuite' is a proof of virtue. Much reviewing is a toast to the bride and groom, given with expectation and selective truth. Beautiful brides with rich and prominent husbands get more notice and better champagne. And those who think they are beautiful or know that they are rich are generally better at promoting themselves.

Getting noticed at all is an achievement. The Age reviews about fifty Australian novels a year, which probably accounts for half the novels published in a year. The editor of Overland has sent me ten novels to review. One I have declined to review for personal reasons. Another example of chance at work or, the author may well think, good luck.

The first five novels are, in various ways stories of domestic life. Garry Disher's *Steal Away* I have reviewed elsewhere and it is a rare challenge for a reviewer to re-consider a review already forgotten by everyone except the novelist and the reviewer. *Steal Away* is the first novel of a writer who has already established a considerable reputation as a short-story writer. The novel is an account of the life of Robert Saxby, who grows up to be a moderately successful academic. On the way he marries Georgina, who bears two children but thirsts for the higher things represented by Vogue.

Reviewing is an ephemeral art and the best time to write a review is just after the review has been published. Too late, of course. Many authors decry the rush to judgement with claims of unfairness, incompetence, arrogance. But every book is a demand for judgement and response. The reader is not the writer and the best reviewing acknowledges that unfashionable fact. So I now make a second comment on *Steal Away*. On a second reading I find that it is a better novel than I had thought. The portrait of the mildly sensitive boy who grows into an incompetently sensitive man has more ironies, more comedy and more subtlety than I had noticed.

Disher has a real gift for understatement. Close observation is one of his skills and he is marvellous at such family rituals as Sunday lunches. "The adults were lifted by the speech but slowed by the lunch." "It was said of Mr Saxby that he was not much use but he livened things up." Disher deftly wheels in a world on traymobiles: "Georgina's father took four spoonsful of sugar in his pale red tea. He was full of the news. He stirred his tea forty times . . ." In presenting Robert Saxby, his parents and his children, Disher also conveys three generations of that embarrassment that family members feel for each other.

But the novel does not finally rise above the drabness of its characters. Robert's life is dull, his soul is dull, his dog is dull. The characters of the novel fart,

but not with an energy of social solecism. The agonies are close to genteel. The monotony of their lives becomes the monotony of the prose, which is elegant, but of one tone, one pace. The narrative voice for the ninety-three scenes, the shortest of which is six lines and one word, becomes like the voice-over for advertising slides. Each sketch makes a fine short story, but undifferentiated enthusiasm soon begins to sound like lack of real interest. The vignettes never grow into a commanding vine. The studied offhandedness about time and place have the strength of fable, but also the drone of a computer. Another publisher, Collins Australia, is about to publish Garry Disher's second novel, *The Stencil Man*. Another collection of short stories is about to appear from Angus and Robertson. I have no doubt that Disher's already proven skills as a short-story writer will find fuller development in his new novel.

*Widdershins* is another first novel, by an author already well known for his book on Katharine Susannah Prichard, *The Rage for Life*, and for his *Red Letter Days: Notes from Inside an Era*. The publisher, Wedgetail Press, is left to soar, or at least fly high, generally unnoticed by those of us literary tourists who keep our eyes and cameras on the latest Penguin, angry or more often placid and well pleased, that comes strutting from the water. Like Garry Disher, Jack Beasley presents three generations of a family, with the focus on the middle generation. Beasley's novel is firmly and angrily rooted in time and place. The place is Newcastle and its steelworks, the time is the forties, fifties and sixties.

Like the work of the often invoked master, Dickens, this novel teems with characters, many of them idiosyncratic. *Widdershins* is also that rare phenomenon in Australian writing, an overtly political novel. Because it is unlikely to have a law suit to make it famous, it will not receive the notice or the sales of *Power Without Glory*, but it is a better novel, partly because it is more passionate, partly because its characters are more lived-in.

Beasley tells the story of Jeff Conway, who is born in the glebeland, "quite literally across the tracks, more correctly the track, by which coal from the old pit made its way down to the Newcastle wharves". The narrative moves from a steam of consciousness of Conway and his father to a conventional narrative and a fairly unconvincing letter from Conway to his son. But Beasley is convincing in his portrait of the Communist Party activist with a passion for justice. It sounds like apple pie and Marxist motherhood, but Beasley presents charisma as incompetent in human relations and often shining on the wrong places in the factory. Jeff Conway is "an enigma, an intellectual working man who continually reined back his political insights to the gait of trade unionism".

