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122



## POEMS OF THE GULF WAR POLISH WRITING NOW

Bruce Dawe

Janine Burke

Alister Kershaw

Glen Tomasetti

Chester Eagle

Nancy Phelan

Colin Symes

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# 1991

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He came again last night. This time he wore only a pair of boxing shorts. He looked pale around the face and pigeon-chested. He said it was his final visit.

He woke me from sleep. I dreamt about the sky. I dreamt the sky was yellow. A bright-edged canary yellow like the yellow room. The yellow room is bright and hurts the eyes. I think this is a good color for sky.

The yellow room is the downstairs one with the sofa and the television set. In the yellow room sit a couple. Dolls. They sit and stare at the television set. I think they must be bored but they smile a lot. That is why I decide in my dream that the sky is yellow. It must be a happy color.

The yellow room is the lounge room.  
The green room is the kitchen.  
The red room is the bedroom.  
My room is the blue room.

The first time he beckoned me I was surprised.

"Me?" I said safe in my blue room on the second floor. "Me?" I raised one eyebrow, "Are you sure?"

"Does anyone else live in that room with you?" he asked. I shook my head. "No, of course not." He must have known the answer already because he was the one who put me in that room.

"Then it is you I want."

I saw that he wore his full ministerial garb. He was the country preacher in all his glory. Ceremonial, splendid and almost unrecognisable.

I was fascinated by his hands. He had long thin hands covered with fine dark hairs. When he took me from my box into the room at Christmas time there had been faint specks of blue paint underneath the nails. I was nothing to him then - he would never speak, nor beckon to, a mere doll. But things change. He reached into the room where I was sitting and made me take hold of them.

"There are things I'd like to show you," he said,

"just outside this room. Just outside for a moment. I won't take you far."

He had removed the front wall of the house.

"Come to the edge," he said. I was afraid to leave the room. "Come to the edge," he repeated. This was the voice of authority, so I obeyed. I held his hands, closed my eyes and jumped.

We landed. We were in another room. The room was shadowy with wardrobes and sleeping children. There were piles of toys on the floor.

"Each of the rooms in this house has a story," he said. "I want to show them to you and tell the stories. You are the only one who can listen. We will begin with the bedrooms." There were tears in his eyes that I could not understand.

"It's not blue at all," I said looking around the room.

"This is the room where my children sleep," he said. He let go of my hands and walked over to the beds. Quietly, like breath, he touched the top of their heads. It made me sad because I knew he was not a demonstrative man.

"If I'd known the dolls' house was my final gift to my children I would never have finished it," he said. "Maybe that's why they never play with it."

He paused and I puzzled over the words. I often longed for the children to reach in and lift me out, and play with me. I wished there was some way I could help him, and them, become happy again.

"One night the children were playing in this room while I tried to work in my study," he said. "They were very loud and I became very angry. I came into the room and told them they must be quiet while I wrote my sermon. I made them sit in silence until I'd finished."

The lino on the floor was lemon-colored. When I stood it was cold against my feet. I tried to keep them on the mats.

Then he was gone and I was back in my room. There is too much blue here, I thought, it is overwhelming.



The second time he came without the ceremonial garb. He stood before me in a simple, solemn, black suit. His shoes were polished immaculately back and front, enough to see your face in, if the light were better.

"I can't leave yet," he said to me, in that solemn sad voice of his, "may I show you another place?"

When I jumped from the second floor of my house into the children's room I felt only a small fear. He held my hand and led me through the doorway and out into another room. It was a bedroom.

The occupant was awake and crying softly in the dark. She didn't notice our intrusion. The crying seemed to disturb the man and he began to talk quickly as if to distract himself from her tears.

"One morning the children came into this room and asked why I slept with no clothes on. It was winter and I laughed."

While he spoke, I noticed a dresser like mine in the corner of the room. I wanted to touch the things on the dresser, the lilac of a hair brush, the pinks and greens of scent bottles, the prisms of color hidden in a crystal vase. He leant against me wearily and I knew it was time to leave.

The following night when he arrived he was casually attired in his shirt sleeves with only a gold cross pinned to his collar to maintain his ecclesiastical image.

"We will go to the bathroom," he said as he led me, once more, through doors and into rooms.

"The bathroom was where the frog lived," he said. "When we first moved into the house there were no windows in the bathroom to let in the light."

"My wife refused to live in such a house unless they put in a window. I remember that the parishioners thought her request extravagant but she stood firm and finally some of them arrived and knocked a hole in the wall. During the day she had to hang thick hessian over the hole to protect our privacy. That was where the frog came from. The children made it a pet."

I went across and tried to look out of the window. But it was dark outside and I could see nothing.

"It took them months to provide any glass for the window. My wife even threatened to leave. But that's the way of things for a preacher in a small country town. I had to tread the fine line between the salvation of my parishioners and my own."

With each of his visits I became more curious and less frightened, and I tried to make sense of what he told me. The night we went into the lounge-room I was so full of questions that I became impatient with his storytelling.

"I remember the night our cat jumped through

the window and landed on the head of a visitor," he said.

A long white ornament attracted my attention.

"What is that?" I interrupted.

"A swan."

"Does it fly?" I asked.

He went back to his story.

"Where does that lead?" I interrupted again. I pointed to one of the doors in the room.

"That is the front door," he said.

"What color is through there?"

He had to stop and think.

"Predominantly green," he said at last.

There was a picture on the wall and when I peered at it closely I noticed that it too was predominantly green.

"What is in this picture?" I asked.

"Mountains and trees." He sounded impatient.

In my room the green room is the kitchen. I tried to imagine a green place beyond the front door but it was hard to equate mountains with kitchen things. I thought mountains would be hot and square like a stove.

The next time he came he wore only a singlet and his trousers. There were no shoes on his feet.

We continued our journey and found ourselves in the kitchen. There was a table in the corner covered with dirty plates and cups. In an old icecream bucket on the cupboard was some milk with cream floating on top. We looked at it.

"The milk comes fresh from the cow," he told me and began to laugh. I wondered why this was a funny thing.

"This is the room where the cow came in," he explained still laughing. "The back door was open and it came up the steps, perhaps it was hungry, it came into the room and couldn't get out again. You should have seen the looks on my family's faces!"

He was still laughing as he took me back to my room.

"What color was the cow?" I asked politely.

"Tomorrow I will take you to the last room," he said, "thank you for taking this journey with me."

All day I sat on my stool, near my dresser and waited for him.

When he came he wore only a pair of boxing shorts. We went through the lounge room and into his study. We had to walk past the front door and, as we did, he averted his eyes.

In the study sat a desk dusty with old scraps of paper. The bookcase was almost empty and boxes of packed books were on the floor.

"They are making them move on," he said and



his sorrow filled the room.

"This is the room where I thought I was happiest," he mused, "I wonder if my family knew that?"

I sat on his knee and we surveyed the desk and the bookcase. We sat for a long time in silence and after a while I leant forward to try and read a few of the titles. They were mostly biblical.

"Tomorrow I will open the front door and fly out," he said at last. "Would you join me. I am afraid of going alone."

I was undecided and he tried to prompt me.

"We will head for the hills," he said.

"I want you to come and see me again," I said.

He shook his head.

"In my father's house are many rooms," he said. Then he sighed. "Too many things happen in rooms."

I knew his comment was for my benefit and I struggled to understand. Then I remembered . . . in a corner of my room, the blue room, was a dolls' house, the same as mine but smaller. No doubt if I opened it up I would find someone else just like me, waiting inside.

"No," I said, "I cannot come with you."

I held my head high and looked him straight in the eyes. For I knew what he would find when he opened the front door.

Another room.