On one level this is a very simple novel. The good guys and the bad guys are painted in terms that even Ronald Reagan would recognise, with Nancy's help. But Beasley creates a dimension of pain and bewilderment by his insistent sense of what it is like to exist in the work place. The steelworks, the Sleeping Lizard, become a character in the novel. "The summer months were a torture time for those inside this giant hot box, a monstrosity of design crouching below the headland right down at sea level to use the cooling waters to recycle its steam, making its machinery more efficient by making its human machines less efficient." This is the world in which the Panicky Pannikin, Mister Dickens, and Doctor Dust breathe asbestos so that they may laugh a little in their long time dying. In the background, lives a wife, "the unknown domestic warrior".

Wedgetail's Beasley often makes inefficient landings in his narrative, while Penguin's Jose always takes off and lands with a seemingly easy sureness. A Penguin always come to me with its pleasant orange memories of picking up a Lawrence, a Hemingway, a Faulkner. For me, lately, it has been too often like being promised John Curtin and getting Bob Hawke. In Nicholas Jose's *Paper Nautilus* you get at least Ben Chifley, and a restored faith in the real thing. This is a quietly passionate novel of superb narrative skills.

In another novel of three generations, Jose starts in 1965 and ends with 1941. Jose tells the story of Jack Tregenza and his relationship with his niece Penny, his brother Peter, his mother Irene. As I began each chapter, I thought this has to be an anti-climax, he can't sustain the interest. But he does.

Jack Tregenza is that frightening human being, an ordinary decent man. Jose describes him and the woman that he did not marry in these terms: "They had known each other all their lives. In the same class at school neither was flashy or unusually talented, both being the middling sort who were expected to triumph only in decency, reliability, kindness and the carrying-on of things while other people tried to change the world. Dull they were not, but friendly and endearing." It sounds like the next episode of "Neighbours". It sounds like *The Tree of Man* without God nesting in the branches. It sounds like a recipe for boredom. It is much better than it sounds.

Bachelor Jack Tregenza is left after the war to bring up his brother's daughter. This is after her blowsy mother Vera has abandoned her and after the child has had to cope with finding her grandmother Irene dead. Little girls and dead grandmothers are the stuff of tears, of fast-buck sentimentality. Yet Jose goes beyond this in writing that moves with a serene compassion. As the novel progresses, this compassionate understanding extends to Penny's mother, Vera, who becomes real beyond the local fictions that are handed round as the truth about her.

For me, the novel faltered a little when the brothers

are re-united in war. I felt that here the novel nudges cliché. Yet the writing remains both powerful and subdued. There are moments when the emotions seem too cleverly contrived. But generally this is a novel that dares to be emotional with a rare sureness of touch, with a sympathetic wryness that presents various forms of love that are just beyond a joke.

David Parker's *Building on Sand* is another first novel from Angus and Robertson by a writer who has previously published a number of short stories. This is the first-person narrative of Jude Watson, an illegitimate son brought up by his grandparents. The place is the South Australian coast not far from Adelaide. The landscape becomes central to the boy's consciousness and the novel is rich in description. "The spade cut straight in like an axe into wood and the soil was wet and heavy on the blade and smelt of decaying organic life, mushroom spores, juicy bulbs, seeds sweet as nuts." Parker is prepared to take this earthiness a long way. "Finally we brought up the cow-dung. Edward loved this too, running his spade carefully under the flat, hardcrusted wholemeal turds, like a baker taking his bread out of an oven, and shifting them solicitously into the sack."

This novel is an affectionate portrait of a period when Australians celebrated the coronation of a British queen, cheerfully sang "I am a Happy Wanderer" and were puzzled by migrants wandering in their midst wearing funny clothes and funny names. Parker also writes warmly of the boy's grandparents, grandfather Edward, who mysteriously supplements his income by selling condoms, grandmother Omma, who fights to make her feckless son respectable and bring up her grandson a Catholic. Another novel of Catholic boyhood might seem the final self-indulgence that will send us all blind, but Parker handles his material with deft irony. The altar wine of Jude Watson's angst is a Clayton's drink, and goes down easily.

Parker writes more exuberantly than the laconic yet lyrical Jose. He too cannot resist a cliché at the end of the novel, as the son searches for his lost father. To say that this is a green and pleasant novel is not to patronise *Building on Sand* but recognise its merits. It is an enjoyable read, that gives the sense of a writer gradually finding his voice.

In *Home is the Sailor and The Best of Intentions* Nancy Phelan has certainly found her voice. She writes as though she were Patrick White in his Second Coming, in which he has learnt to smile rather than growl. Both works are set in the village of Hazel Falls in the Blue Mountains. Such is Phelan's invocation of people and place that I fully expected Dylan Thomas to roll off the last train from Sydney and wander the main road of Hazel Falls spouting snatches of "Under Milk Wood". Phelan's pensioners, shopkeepers and cleaning ladies are used to coping with eccentrics.

The Commander in *Home is the Sailor* struggles to fight off the efforts of his daughters to restrict an idiosyncratic way of life devoted to inventions that would be the envy of Inspector Gadget. What the Commander can't escape is Old Age, which is partly an invention of others. "Old age is conferred by others." While the Commander is a little too much Do-it-yourself-Dickens in his idiosyncracies, his plight is presented with both humor and pathos. Phelan creates a wonderful group of characters around him: his sister-in-law Charlotte, and her cousin Phoebe who collects Eastern gurus; his cleaning lady, Mrs Gumley, who collects bric-a-brac from her employers and sells them to Genevieve Grote. Mrs Gumley needs to do this and to defraud Social Security and insurance companies to finance the shaky social life of her daughter, Raelene. The comedy is gentle and sustained, supported by a genial wisdom.

Mrs Gumley makes her re-appearance in *The Best of Intentions* where she 'does' for Miss Crow, who has retired to Hazel Falls to enjoy growing old. But the pleasures of ageing escape her, as they do many of Phelan's characters. In both stories, the writing lives richly. "Quiet and smooth as a coffin at the crematorium the train slid out of the station." "No one enjoyed a good bereavement more and many cosy seminars had been held across her counter . . ." " 'Yair, well we all gotta go some time,' said Mrs Gumley in the complacent tone used for such untruths." Occasionally the prose sweats adjectives, but generally Phelan writes memorable comedy with a mixture of gentleness and acerbity.

*Self Possession* (yes, another first novel by a short-story writer) is comedy of quite a different sort. "Marion Halligan pokes wicked fun at contemporary mores", says the blurb in the complacent tone reserved for such half-truths. As so often, wickedness is more as aspiration than an achievement. No doubt this book is required reading for Canberra academics and their students, for it is the story of Angela Mayhew, who comes to Canberra to study classics, is taken over by some academics with Pygmalion fantasies and has an affair with a totally unconvincing local genius.

I enjoyed this novel, partly because I studied in the classics department of the ANU in the sixties and I kept wondering if I would run into anyone I knew. But it is a book that keeps promising to bite by barking a lot, and then giving a few gentle nips. Helen and Zachary are artists who live on a property called Murumbeldo outside Canberra. They talk bravely and often about fucking and 'adopt' students in order to give them the freedom of being clones of themselves. Somehow, it promises to be funnier, angrier, more 'wicked' than it is. One student suicides and her 'friends' grieve for themselves and their not noticing. The writing lacks both the toughness and the passion

to make us care much about either the living or the dead. Wickedness is a much more difficult achievement than we like to think.

The prose often left me wondering and I leave you some samples for your own wondering. "All her flesh was tight, compact, not opulent or fluid; her breasts were small and neat. She recalled a woman of stone, slightly yellowish marble perhaps, by Henry Moore in a strictly representational period, and not at all the odalisque her behaviour suggested." "The landscape was full of blues, brilliant like the sky, chill like the frost on the grass in the grey mornings, misty and mauve like the slow curves of the Brindabellas in the distance, worn soft and smooth and past all hope of passionate action by the tired hand of milleniums."

With *Wedlock* the satire moves to Sydney and proves yet again that almost self-evident truth that Sydney is more fun than Canberra. This book surprised me. I had heard of the storm in the Royal Doulton teacup caused by the original title of the book, which mentioned a Sydney social identity. My surprise was because all this trouble with the alliterative wives of a misunderstood millionaire had led me to expect a novel for trendy tots, a tract for the Sunday Times. There is a touch of this, but *Wedlock* is a genuinely funny, quite passionate and occasionally erotic novel. Sometimes it reads like two novels in one book, the jokey, knowing and rather 'in' satire smiling a little surprised and uncertainly at the social concern and human interest.

Marchesa Marcella Pavan collects husbands with the enthusiasm of a Robert Sangster collecting racehorses. Her social aspirations are partly governed by a hope that no-one will dig deep enough to find her roots in a greengrocer's shop in Echuca. Husbands are easy to find. What Marcella craves is an "original charity" that she can give her name to. She launches the Australian Film Disaster Fund. "Then the MC announced the inaugural award, donated by the Marchesa Pavan herself: a scholarship to the junior school at Cranbrook, a year's subscription to Grief, and a business class airfare for two to Lourdes on Air France or Jasna Gora on Lot."

McClusky leaves no stone unturned, no stone unthrown. Her writing is funny and sharp. But she does not know when to stop. "The *Wakame* soup was scrumptious. The mousse of palm hearts with a caper *roulade* and stir-fried *julienne* of carrot and pimento, sake and hazelnut oil glazed were divine." When you've eaten one vegetarian, you've eaten them all. However, there is a rare zest and inventiveness to the satire.