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ALISTER KERSHAW

## Adrian Lawlor

*This account of the painter and writer (1889-1969) is from Chapter Five of Heydays (Angus & Robertson, \$12.95) to be published in April.*

He was, as Albert Tucker says, an extraordinary looking man, with his cavernous cheeks, his improbably high forehead, his (because no other word will serve) mesmeric eyes, and an expression which changed as constantly, as rapidly, as iridescently as the sheen on a patch of oil, moving unpredictably from an immense melancholy to a bewildering gaiety. George Bell painted a portrait of him, so did Lina Bryans and William Frater and so, most successfully of all, did Bert himself. But nobody, in whatever medium, had a hope of snaffling or lassoing so intransigent a creature.

His 'Collected Letters' - but collected, tumbled together, without regard to chronological or any other order and left unblotched with explanatory footnotes - would provide the only portrait worth having, a living self-portrait. I must have had hundreds of letters from him in the course of our long friendship, every one of them what Shapiro would have called a shot in the arm, read and re-read and read again. If the whole collection hadn't been pinched long since, I could have saved myself a lot of work and given the reader the impression that he was really getting something for his money simply by filling the rest of this book with them.

It would have been still better if I could have recorded all of those flying-trapeze discourses which swung him and his listeners in wild eccentric parabolas. He was, in his talk, funambulist, acrobat and juggler at one and the same time. A record, a single record, did once exist, replete with the gags, puns, allusions and euphuisms, the leaps and bounds which made up his every utterance. I had just finished making a recording for the A.B.C. on one of the friable 'acetate' discs which were used before tape-recorders hit the market when Adrian unexpectedly walked into the studio.

"Gahd! The *gadgets* here! What do you do with them? Or, which is more likely (life being what it is and none of us secured from external disaster) what do *they* do with *you*? Is the very chair on

which you sit an *electric chair*? Those switches, those buttons! There used to be a children's ditty, a catch, a round - American, would it have been? - the querulous burden of which was 'Button, button, who's got the button?' And now we know. You have."

"Not my buttons, Adrian. They're the sole responsibility of the engineer."

"The engineer hoist with his own button, I conjecture."

"He's a sound engineer."

"And why, will you tell me, should he not be sound, sound to the core? Are engineers to be dismissed, on account of their profession merely, as *unsound*, flawed, faulty in their principles and lax in their morals? What aberration is this?"

"Adrian, while you're here - what about *you* making a record?"

"I? I'll have no part of any such lackwit scheme. Nay, from the tables of my memory I'll wipe away all trivial fond records. Well, perhaps, not all. I'd miss the Last Quartets - nothing trivial about them."

"Come on. I'll bear you company. We'll do a cross-talk act."

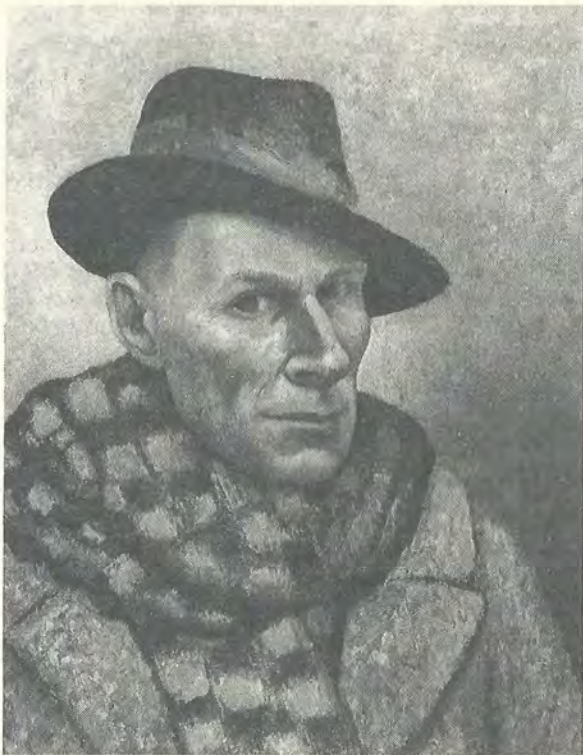
"Not for Cadwallader and all his goats. I'd rather discuss, unrecorded, these buttons of yours. *Revenons à nos boutons.*"

A protracted wrangle followed. Finally, I managed to persuade him. There was uproarious stuff on that record, interspersed with protracted spasms of laughter from Adrian, overcome with the preposterous, the totally impossible, notion that every word he said was actually being recorded and could be heard again by himself whenever the whim took him. It was his first and last incursion into a world where such things happened.

I interrupted one of his paroxysms.

"Go on talking, Adrian, blast you. We're wasting time. That damned disc is spinning round at a rate of 78 revolutions per minute."





Adrian Lawlor: Self Portrait c. 1937. Oil on cardboard  
61.5 cm x 48 cm. Heide Park and Art Gallery

And from Adrian, writhing in an attempt to repress his incredulous merriment, “Is it? Is it, by God? I wondered why I felt so giddy!”

The record, the unique record, was purloined along with the letters so that nobody, except for a handful of privileged dotards like myself, will ever know what it was to be hurtled around – at incalculably more than 78 revolutions per minute – by Adrian’s headlong talk. It was bewitching – literally so because it exercised, and on the most unlikely people, an irresistible spell. How many times in how many pubs have I watched, in nail-biting apprehension, as Adrian, against all the odds, wove his magic around a group of stevedores, wharfies and truck-drivers. He would be telling the rest of us about, let’s say, Proust. The adjacent drinkers would be listening without enthusiasm. Why the hell should they have to put up with this bullshit? Finally, their exasperation would overcome them. From one of them would come a threatening comment, as it might be “Cop the bloody pansy!” and Adrian would turn unhesitatingly towards him. “A Proustian, are you, my dear fellow? But on what do you base this assertion of yours? That Marcel might be described as a shrinking violet, I grant

you, albeit he was never known to shrink from a coronet; but a pansy? Something of a less blatant colouring wouldn’t you say?”

We’d watch the performance unbelievably, however often we’d already seen it enacted in different forms. Within minutes, Adrian would have his audience meekly soliciting further information about Proust.

“Well, you in particular, Len, will appreciate the primacy of the question that arises. It’s evident that you are familiar with time, may, for all I could assert to the contrary, have *done* time. You have a supplementary qualification, however. Truck-driver that you are, you are acquainted with *overtime*. And here we must confront the dilemma. That Proust should write about mere time is well enough; that he should, as he did, overwrite about overtime is, you’ll concur, a vastly different dish of tea or plate of madeleines.” Thereafter, one heard nothing from the truck-drivers and stevedores but a recurring and deferential “Have another beer, Adrian.”

Well, the talk is gone for ever. What remains, apart from the paintings, are his two books. No-one who’s read this far is going to be in any doubt as to what I think of *Arquebus*: a magnificent rollicking satire which, if things were as they ought to be, would have been put back in print ages ago. What about

Adrian Lawlor: Portrait of John Reed c. 1938. Oil on canvas  
64.5 cm x 63 cm. Gift of Barrett Reid. Heide Park and Art Gallery





his novel, *Horned Capon*? That would never have got into print at all if it hadn't been for Adrian's friend and mine, Denison Deasey. Deasey had money – a circumstance which endlessly fascinated Adrian for whom there was no significant difference between fifty cents and a million dollars. "Tell us, Dease, how much *have* you got? A cool thou? A pony?" Whatever it may have been, Deasey admired *Horned Capon* sufficiently to subsidize its publication.

That wasn't so easy. The war was over but the bloody-minded functionaries who'd had such enjoyment from imposing their rationing on a submissive public weren't going to relax their grip until they had to. Poor old Deasey tottered closer and closer to lunacy (and he was fairly lunatic to begin with) as he scrounged paper (and vile paper it was) from the ill-disposed "authorities" and strove to convince his printer that the whole purpose of printers was to *print*. He and Adrian were unaffectedly astounded when the printer, much older and much richer by this time – and Deasey, of course, much older and much poorer – actually delivered the goods. From France I wrote to tell Adrian of my delight. He was pleased by what I had to say:

For this letter of yours contains, really you know, your first overt committal of opinion – of critical approbation – of a book (a BOOK, as you magnanimously cipher it!) which is now at last given flattering and multiplied appearance as a stack of volumes, whose too too solid weight I found myself agonisingly wishing, yesterday, as I staggered 15 several times up the six flights to my attic (myself my own self-begotten sorcerer's apprentice, as it were) would thaw and resolve itself into a bucket of hops. *That* I would gladly have undertaken to carry without spilling a drop – this side of the upstairs lavatory at any rate . . .

*Horned Capon* (there was nothing of the capon about it) was, as everyone except Adrian knew in advance it would be, given a thorough going-over by the rare reviewers who took any notice of it. A. D. Hope, in particular, berated it with hand-rubbing enjoyment. If he hadn't decided ever since his gunning down of Max Harris that it was his life's mission to put writers in their place, he might have been able to see the book's merits. It has plenty. It's not as totally successful as *Arquebus*, I suppose, because Adrian's was essentially a comic genius, and comedy occurs only spasmodically in *Horned Capon*; and let's make Mr Hope happy by conceding that there are passages of bathos here and there. Nevertheless . . .

There's a paragraph in a review of Corvo's *Hadrian the Seventh* by D. H. Lawrence which strikes me as peculiarly applicable to Adrian's equally erratic work:

A man must keep his earnestness nimble, to escape ridicule. The so-called Baron Corvo by no means escapes. He reaches heights, or depths, of sublime ridiculousness. It doesn't kill the book, however. Neither ridicule nor dead earnest kills it. It is extraordinarily alive, even though it has been buried for twenty years. Up it rises to confront us. And, great test, it does not "date" as do Huysman's books, or Wilde's or the rest of them. Only a first-rate book escapes its date.

Sooner or later (later, presumably) some percipient publisher, I'm ready to bet, will bring out a new edition of *Horned Capon*. And why not, while he's at it, a new edition of *Arquebus*? Perhaps, in an ultimate spasm of acumen, he'll bring together the gyrating bits and pieces which are scattered through different reviews or which exist only in manuscript. I included one of the latter in a memoir of Adrian which the American printer R. T. Risk produced at his Typographeum Press. That an American should have been willing to publish a memoir of one unconsidered Australian writer by another rates, I'd say, a grateful tugging of forelocks and dipping of lids. But it's a pity that nobody in Australia gave any indication of wanting to take it on.

Adrian's appearance was, to repeat Bert's adjective once again, extraordinary; his disappearances were twice as extraordinary and infinitely more disconcerting. Nobody could have been more blazingly *present* than Adrian when the atmosphere was sympathetic. He was always the star turn wherever he happened to be. His abhorrence of 'parties' – we were great throwers of parties then – was unbounded, but every so often he could be wheedled into turning up at some do or other. It would be all wrong to say that he took the floor. He didn't have to take it. It was enough for him to start talking and within minutes the entire company would be grouped in an awe-struck circle around him. "How Adrian's enjoying himself!", we'd tell each other. Was he? No.

Sometimes we'd be given warning that he was about to dematerialize by a barely audible mutter of "What am I *doing* here?" More often, no warning whatsoever was given. Either way, abruptly there'd be no more Adrian, not a sign of him. He wasn't seen to detach himself from his admirers, to cross the floor, to go through the door. He simply wasn't



there any more. Without any Wellsian mumbo-jumbo he possessed the art of making himself invisible.

In that memoir of mine I recalled one such spooky occasion. It can illustrate the scores of others I saw – or, if you prefer, didn't see. We were on a bus going to Adrian's house in Warrandyte. The passengers were mostly businessmen commuting homewards at the end of a day's stockbroking or whatever their occupation may have been. Adrian gave his opinion of them. It was unfavorable. He stared around with a mixture of resentment and misgiving. I recognised the symptoms. My diagnosis was right. The conductor was making a tour of the bus collecting fares. He collected from the man next to me, he collected mine, he walked straight past Adrian. All he'd seen was an empty seat. Adrian had vanished.

Eva, Adrian's gentle and adoring wife, died. A second marriage ended catastrophically. When Deasey went to see him at Warrandyte, he was greeted, so he told me, with the words, "Why have

you come here? I'm dead." This became, I also heard, his unvarying reply to anyone who, on his rare visits to Melbourne, tried to speak to him: "Don't talk to me. I'm dead."

Then, in order to give some financial help to his sister, he sold the house at Warrandyte and shifted to a small flat in the suburbs, seeing nobody, no longer painting, no longer writing.\* And then he disappeared for the last time.

*\* He did, in fact, see people and wrote one more novel. Adrian gave this manuscript to me and it is now held in the LaTrobe Library, State Library of Victoria. A retrospective exhibition of his paintings, which Adrian asked John Reed to open, was held in 1966 and was successful. The Lawlor-John Reed relationship as described by Alistair Kershaw in *Heydays sits uneasily with the documentary facts of their letters and the early collection of Lawlor's paintings by Reed. Still, never one to spoil a good story . . .*  
– Ed.*

*Alistair Kershaw was born in 1921 in Melbourne. In the 1940s his poems appeared in *Angry Penguins*, *Comment and Art* in Australia and in three books *The Lonely Verge* (1943), *Excellent Stranger* (1944) and *Defeat by Time Past* (1947). He left Australia in 1947 for France where he broadcasts for the BBC and ABC. He now lives in the Sancerre region of the Loire Valley.*

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JAN WALC

## The Muses are Silent

Translated from the Polish by Janet Phillips

In Poland, as in the Soviet Union, literary circles have constituted a social base for dissident movements, and writers have been broadly represented in opposition groups from the outset. This was true of KOR\* circles in the mid-Seventies, during the rise of Solidarity and in the following period of martial law.

There were many reasons for this. The communist system had prevented the formation of normal oppositional political élites, and when such élites became socially indispensable in the deepening political crisis, they had to be drawn from artistic-intellectual circles.

Also, the collapsing system, finding itself increasingly frustrated and fearful of its imminent demise, reacted by enforcing more drastic censorship, thus compelling many writers – including those who had not previously done so – to adopt an oppositional stance.

There were more practical reasons, too, for the emergence of a literary counter-culture. For example, the literary quarterly *Zapis* (the Record), the first journal published illegally in Poland, had at its disposal a ready supply of material censored from approved publications. So it was much easier to publish a literary journal than to establish a newspaper or political journal of which the contents would need to have been commissioned.

*Zapis* was a true literary magazine, but also the first regularly published, uncensored journal between the River Elbe and Vladivostok. This was an important political fact, of which its authors and editors were fully aware, and which eventually became understood by all. It contained not only literature read for its own sake, but was also a vehicle for political expression.

After decades of struggle for creative freedom – a struggle in which writers played such a key role – there emerged opportunities to publish beyond the censor's reach. Paradoxically, this did not result in any rich 'literary' activity.

The independent publishing organizations that appeared in the Seventies – publishing several thousand titles in the space of a few years – were primarily concerned with filling in the gaps from, and redressing the neglect of, the preceding years and decades. That meant printing in Poland hundreds of unobtainable Polish books published outside the country, as well as translations of a great many foreign books unavailable in Polish.

Not all books banned by the censor were of a political character: for example, the works of Czeslaw Milosz were published exclusively in Poland by the underground publication *NOWA* before the poet received the Nobel prize. Nevertheless, political issues were to the fore, attracting an increasingly broad readership to the underground press.

This audience began to re-examine Poland's history, which had been distorted and lied about for decades, and it suddenly became possible in the underground press to uncover and analyse a succession of "blank spaces".\*\*

Years before Gorbachev began speaking about filling in "blank spaces", and as early as the Brezhnev years, Polish underground publishers were specialising in this task. After years of boredom – characteristic of cultural life in totalitarian states – books became essential nourishment for thousands of Poles of different backgrounds.