There is also another dimension, represented by Dimsy Death (rhymes with teeth), who is a social worker and the lover of Marcella's son Paul. Dimsy works at the Collective as a counsellor, and in trying to help Janelle Clutterbuck, who keeps getting surprised into pregnancy, attempts to carry out some of the ideals of her working-class mother. The relationship between Dimsy and her mother is presented with great emotional force.

*Wedlock* works well on many levels. The ironies are often forceful and sharply expressed. Paul reflects on his mother. "She's been brought up to be decorative, not socially useful. She'd been denied the incredible advantages of easy access to feminism and socialism. Dimsy had grown up tremendously privileged by comparison." *Wedlock* is a very Sydney novel that manages to rise above its origins. I leave you with Dimsy's thoughts on her life in Sydney—the poor girl is a Victorian. "She wasn't even good at food. She'd failed Doyles, the acid test. Allergic to all fish and seafood when they were the only sacred cows in Sydney. If you couldn't guzzle prawns and suck rock oysters by the cubic league what was there left to do at weekends? Guru fancying, that was what."

I expected to laugh at Margaret McClusky's novel and I did. I was also moved. I expected to laugh at least occasionally at Ross Fitzgerald's *All About Anthrax*. I laughed very little. Influential people apparently like his work. "Brilliantly revolting" (Tom Shapcott). "A delightful black uproar" (Max Harris). "Grafton Everest is triumphantly repugnant" (Steve J. Spears). "Grafton Everest is a wonderful creation" (Barry Humphries). I would love to think that these comments on Fitzgerald's first novel *Pushed From the Wings* embarrass these reviewers. Their aggressive ambiguity is revealing.

*All About Anthrax* offers twelve stories about Grafton Everest, whom the blurb calls an "extraordinarily comic character". He isn't. Everest is an extraordinarily dull little molehill pretending loudly to be a mountain. I resist the temptation to explain why this character is dull. It might encourage the author to think he is worth talking about. Generally he isn't, though in the last story, "Another's Trouble", there are glimpses of that humanity and intelligence that characterise Ross Fitzgerald in other spheres.

I turn with pleasure to another novel that also might be loosely called 'comic'. This book's publishing history has not been the story of a successful marriage. Wakefield Press published *Propinquity* but lost government funding and were not able to distribute it. The author bought back the book and is now attempting to distribute it through the novel through the Bookchain group. If all else fails, enquiries can be made from the author, GPO Box 35, Adelaide, 5001.

Enquiries should be made. I have also reviewed this book before. A second reading confirms my belief that it is one of the most imaginative novels to appear for some years. I just hope that the author has more luck than he has had so far. The book was shortlisted for the Age Book of the Year, but then strangely never

mentioned in the judges' report.

The narrator of *Propinquity* is Clive Lean, a pleasant young man, heir to his father's Plas-E-Quip garden equipment company. The novel begins with his last year at Geelong Grammar, the prep school for Melbourne University and Running the Country. "Confusion over life's meaning was nothing to the numbing possibility of failing Matriculation." Lake and his three friends pass their examinations in a gentlemanly, unspectacular way and move on to their next home-away-from-home. "Melbourne University was a kind of heaven into which particularly virtuous Geelong Grammarians had managed to ascend."

So far, it is pleasantly gentlemanly satire. Macgregor transports Clive to England, after he has interrupted his medical studies to run Plas-E-Quip. The rains come, the hose business dries up, and Plas-E-Quip goes broke. In a nice piece of satire on business take-overs, Clive sells his business to a derelict he meets in the Botanical Gardens, who is not Robert Holmes a Court. With Clive in England, the book takes on another dimension and becomes daringly imaginative. Clive has an affair with Sam (as in Samantha) Goode, who is the daughter of the Dean of Westminster Abbey. Sam has a secret. Deep in the Abbey she has discovered the perfectly preserved body of Berengaria, the wife of Richard the Lionheart. While Richard was lionising round the Middle East trying to regain Jerusalem, Berengaria was wandering round discovering gnosticism. Church authorities embrace women gnostics with as much fervor as they embrace women priests. So Berengaria was murdered. Or was she merely put to sleep? Maybe one of Clive's friends who has gone off to Haiti to fight Baby Doc can discover something about voodoo and help with the Royal Sleeping Beauty.

For three quarters of the novel you have to be energetic in suspending your disbelief. Macgregor's writing cheerfully assists in this. It is a bit of a mixture of P. G. Wodehouse and Patrick White. You have to be prepared for Wodehouse mysticism and White farce, and that makes this a very individual novel indeed.