But it was not a period productive of *les belles lettres*. The maxim "life in truth", formulated by Vaclav Havel, a member of the editing team of the Polish political quarterly *Krytyka* (Criticism), was accepted earlier in Poland than in Czechoslovakia, and its author was more esteemed on the Vistula than on the Vltava.

All this led to an enormous increase in the public demand for non-fiction books, particularly histories of the past few decades. It became imperative to record and interpret recent history. The question of Stalinism was especially important and



interesting as covered in these Polish publications. For the greater part of Polish society, born after Stalin's death, the participation of millions of Poles in the establishment of 'the evil empire' was completely beyond comprehension and called for detailed explanation.

This demand created a situation in which the best-sellers in Polish literature of the past twenty years were the non-fiction books *Oni* (They) by Teresa Torańska and *Hańba domowa* (A Family Disgrace) by Jacek Trznadel. Both books were composed of a series of conversations conducted by their authors; Torańska interviewed members of the Party-state leadership of the 1950s, while Trznadel spoke with well-known Polish writers. Both works were conceived at the same time, immediately after the emergence of Solidarity in August, 1980, the same period in which their authors began interviewing. Martial law, imposed by General Jaruzelski before the works' completion, forced both books to be published underground and with some delay.

Torańska's book was assured of great success, if only by the fact of its subject; as it went against the unwritten, but unconditionally honored, law of communism that successive leaders of the Party should be consigned to historical oblivion.

Admittedly, since Kruschev, they had not been 'liquidated'. But it was unthinkable that they would be permitted to speak out publicly and comment on actions taken and decisions made when they were at the top. It was remarkable that the author had succeeded in getting past the front door to interview these former big-wigs. That coup alone guaranteed the book's success.

Significantly, Torańska's conversations introduced a discourse between two completely different generations. Torańska was born after World War II, whereas all her interviewees were born before World War I. These conversations may have been necessary, but it was obvious there was no hope of reaching a mutual understanding. The old Party doctrinaires were not capable of accepting even the existence of the real world and barricaded themselves with Marxist rhetoric. Their interviewer, eager to describe and analyse that world and the consequences of past events, showed little patience with propaganda.

Torańska's book is a record of conflict – the fundamental disagreement among contemporary Poles over communist doctrine. And we are now witnessing the type of compromise upon which her book is based – a compromise which had appeared an impossibility just a few years ago: of sitting down and talking with communists and behaving at the

table in such a manner as to prevent the dialogue breaking down. Although Torańska argues with her interlocutors, she knows she cannot cross certain boundaries.

The book's very title suggests the way in which contemporary Poles now understand the era of communism. 'They' were 'other', who did not understand, who inhabited a realm of abstraction best signified by this pronoun with its implication of distance.

Jacek Trznadel's bestseller, *Hańba domowa*, its title taken from a poem by the nineteenth century Polish poet, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, also tries to answer that insistent call for a way of understanding the era of Polish communism. Trznadel's book brings all the issues home. Torańska's heroes, through their connections with the international communist network and adherence to communist doctrine, were more 'internationalist' than Polish. Many of Trznadel's interlocutors, however, joined in building the Stalinist order in Poland in the 1940s and 1950s. They present the matter from another point of view, not that of those who enforced the new order, but of those who allowed it to be imposed upon them.

The recent collapse of communism in most countries in central and eastern Europe makes the Polish experience doubly relevant: how should one think about 'them'? how should one converse and behave with 'them'?

In countries where communism began to fall apart later than it did in Poland, the former leaders have mostly been arrested. This sets up a very different situation of dialogue from that described by Torańska. (An extreme example was the trial of Ceausescu seen on television worldwide.)

Polish intellectual and artistic life has come to be dominated by politics and a coming to terms with recent, fast-changing events.

When martial law was imposed, one very significant response was the sudden blossoming of poetry; scores of small volumes and various anthologies appeared, and poems written on typewriters were published by the underground press. The independent, uncensored literary journals were also full of these poems. Harking back to the Polish martyrological-messianic poetic tradition proved the only satisfactory way of explaining the predicament of that period. But when the terror had passed, the fit of poetry writing which had struck the nation suddenly ceased, leaving behind few poems which would transcend their historical circumstances to become 'literature'.

Rather, it is the books of a documentary or polemic nature which will survive, for example,



*Kadencja* (Term of Office), by Jan Józef Szczepański. Its author, a well-known novelist, was elected in December, 1980, as chairman of the Union of Polish Writers, an organization which refused to bend before the political demands of the authorities and which, in the year following the imposition of martial law, was outlawed by the communists and forced underground. Szczepański devoted his hefty *Kadencja* to these events, and it achieved greater success than any of his excellent novels.

The essays of Adam Michnik, written in various prison cells and smuggled out in a way known only to the author, have also enjoyed enormous popularity in recent years. Successive volumes of them, published by Poland's underground press and abroad, have been translated into many languages.

In the revival of democracy in Poland, and Solidarity's victory in parliamentary elections and subsequent formation of a government, writers played an enormous part, taking upon themselves a range of political roles. This may not be the best milieu for literature, but it could not have been any other way. Thousands of positions, occupied to this day by the communist nomenclature, cry

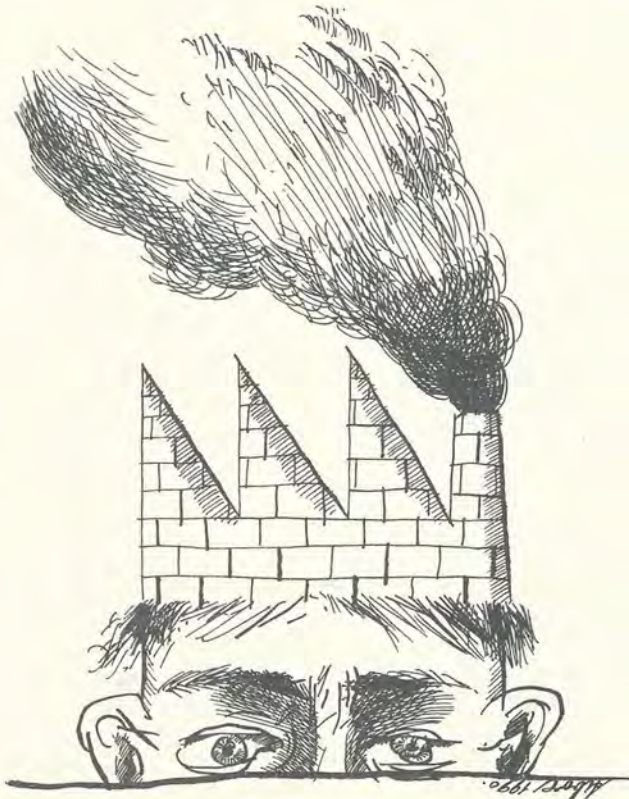
out for new occupants. Positions in all diplomatic missions stand empty, with no professionals to fill them. The only reserves on which the government can draw are the artistic and intellectual élites. Writers, therefore, are becoming managers, senators and ambassadors. They now have little time left for writing anything that does not answer an urgent political demand. Until they find that time, the muses must be silent.

*Jan Walc established the Polish underground journal Kultura Niezależna (Independent Culture) which is now published openly. He was active in the anti-regime movement for many years and was first arrested for dissident activities in 1968. His most recent book is Wybieramy (We Select), a collection of essays.*

*Janet Phillips, until recently, worked in the Human Rights Section, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.*

\* *KOR (Committee for the Defence of Workers) - a group of intellectuals who supported, in financial, legal and other ways, workers who were persecuted by the Polish authorities.*

\*\* *Białe plamy literally means 'white stains', but is more commonly referred to in the Western press as 'blank spaces', and denotes facts deliberately omitted from approved Polish histories and denied by the communist authorities.*



Jiri Tibor



# Seven Polish Poems

NEWLY TRANSLATED BY KEVIN WINDLE

## SECRET MEETING WITH MY SON

He tells me there'll be a cake  
with seven candles  
that he'll blow out  
puffing up those jolly cheeks  
to the limit  
And only as we part he asks  
- Don't come home that day will you  
after all they know  
what date I was born.

Later on I learned  
that they didn't come for me  
and the birthday party was a success  
The children all played  
"internment"  
took the youngest one  
and shot him.

1982

## DECAY

Somewhere  
On the fringes  
Of a crumbling empire  
On a shore pecked by voracious birds

What should we take with us,  
What for others,  
What should be salvaged  
What can be abandoned

Everything's lost weight -  
Verse and stone and days unborn  
Even truth that  
Seemed too heavy  
to be moved  
Now sheds its soundless tears

1987

TOMASZ JASTRUN

## N.N. TRIES TO REMEMBER THE WORDS OF A PRAYER

Our Father, who art speechless,  
who art deaf to every plea,  
and lets us know the world is still turning  
only by the daily braying of factory sirens,  
speak to us:  
that girl taking the tram to work,  
in the cheap raincoat, with three rings  
on her fingers, with sleep still tugging at her  
eyelids,  
must hear Your voice,  
must hear Your voice, if she's to wake  
for yet another day.

Our Father, who art unknowing,  
who dost not even look down at this earth,  
but merely announces in the daily papers that  
the world,  
our world,  
is still in order, look down:  
the man at that table, bent over his rissole, his  
glass of vodka,  
his evening paper thick with gravy and  
newsprint,  
must know that You also know,  
must know You know, if he's to live  
through yet another day.

Our Father, who art not,  
whose name is never even invoked  
except in didactic booklets that print it in lower  
case,  
because the world  
goes on without You,  
come into being:  
the man who goes to bed counting  
all his lies, fears, and treacheries of the day,  
all those inevitable and fully justifiable acts of  
shame,  
must believe You do exist,  
must believe You exist, if he's to sleep  
through yet another night.

STANISLAW BARANCZAK



## REPORT FROM A BESIEGED CITY

Being too old to bear arms alongside the others  
I am permitted only the lowly function of  
chronicler  
recording – who knows for whom – the history of  
the siege

I have to be precise without knowing when the  
assault started  
two hundred years ago in December September  
or yesterday at dawn\*  
all of us have lost all sense of time

all we have left is this place and a sense of  
belonging  
we still hold the ruins of the temples the ghosts  
of the gardens  
and buildings  
if we lose the ruins we'll have nothing left

I write as best I can in time with the endless  
weeks  
Monday: supplies all gone and only rats for  
currency  
Tuesday: mayor murdered killers unknown  
Wednesday: cease-fire talks in progress envoys  
interned by enemy  
present whereabouts i.e. place of execution  
unknown  
Thursday: unconditional surrender proposed by  
grocers  
proposal voted down at stormy meeting  
Friday: outbreak of plague Saturday: suicide of  
N.N.  
a stalwart fighter Sunday: water runs out  
attempt to storm the Eastern gate known as  
Covenant Gate  
repulsed by our forces

I know how dull it all sounds it won't move  
anyone  
I'm avoiding commentary keeping emotions in  
check setting down the facts  
it seems they're all that count on foreign markets  
but I take some pride in reporting to the world  
that thanks to this war we've raised a new  
generation of children  
our children don't care for fairy tales play at  
murder during the day  
and dream at night of soup, bread and bones  
just like cats and dogs

I enjoy an evening stroll along the boundaries of  
the City  
along the frontiers of our precarious freedom  
I look down and see their ant-like troops their  
lights  
I hear the beat of drums and their barbaric howls  
it's hard to believe the City has held out so long

the siege has gone on so long the enemies must  
be taking turns  
they share nothing beyond the wish to  
exterminate us  
Goths Tartars Swedes imperial hosts and those  
of the  
Transfiguration\*\*  
who can count them  
their colors aloft shading into one another like a  
forest on the horizon  
from a delicate canary yellow in spring to green  
and red to the  
blackness of winter

at evening freed from facts my mind can turn  
to times and deeds long past for instance our  
allies overseas I know they're genuinely  
sympathetic  
they send flour sacks of comfort lard and sound  
advice  
they don't even know how their fathers  
our former allies in the second Apocalypse  
betrayed us  
the sons bear no guilt they deserve our thanks  
so we are thankful  
they've never known a siege as long as eternity  
those touched by misfortune are always alone  
the Dalai Lama's followers the Afghans and the  
Kurds

now as I write these lines the proponents of  
conciliation  
have gained some ground over the diehards  
the usual ebb and flow of feeling the outcome is  
still in doubt

the cemeteries are spreading the defenders'  
ranks thinning  
but the defence goes on and will last to the end  
and if the City should fall and only one man  
survive  
he will carry the City within him on the roads of  
exile  
he will be the City



we stare into the face of hunger fire death  
and worst of all – the face of treachery

and only our dreams have not been dashed

(1983)

## ZBIGNIEW HERBERT

\* "two hundred years ago": a reference to the partition of Poland between Russia, Prussia, and Austria in the closing decades of the 18th century.

General Jaruzelski imposed martial law on 13th December, 1981.

September signifies the new partition of Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1939.

\*\* "the Transfiguration": apparently a reference to the Preobrazhensky Regiment, established by Peter the Great, and hence to the Russian armies of occupation in the 19th century.

## TIME OF YEAR

In the deep stillness of my favorite month,  
October (maples reddening, oaks in bronze,  
Here and there a pale yellow birch left)  
I celebrated a hiatus in time.

The borders of the realm of death lay all around  
me,  
Round a bend in the avenue, beyond the  
parkland lawns,  
But I did not have to enter, not having been  
called.

Motorboats pulled onto the bank, pine-needles  
on the paths,  
The river flowing in darkness, no lights on the far  
side.

I was going to a ball of spirits and sorcerers  
Where a delegation would appear bewigged and  
masked  
To dance unrecognized in the pageant of the  
living.

CZESLAW MILOSZ

## LIFE WHILE YOU WAIT

Life while you wait.  
An unrehearsed performance.  
A body unfitted.  
A mind unprepared.

I don't know the part I'm playing.  
I only know it's mine and can't be changed.

And what the play's about  
I have to guess on stage, on the night.

Hastily prepared for the privilege of life,  
I struggle to ensure the pace imposed,  
Ad-libbing, much as it disgusts me,  
Stumbling at every step on the unfamiliarity of  
things.

My way smacks of the deepest provinces.  
My instincts are an amateur's.  
Stage-fright as an excuse is all the more  
humiliating,  
And mitigating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and gestures that can't be called back,  
Uncounted stars,  
A character like a raincoat buttoned on the  
run –  
these the pitiful consequences of haste.

If only I could rehearse just one Wednesday in  
advance,  
or have another try at just one Thursday!  
Now Friday's coming up, another new script.  
Is it all right? I ask  
(hoarsely,  
because I can't even clear my throat in the  
wings).

It's a fallacy to think it's all a trial run  
being held in some temporary venue. No.  
As I stand on the set I can see how solid it is.

I am struck by the fine detail of the props.  
The revolving stage is already in motion.  
And even the furthest battens on.  
There's no doubt that this is the premiere.  
And whatever I do  
will turn forever into what I did.