So I have looked at nine out of ten marriages. Luck has led them to the gossip column of my reviewing, to my toasts to the brides and grooms that have striven for some sort of honesty. I would gladly come back to any anniversary celebrations held by Margaret McClusky, Nancy Phelan, Nicholas Jose, John Macgregor. The others might think that the lucky one is the tenth who got away. That is the trouble with these public marriages. Perfect strangers like me keep coming up and insisting on saying a few words about the bride and groom.

For some sociological researcher who wants to turn a hand to something useful, there is room for research into the divorce rate between writers and publishers, and into the success of second marriages. There is at least a conference paper in a study of which marriages are noticed in the literary society pages of reviewing, and by whom. There are even reviewers, and magazines, that build up a dinner party circuit of books—and publishers—that they review. Getting an invitation, being reviewed, depends on a jumble of breeding, form, connections and good luck. It is all a bit of a gamble.

*John Hanrahan was formerly associate editor of* Australian Book Review. *He has published a number of short stories and now works as a freelance writer and reviewer. He lives in Melbourne and is not the Sydney film reviewer of the same name.*

## A Celebration of Oz

Russel Ward

Nancy Keesing: *Riding the Elephant* (Allen & Unwin, $24.95).

Thirty years ago a visiting Englishman, J. D. Pringle, argued that the arts were weak in Australia because there was no such thing as an educated *class* to set standards and "no Bloomsbury or Left Bank; no life of the cafe or the salon". Partly because of the sundering distance between our capital cities, he thought, poets and novelists led lonely lives.

It was not true then and it is grotesquely false now. Precisely because of the 'tyranny of distance', Australian writers more than most have developed highly effective lines of communication with each other. They have, in Nancy Keesing's image, learnt how to ride the continental elephant that sustains them. Her index lists well over two hundred writers, poets, painters, critics and others, all of whom knew her and each other if only, in rare cases, through their works.

The author describes her book as "a kind of memoir" or "the kind of autobiography I write when I'm not writing an autobiography". Fair enough, because she has written much more about literary and other friends than about herself. But *Riding the Elephant* is a great deal more than any kind of biography. It is a celebration of what some surviving Anglophiles maintain does not exist—a distinctively Australian culture. At the age of five Nancy Keesing writes, "I had absorbed through the pores of my skin the Australian eleventh commandment which ordains: 'Thou shalt not dob anyone in'."

More immediately, perhaps, the book celebrates the author's love for her native city, Sydney, so often damned by others as the world capital of vulgar philistinism. So T. S. Eliot perpetuated in *The Waste Land* this snatch of a ballad reported to him "from Sydney, Australia":

O the moon shines bright on Mrs Porter
And on her daughter:
They wash their feet in soda water.

But why *Riding the Elephant*? The title derives from Nancy Keesing's most vivid memory of early childhood. At the age of four, returning with her parents from a New Zealand holiday, she was taken down into the hold of the old *Wanganui* to see the Wirth's Circus elephants. Without warning the hugest beast encircled with its trunk the tiny child's waist and swung her up onto its back, where she was held firmly by the trainer. Initial terror and shock gave way to exhilaration and triumph, quickly replaced by dejection when the elephant deposited her on the floor again.

But it was the triumph that remained in her psyche. For the rest of her life, when beset by failures or disappointments, she remembered that primal feeling of being in control of her own destiny. Now, with twenty-five books behind her, grown-up children and legions of literary and other friends, she writes that she is "still riding the elephant".

Readers may enjoy the book at several levels: most obviously as the life story of one of the very best human beings I've ever known.

Second and incidentally, for some, it is a good social history, casting a lively light on some of the immense changes that have taken place in the last century. She reminds us, for instance, that the very idea of young people, whether married or not, living together in a rented 'communal' house or flat, was unthinkable till the 1960s; and of the splendid, grimy old Victorian building which in her youth still housed the **Bulletin**, the ghosts of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson and the corporeal presence of great living writers like Douglas Stewart and Malcolm Ellis.

Third, like some red wine the book may be quaffed with gusto now or savoured with greater enjoyment in the future. It is not a history of Australian literature, but a rich lode of information about Australian writing and writers since the first world war, a lode which will be diligently quarried by future historians.

*Russel Ward is author of* The Australian Legend *(1958) and many other books on Australian literature, society and history.*

## Pages of the Months

Graham Rowlands

Susan Afterman: *Rain* (University of Queensland Press, $7.95).
Thomas Shapcott: *Shabbytown Calendar* (University of Queensland Press, $7.95).

To be or not to be—fair? The first section of Susan Afterman's *Rain* is basically about pregnancy. Not only am I not opposed to motherhood; I'm deeply interested in the poetry of pregnancy and childbirth. After all, it hasn't featured much in Western literature until quite recently. Despite my sympathy, I don't think this section contains the poet's best work.