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA



## TIME AND SPACE

inclined planes  
have a rhythm all their own no worse no less  
expressive  
than the rhythm of the revolving spheres  
or of sand whispering in an hour-glass  
a rhythm gently ruffled  
by the measured breath of time

Galileo sings  
as he studies the laws of motion down inclined  
planes

himself the hour-glass of events

without a voice and that tightening of the throat  
he could not measure the tiny intervals  
between one moment and another

he hears  
the hoofbeats of oxen ploughing  
and the ring of iron on anvil

the rhythm

the ceaseless process of things  
regenerating themselves from ashes

the sequence of moments  
slipping inaudibly  
off the limits of memory

just as hands sense the rhythm  
when they gently grasp  
a sphere a cone or a burning pyramid

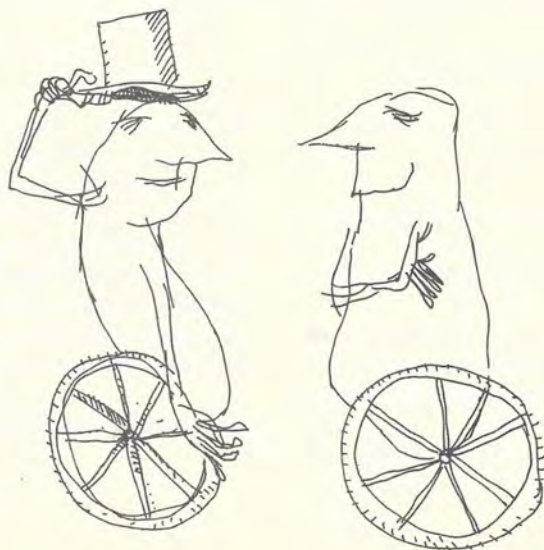
and you Galileo are  
a trail of rhythm  
now more than ever  
when you sing

measuring by the echo of your voice the  
compass of bodies  
sliding down inclined planes

and far outstripping the spherical Earth.

GRZEGORZ BIALKOWSKI

*Dr Kevin Windle teaches in the Russian section in the  
Department of Modern European Languages at the Australian  
National University.*



*Jiri Tibor*



JANINE BURKE

## The Moon The Sun

He usually took Bessie for a walk around four. It was the hour the muscles in his hand began to cramp and Bessie who divined such things, got restless just as the pain flared. "Okay, old girl," was all she needed to bound up the corridor. When he took her lead from the hat stand, where no hats hung, she'd be whimpering with joy.

"Yes, Bess. We're off."

It was the quiet time before traffic snarled the highway between his street and the beach, when the pier was practically deserted, apart from a fisherman or two.

Today, he'd started late. It was after five. He'd been writing a letter to Louise. In fact, he'd spent the afternoon on it, abandoning the novel whose deadline was, once and for all, upon him.

"Dearest Louise . . ." "Dear . . . 'Lou . . . Sounds like Tuscany's great. Wish I was there!!!"

Three exclamation marks? Adolescent. Exclamation marks indicate a lack of expressive ability.

"The landscape around Siena would be marvellous at this time of year. Have you hired a car to explore the countryside?"

Then he was going to warn her about the inspired madness of Italian drivers, the difficulty of remembering to stay on the left-hand side of the road and those great orange buses that winged the corners of Tuscan towns like hang-gliders.

"Be careful."

He crossed it out.

"Carissima Louisa."

Well, she'd said that's why she was going. To learn the language. Long-service leave. Three months in Tuscany. The spring. He remembered it well.

He'd been twenty-five during an unkind October when the winds had whipped around Florence, driving him at a cracking pace to the tourist haunts. He'd escaped to Siena and spent one calm day within its walls. He'd always vowed to go back.

In fact, he could partly blame himself for Louise's departure. Going on about travel as the ultimate form of education. Why hadn't he shut up?

"I imagine you sitting in a café on the grand piazza sipping a cappuccino."

With who? Some frisky Sienese? She'd team up with someone. Louise had that openness which was so attractive, so . . . Australian. Perhaps a girlfriend? Perhaps a nice, married couple. People took to Louise. They trusted her and she was so sharing. Bloody Italian men.

"Had your bottom pinched? (Ha ha.)"

God, he groaned. What a give-away. And that line went, too.

"It's hard work studying another language. Remember to treat it as a holiday. After all, it was meant to be a holiday. Just because you've signed up for a course doesn't mean you can't have fun. Take the weekend off. Don't stay stuck in a room with your notes. That's too much like Taylor High."

This effort towards generosity was costly and he was spent for the next few minutes.

"I'm nearly through the second draft. Perhaps I'll romp it in. Might even be able to fly over for the last few weeks and we could do Tuscany together."

With what? The advance was long gone and the job in the bookshop paid the rent. Just.

"You know I'm dedicating it to you. You're my best and fiercest critic. You keep the bastard honest".

He looked at his watch and then at Bessie who was sitting by the door. She'd pulled the lead down herself and it was between her teeth. She wagged her tail hopefully. "Last lines, Bess. Bear with me."

"It will change you. Going away changes people in subtle ways they can't foretell, can't know until they come home. Then you find you're not the same person you used to be, you don't quite fit. It happened to me when I came back from the States. I criticised the very things I used to love about





Rich Arndt



this country and it took me a while to love those things again. I'm writing to say . . . I understand."

Bessie was streaking towards the pier, scattering seagulls. They'd walked along the sand. Next came a run to the end of the pier; Bessie honored the chronology of their exercise exactly. He enjoyed gazing at the horizon after the hours at his desk. It was as though the tangle of words, their density and difficulty, beauty and chaos, spread out like long hair in water, drifting, weightless, shaped by currents, belonging to him without burden. He didn't come here looking for answers, for a gust of inspiration to pick him up and carry him away. It was the pleasure of that perfect illusion where the curve of the earth slips away from the eye and becomes the straightest line imaginable. The sea was green today. Sometimes the bay turned a muddy blue-brown when the tides were sluggish, but this afternoon the water was tropical in a sparkling willingness to show its depths. He glanced into the shallows to see a sting-ray, fins waving like dark capes, fly under the shadow of the pier. It was the kind of sight he would have shared with Louise, when she arrived with beer and the papers at six. They'd have a drink on the verandah; he'd go for the headlines and Louise for the horoscopes. Reading them made her feel "on side with the universe".

"No luck?" he asked the boy pulling in his line.

"Not for me." They both laughed, and the boy began packing up. He kept walking. He was half way out by the time he noticed her. She was standing on the side of the pier where there was no railing, where the fishing boats pulled in. Little. Old. Wearing a brown coat of some fuzzy fabric. Perhaps mohair. Anyway, too rugged up for such a mild day.

Bessie barked from the end of the pier, so he didn't meet her eyes as he passed, but whistled to Bessie who waited for him where the wooden planks met the stone breakwater.

A cormorant dived and he counted to sixteen before the bird came up for breath. "Pretty good, eh?" Bessie had had her run and was prepared to amble alongside him.

He attached the lead and they went out to where the boulders of the breakwater slipped like a broken trail into the sea. The sun was well above the horizon, its setting an hour off.

In the daily paper beneath Tides was a small section titled The Moon, The Sun. He liked to know what the planets were up to, not in Louise's way, but their rhythms, which were connected to his own. He stopped writing when it grew dark. It was time for another order of events. He associated moonrise

with food and music, with Louise singing as they prepared the evening meal and Bessie at rest in her basket near the door.

She looked up at him.

"Yes, Bess, I'm day-dreaming. You know what a hopeless character I am. What if you weren't around? I'd never go out for walks. I'd be crippled with arthritis. I'd be a hunchback. I'd be up a belltower gazing at damsels in distress and wondering how to save 'em." He cuffed her. "I know it's time for your dinner."

The old woman was still there. The wind was cooler now and they were the only two on the pier. She looked up as he approached. He had the impression she'd been waiting for him.

"Hello", he said.

She was wearing a wig that sat at an angle to her head and little gold earrings that glistened in the sun. "I came here to kill myself," she said, "but I haven't done it. Does that make me a coward?"

He stared at the water. It was barely deep enough to cover a man's head.

"They put me in a home. I can't stand another minute of it. I can't stand watching those television programmes. They turn them up so loud because half of the people are deaf but it's so loud you can't understand anything that's said. If you complain, they treat you like an idiot. They say, 'Go and sit down, dear. Off you go, go and sit down.' I'm not going back there. I came down here to die. But I haven't done it. I've been here for over an hour, but I haven't done it. Are you alone in the world?"