The third section covers her move to Israel with her husband and children. They live and work on a farm in western Galilee. As an agnostic and Palestinian Arab sympathizer, it's impossible for me to empathize with her spiritual and political identity. Despite my lack of sympathy, I'm sure the Israeli section contains her best work. Her aesthetic control improves throughout the book. Moreover, it seems probable that the Israeli experience is responsible for this improvement.

Certainly the centrally-placed long prose poem couldn't have been written without her move to Israel. It merges farm experiences there with previous New South Wales farm experiences. It's less vulnerable than the pregnancy section because she makes no attempt to impose whole poems on her material. An advantage. But there's also a disadvantage. While the dominant pregnancy of the first section poses no thematic problem, more than one reader will find something unbalanced about pregnancy that *subsumes* even the most controversial Middle Eastern history and geography. Fortunately, the imbalance is overcome in the Israeli section.

The pregnancy section contains some fine poetry on the fears, delights and plain memories of pregnancy in evocative imagery. The bodies (woman, man and foetus) are frequently portrayed as land- water- and "sky"-scapes. Despite some over-writing, the view of pregnancy, childbirth and survival is decidedly unsentimental. It even includes black humor. However, the poetry isn't published as poetry. There are twenty-four discrete *poems* and some don't work alone. Their imagery either clashes or becomes repetitive and gratuitous. It lacks unity. Occasionally a poem is just slight. However, these poems might work as *poetry* in the modulations and tensions of a sequence. They suffer by comparison with the prose-poem form.

The Israeli section introduces rhetoric from the prose poem into the poetry. Except for a few over-generalizations, it works well. The rhetorical and lyrical usually co-exist in the one poem, removing the imagery problems of the pregnancy section. Rhetorical repetition works brilliantly with identity-in-landscape visual imagery in "The Wheat Mirror". A very strong Judaic poem. After learning how to use rhetoric, the poet has also learned how to remove it entirely, as in "Purim" and "Untouchable". Very attractive lyrics. The Israeli section contains *whole poems*. Finally, it's difficult to imagine a more accomplished expression of Susan Afterman's identity, family, politics and spirituality than "Wings":

I am grateful for being given life this way
given everything like a child
who doesn't carry heavy things

a rose garden
a walled cedar garden
rosehips and cedar fruits
round things

your voice
and your nose and your laugh
and the clouds are round
space surrounds us like a curved mirror

at the centre of the curving
isn't anything

our wing shoulders
do not carry

Thomas Shapcott's *Shabbytown Calendar* has been reprinted in what the publisher describes as a new edition. Twelve years ago I thought it was one of the most thematically unified *and* stylistically varied collections of post-World War II Australian poetry. That's what the poems remain today—the elegies, town portraits, social criticism, careful observation and the desire for history all combined with a pessimism about separateness, environmental inertia and death. It's a personal and spiritual pessimism that nevertheless can't help bursting and bristling with sensory optimism. It smells of mortality—and mangoes. My new response isn't *exactly* the same as my old response. However, it's not so different that I could be persuaded by some literary theorist that I'm turning pages of the months of a different calendar.

*Graham Rowlands works as a TAFE editor in Adelaide. His most recent poetry collection is* On the Menu.

## Comet to Comet

Chris Puplick

Gavin Souter: Acts of Parliament (Melbourne University Press, $29.95).

"Another damned, thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Mr Gibbon?"

Boswell, in his *Life of Johnson*, quotes William Henry, Duke of Gloucester's, response to Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. Gibbon's work is of course one of the great classics—a standard historical text and an exemplar of both the simplicity and beauty of the English language.

Gavin Souter's book *Acts of Parliament* is also thick and square. I have no hesitation in pronouncing it a classic. This book will endure as probably the standard text on the history of our Federal Parliament from 1901 to 1986. It is written with style and elegance and throughout its 600-odd pages never flags in pace or interest.

In some respects this book could be entitled "From Comet to Comet", opening as it does with the Great Southern Comet of 1901 and concluding in 1986 with Halley's. Comets would have been a good *leitmotiv* for the spectacular rise and fall of our political princes—the tragic decline of Deakin; the overthrow of the imperious Menzies; the sudden death of Curtin and the hubris-laden fall of Whitlam all echo the Shakespearian assertion: "when beggars die, there are no comets seen, The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."

The most surprising feature of this book is the way in which it reveals the exceptional continuity of the Australian political debate. As I write, I have on my desk the 14 March 1988 edition of Time Australia, carrying as its cover story "Immigration Special Issue: The New Australia". Souter describes the debate over the very first piece of legislation put before the new Federal Parliament—the Immigration Restriction Bill. Reading the debate one sees just how much the wheel has come full circle.