"No. I mean, not really. Well, yes, in a way. Where's your family?"

"They died. My son and my husband died. There's no-one left. Do you know what it's like to have no-one? To wake up every day and have no-one?"

The café would probably be closed by now. He had no money on him and it was a good twenty minutes back to his place.

"I'll take you somewhere. You can't stay here. What's your name?"

"Mrs Salvador, Mrs Ernesto Salvador, but it's no good calling me that because he's dead. I'm not missus anything. My name's Edith."

"Well, Edith, how about a cup of tea?"

"I brought a mandarin with me. Look," and she shuffled around in her bag and brought out a weathered piece of fruit. "I'm going to kill myself and I took something to eat. Funny, isn't it?"

"Edith, do you have any money on you? Because we could call a taxi - "

"Why would I have any money? I was supposed to be dead by now." They had left the pier and



were picking their way across the sand. "Where's your wife? Have you got one?"

"She's in Italy at the moment . . . and she's not my wife."

"That's a long way to go. Why did she go so far?"

"It was an idea she had - we both had. She wanted to learn Italian and she decided to travel around, you know. Have a holiday."

"My husband came from South America. We went there once, to Rio de Janeiro."

"That must have been nice."

"It was horrible. It smelt. There were open drains and beggars without arms. No wonder he came to Australia. Why would you want to live in a country like that?"

To his relief, he could see someone moving about inside the café. He went up to the window and waved. The cleaning woman mouthed, "We're closed," and returned to sweeping the floor. He banged on the window and, irritably, she opened up. "I said we're -"

"I need some help. Is there a phone here?" She took a look at him, and the old woman, and allowed them in. Who would he ring? Police? Ambulance?

Edith sat on a chair in the empty café, clutching her bag, and staring out to sea.

In an undertone, he told the cleaning lady the story. "She's come from the old people's home further up the highway. Poor dears, they do wander."

"Do you know the number?"

"The council might. Want a cup of tea, love?"

"No, thank you", said Edith.

The council offices were closed. He went and sat next to Edith. "Is there anyone you'd like me to ring? Anyone at all?"

"You wake up and you say, what's the use of it? What's the use of another day? Do you think there's any point in my staying alive?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, what is it?"

The sky was burning pink, orange and gold. The sun had set fire to the water. Its radiance was too bright to watch, and he lowered his eyes.

"I'd like to run a business, a little business like this. It'd give me something to do. There's nothing to do."

"Don't they give you . . . things to do?"

"Play cards, that's all they like. I hate cards. I'd rather cook but they won't let me cook. They give you terrible food to eat but they won't let you boil an egg."

"Do you read? Do you like to paint?"

"I've read enough books. I'm sick of books. I

came down here to die. What keeps *you* alive? Why do you go on with it?"

He thought of the answers he could give, about love and Louise and writing one great book. He said, "Each day I take my dog for a walk along the beach. We go around the same time. If we don't, she reminds me. We play catch with a bit of driftwood, then we walk along the pier. I see what birds are about: gulls, cormorants, sometimes a tern. She tends to chase them. There might be some people fishing. I'll ask what they've caught and they'll tell me what's biting. Then we reach the breakwater. We take it slowly. Sometimes we might even sit for a while and watch the sunset. Then we go home."

"My son likes fishing."

"I'm sorry about your son. When did he die?"

"Oh, not him. The other one. The one who lives in Frankston." For the first time, she smiled. "Won't be the first time he's had to come and pick me up."

Edith's son was a short, solid man in his forties who drove a yellow Kingswood. "Call me Nick," and there was a brief handshake, before Edith was packed in the front seat and strapped in.

"Your mother doesn't seem too happy with her living arrangements."

"She gets sick of people coming to visit her. We got all these cousins. They rattle her nerves. She sneaks off. I gotta come find her." He seemed to take his responsibility without a trace of humor or annoyance. "Nice spot. You live round here?"

"Perhaps I should go and see her. She said she was . . ."

"She won't remember you. She don't remember me from one time to the next." Nick got in the car and slammed the door. "See you, mate."

Edith didn't look back. Perhaps she'd already forgotten him. He whistled for Bessie and they crossed the highway.

My love.

I imagined you were with me when I took my walk this afternoon. It made the loneliness easier to bear. Your eyes watched the cormorant dive and the stingray disappear like a shadow. You were ahead of me on the pier, and when we reached the breakwater those hard dark stones curved about you like an embrace. We are lucky. We have so much. There is only the present. The future takes care of itself. I felt that this afternoon. Leaving the land, walking over water, one's perspective shifts. I realised your presence in that instant as defining a change. I felt capable, suddenly, of covering the spaces that exist between us, that I address too care-



fully, tiptoeing as though on thin ice. I no longer have the fear of losing you. I have cloaked us both with this fear and holding on too hard, have distanced myself from you. I have pretended to an independence I do not feel and that now only encumbers me. I hope you forgive me and that you will come home to the whole man you sought but

could not find in our embrace.

P.s. The tide was out when I went for my walk. If I'd gone an hour earlier, it would have been deep enough to sink an anchor.

*Janine Burke's last book was Field of Vision, A Decade of Change; Womens' Art in the Seventies, published by Viking.*

## TWO MEDITATIONS

### 1. Country

In any country but ours  
we may not have noticed  
that old wooden house

perched above the road  
at the edge of the cutting;  
as I picture it now

in the mind's eye  
I see that it must form  
a sort of museum

of lost causes. How  
utterly vain  
we must have been

when we thought that we  
could possess this land  
and call it home. A full

two hours' drive  
from any place of size  
or of consequence

that old house perched  
at the edge of the cutting  
tells all who wish to know

that this cannot be so. Yes,  
as I picture it now  
in my mind's eye

I see that this museum  
could only be found  
in a country like ours.

### 2. City

Although this city  
that our fathers  
have bequeathed us  
is a poor place  
in which to pray

I'd like to kneel  
above bare trees  
in total silence,  
then think of what  
it may be like

in six months' time:  
the trees, by then,  
should have new leaves,  
and nothing of  
this city will be seen

when I pause once more  
at the window, kneel  
completely in silence  
- and then look down  
into the street.

GARY CATALANO



COLIN DUCKWORTH

## The Australian Mind: Sold Off, Sold Up or Sold Out?

*Stephen Knight: The Selling of the Australian Mind:  
From First Fleet to Third Mercedes (Heinemann, \$19.95).*

The line between employment, exploitation and prostitution is very fine. To survive, most of us sell either mind or body – the body in exchange for wages, and the mind through various forms of patronage. Any study of a nation's intellectual and creative activity is essentially a study of patronage, for the thinker and artist have always depended on some kind of charity, however well disguised. New Literature Board is but old Maecenas writ large; the new Medicis are purveyors of medically-condemned carcinogenous plants.

The apparent impersonality of the modern system of grants and subsidies should not mislead us into believing the situation has changed radically, for it is still difficult for 'non-productive' mind-workers to receive remuneration commensurate with even time and effort, never mind originality. We live in an age when Sir Peter Abeles' salary is \$5 million, when Mike Gibson of Channel Ten takes a \$600,000 pay *cut* (leaving him only \$200,000 a year, poor chap), when a top real estate agent could get a *bonus* of \$400,000; whilst a university professor appointed in competition with the best available in the world is paid \$66,000, and the rate for examining a doctoral thesis, which requires the highest possible expertise, is about five dollars an hour. Actors' average pay is \$12,000 a year, out of which they are expected to subsidize their accommodation on tour; I am still awaiting a \$600 'advance' for a book contracted two years ago. Something is rotten in the state.