Move on just a few pages in Souter's text and you will find one of the book's fine David Low illustrations of the first Bench of the High Court. A quote from the Bulletin of October 1903 describes the new court as inclined to an expansive view of the Constitution in relation to external affairs—one wonders how the founding fathers or the first justices (some of whom were both) would have reacted to the current court's reading of the external affairs power in relation to the Australian environment and its control.

Nevertheless this is not primarily a book about politics or even about political institutions, crucial as they are; it is primarily a book about politicians. Moreover it is a book about politicians as both party men (all too few women) and parliamentarians. The separate character of political leadership in relation to these too often competing demands has been rarely if ever explored in Australian political writing, and in this respect Souter's work is most significant.

The point however leads me to the one and only serious criticism of the work, its failure to draw out the essential differences in the way in which the Labor and non-Labor parties operate internally. While the Labor caucus is often mentioned, a reader not knowing how the caucus system of discipline works, or the effect of the operation of the Labor 'pledge' which prevents members voting against their party on pain of expulsion, would fail to understand the constraints which such a system places on parliamentarians, and in particular on Labor leaders. Similarly, the extent to which the regular crossing of the floor by some Liberal 'rebels' in the Menzies era

failed to in any way diminish Menzies as a party leader, or indeed cause the automatic end of the rebels' career, is left rather too quietly unexplained.

Mungo MacCallum in his recent departure from the press gallery lamented the passing of Parliamentary 'characters' and indeed, alongside the bold spirits of Souter's book, I concede we do look a rather pale lot. At least while there may no longer be "American bounders" like King O'Malley, or "Little Diggers" like Billy Hughes, we can also say with relief that there are no "Lemonade Leys"—Thomas Ley, the member for Barton, a temperance proponent who probably murdered one of his political foes and ended his days in a British insane asylum following another murder.

Not only have the characters gone, but there has also been a decline in both parliamentary oratory and in parliamentary invective. Souter quotes the nonpareil master of invective (Hughes) as saying of Australia's most interesting Prime Minister (Deakin) that he "could sell a hotel to a prohibitionist, or persuade a timid old maid to purchase an insane dromedary as a house pet". Oh for such persuasive (or believable) leaders today!

To the extent that parliament is a forum in which the qualities of leadership must be constantly displayed it is hardly surprising that much of Souter's book focuses upon party leaders and prime ministers. One of its great virtues is that it does bring some new dimension to these already familiar figures.

Some have skeletons in their historical closets—it appears that the first Labor Prime Minister, Chris Watson, was really named J. C. Tanek and was never technically eligible to have been elected to Parliament, on much the same grounds as those that led to the recent unseating of N.D.P. Senator Robert Wood.

I found the most significant revisions of accepted dogma to arise in Souter's discussions of Menzies and Curtin in their relationships with the great powers during World War II. Menzies emerges as a strong 'independent Australian Briton' who was prepared to take on Churchill and the British War Cabinet in defence of Australia's interests whenever necessary; while Curtin emerges as a virtual doormat for General MacArthur (who himself thought of the Australian prime minister in precisely those terms). One sees Menzies waving the flag of Australian nationalism while Curtain complains about being unable to find a suitable Australian as Governor General, and so imports a member of the Royal Family! Some of the Labor myth-makers and hagiographers would do well to take note.

But parliament of course is primarily a collection of very disparate individuals and great numbers of them are given their Warhol-like few minutes of glory in Souter's pages. It is through them that one sees most clearly the genius of the parliamentary system of government and the unique features of its practice in Australia. The complete openness of our system, without the British barriers of class or the American constraints of money, is clearly exposed and rightly praised. The ability of a few individuals to force governments to act or not to act is equally featured. The great debates (Calwell on conscription for Vietnam) and the moments of high drama (11 November 1975) are well presented, and are set within the proper context without which they cannot be truly understood.

This book has both the time and scope to go beyond the mere recitation of the facts. It deals more than adequately with such matters as the relationship between the executive and the legislature; the impact in both directions of the tensions between parliament and the judiciary; the role of the party room in the processes of government, and the unique and ever-changing role played by the parliamentary press gallery, those current manifestations of Burke's "fourth estate".

Even from outside the Parliament, the impact of the Murdochs (over more than one generation) and the Morosis, the Khemlanis and the Kerrs are clearly illustrated. *Acts of Parliament* reaches much further than the limited walls of its various historic homes, past, present and about to be.

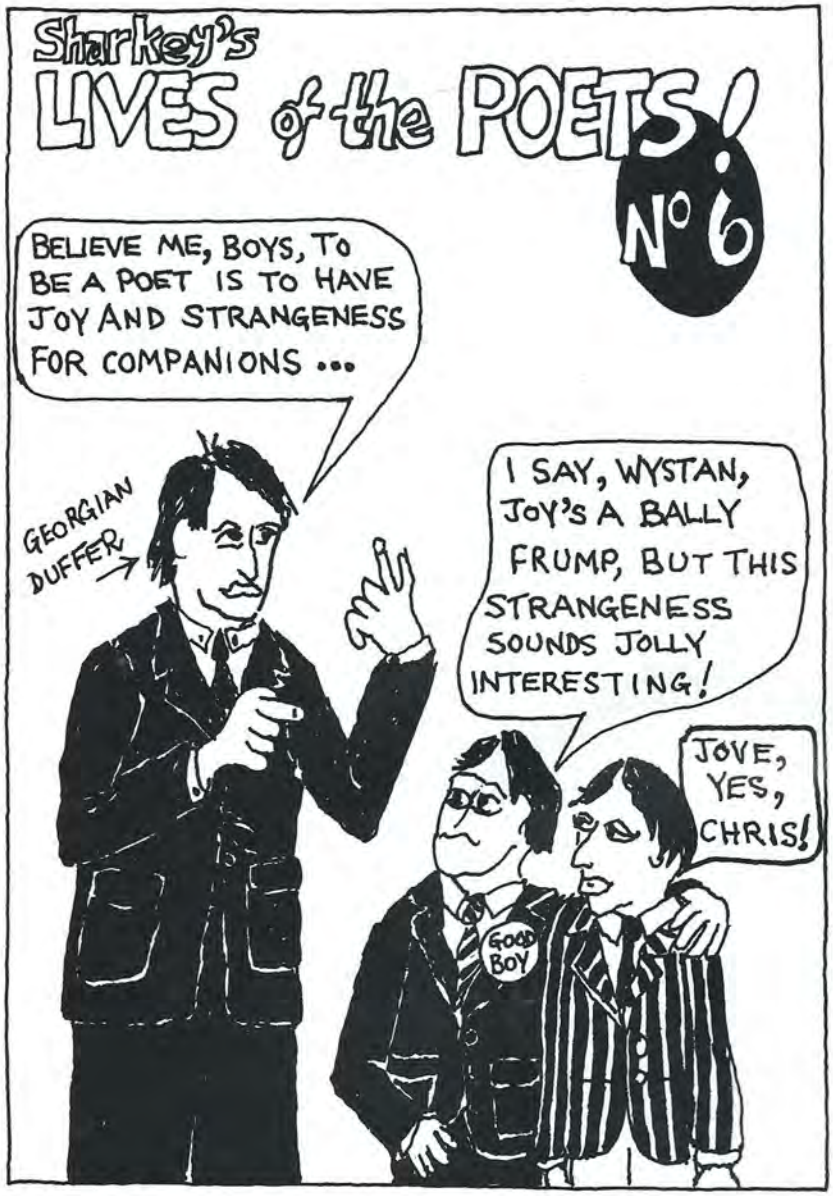
This book is the first of several volumes due to be published this year under the aegis of the Commonwealth Parliament Bicentenary Publications program, supervised by the Joint Library Committee. Other volumes are to touch on the general history of the institution of Parliament and on the role of the press gallery. Souter has set a remarkably high standard for others to follow.

I have always been of the opinion that the best political histories are written by people who are neither professional politicians nor historians but are either great storytellers and observers (like Thucydides) or great journalists (like Shirer). Souter writes in this tradition and although his book is described as a "narrative history of the Senate and the House of Representatives" of the Commonwealth Parliament, it is in fact a good deal more.

Lavishly illustrated and handsomely presented, this book now becomes an instant standard reference both of people and of events in our national parliament.

Souter ends this book on a very positive note—he reaffirms the ability of the political and constitutional system to be improved, given the political will to do so. Change and improvement is necessary. Santyana bids us learn from history in order to avoid repeating its mistakes. Those who would make that change and improvement would be well advised to start on their awesome task by first reading *Acts of Parliament.*

*Chris Puplick is a Liberal Senator for New South Wales. He has served in the Senate from 1978 to 1981 and from 1984 to date. He is currently Shadow Minister for the Environment, Arts and the Bicentenary and the co-author of* Liberal Thinking (Macmillan, 1981).


Sharkey's
LIVES of the POETS!
Nº 6
BELIEVE ME, BOYS, TO BE A POET IS TO HAVE JOY AND STRANGENESS FOR COMPANIONS ...
GEORGIAN DUFFER
I SAY, WYSTAN, JOY'S A BALLY FRUMP, BUT THIS STRANGENESS SOUNDS JOLLY INTERESTING!
JOVE, YES, CHRIS!
GOOD BOY