Stephen Knight's wittily-titled book promises an investigation of this situation, which is not peculiar to Australia, but it also does much more. It is stimulating, widely-ranging, entertaining, personal, and provocative in the sense that it has one tut-tutting as well as applauding. The rate, for me, was about three cheers to one tut per page overall – but some of the tuts were serious ones. As a model modern Arts academic and radical dissenter him-

self, Knight wouldn't want it any other way. His aim is not to prescribe solutions and provide definitive answers, but to challenge us and make us look afresh at familiar aspects of our society and question them. On some important cultural aspects, however, such as theatre, music, censorship, and New Wave Feminist educational polemics, he is strangely silent.

The book takes its title from the last of the fourteen essays it comprises, the first of which provides the sub-title. In between, Knight discursively explores topics as varied as Australian lack of spirituality, TV audiences, D.I.Y. house restoration, inauthentic conservation, markets and the natural way of life, language and grammar, humor, patriotism, eating habits, publishing, travel, and the perils of dinner parties. An index would help greatly in the second edition, as the essay titles give little idea of what to expect.

Given the disparate nature of the subject-matter, it is no doubt inevitable that the book relies heavily on generalizations. Now, I so distrust generalizations that I'd say they're all untrue, if logic permitted. There is a pervasive tone of gentle mockery (that's fine) which is, however, often ill-focused. One is often unsure what the norms are that Knight is basing his social satire on, causing his barbs to miss their targets. I shall respond to his challenges in a dialogue with the text, as if at a non-prandial dinner party about which Stephen Knight (for once) will not have to be anxious, as his contribution has been pre-recorded.

Knight begins with some acutely observed and wryly recounted reminiscences about life in the 1960s, from the point of view of a recently-arrived Pom: Darwin airport with its "Welcome to Australia: washrooms straight ahead" (nicer than the one I saw on leaving California: "You are entering Nevada: Strictly No Parking!"), Sydney and its incomprehensible drinking laws, and Outer



Melbourne “populated by waves of people displaced from their camps in Europe, Asia and Collingwood.” He quickly moves into his major theme: possessionism – present even within the socialist idealism of the Whitlam phase. He aims to break through the “carapace of materialism” to find the hidden structures and meanings that might explain the contradictory nature of Australian national character.

One might object that such apparent contradictions are the result of believing there is any such thing as a national character. That is one of the generalizations I gave up years ago, as soon as I could see the British from a distance, and heard so many foolish things said in other countries about “you Poms, Brits, Limeys, etc.”, as if lumping together Yorkshire factory workers, London stock-brokers, and me, made any sense. Knight’s Aussie construct, the “sensitive soul behind the squinting mask” can equally be found in the Scottish Highlands or the Cévennes, just as our much-vaunted larrikin can be seen daily in the East End. It may well be true that the original convicts were guilty of “less extreme acts of criminal greed than are now standard in mercantiled culture”, but of which modern capitalist country is this not true? Much of the motivation behind the de-regulation of Eastern bloc economies stems from precisely the same materialistic aspirations. There, too, collectivity has been “swamped by individualist craving for material comforts”. Perhaps it is less remarkable that it has happened here, one might argue, since most immigrants have been driven to abandon their own country by a desire for better living standards.

But modest self-betterment is not what Knight is attacking. What offends his laudable sense of social equity is the obscenity of grotesque, pretentious “crimes against a rational and equitable distribution of possession” in Australia, as characterized by the Third Mercedes. Why not a Rolls-Royce, BMW, or Jaguar? Because the Mercedes gives Knight a chance to have some fun with words. In early English, he points out, ‘mercede’ meant a just reward for labor, but the third one has now become a symbol of “the surplus society”. A Romance linguist can push the irony even further, for in Spanish ‘mercedes’ were boons and honors, the King’s gifts to loyal subjects (back to patronage), but the origin lies in Latin ‘mercedem’ (meaning both pay and favor) – whence not only ‘mercenary’ and ‘mercantile’ but also ‘mercy’. This is not etymological pedantry: it shows how deeply embedded in social intercourse is the confusion between materialism and just reward. The whole process is a trade-off, in which the mind-worker has little

to bargain with. The selling of the mind in our period of crass mercantilism is, as always, a hazardous and ill-rewarded business; on a national scale, Knight goes on to show in his final essay, it is “a serious degradation of a crucial component of society and culture”.

Australians will be mortified, he predicts, to learn that their country produces values “like intellect, wisdom, insight and critical analysis” offering “rich evidence for the existence of a vigorous, responsible and self-generating intellectual sphere” of which the prime site has been the humanities departments of our universities. He sees “the devotedly commercial and anti-intellectual mood in Canberra *and inside many of the crucial institutions*” [my italics] which downgrade intellectual work that is “not immediately and directly cost effective or, better yet, profitable”, as likely to destroy what was once “a thoroughly lively and socially crucial cerebral component of the national culture”. Few readers of his book or of this review are likely to disagree with his illustrations and arguments, with which we are only too familiar ever since the Dawkins White Paper. But are those responsible for the “brutal and autocratic parodies of socialism” likely to be persuaded to change course? Those of us who have tried, and failed, will be pessimistic. Nevertheless, his *caveats* about the dangers of private funding and the concomitant threat to independent research, about the pernicious effects of ARC policies and procedures on heuristic research, and about the hidden agenda of insidious political attacks on the arts and social sciences (echoing the points I and others have made in speeches and letters) need to be reiterated in Knight’s elegant and dignified manner. It is, however, like leaning over the side of the sinking ship and spitting into the wind. “Academic galley-slaves,” he rightly remarks, “make poor navigators.”

When it comes to his picture of university life there is some cause for disagreement. I apologize in advance for the anglocentricity of my remarks, but Knight has chosen the ground. He writes from a rather narrow Oxbridge standpoint, contrasting college life over there with the suburban commuting of most Australian students. But the life of non-collegiate Melbourne students is in fact very like that of their counterparts at Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow or Leeds (or Lyon or Montpellier), who also have to do their assignments on the bus or amid the chaos of family life. His strictures about the inflexibility and narrow specialisation of the “British and Continental” curriculum makes sense for Oxbridge, but none at all for Scotland or France, or for the many English universities which, thirty



years ago, broke down subject barriers and allowed students to study unusual combinations. At Keele, for example, one can study management science and philosophy, or French and computer science. Those Colleges of Advanced Technology elevated to university status in the 1960s (Bath, Brunel, City (London), Loughborough, Salford, Surrey, and so on) paved the way for innovative subjects and combinations, producing the most employable graduates in the country. At Melbourne, in contrast, there is an intractably rigid degree-structure which shocked me when I came here from the much more flexible University of Auckland. Compulsory diversification is not flexibility. Provision here for part-time students and for cross-credit is certainly more flexible than in Britain, but not more so than on "the Continent". Knight's statement that Britain's Open University has no counterpart in Australia is a bit hard on Deakin.

Did degree courses in Australia before the Sixties consist of "simple canons of information"? I couldn't say, as it was before my time here. It certainly wasn't true for the several English universities for which I examined. What is a bit suspect is Knight's contention that "genuine areas of critique" are recent innovations. Would he, I wonder, be falling into the trap of believing that there was no critical methodology before structuralism? In his approval of the dismantling of school syllabuses that were "simple shovelfuls of testable information" there is little sign that Knight is perturbed by the lack of information (historical knowledge and perspective, for example) held by so many students, or by the trend towards contentless courses. Bernard Miles's old joke ("Oi had a toidy good education. Oi could read when oi were eighteen. Only not to understand it") will soon have to be changed to "I didn't know nothing when I left school, but I ain't arf good at thinking". Perhaps Knight momentarily forgot that many areas of learning demand memorized information for competence, as well as critical abilities: languages, and hard sciences, for example. Recently, Imperial College London, which can take the cream of the country, announced that it is adding a year to its courses because of the falling standards of sixth-formers (who are, by our standards, very specialised). I cannot think there is room for complacency here if our future scientists are going to compete internationally.

Schoolchildren and 'progressive' teachers will be delighted with Knight's permissive attitude to grammar and spelling in the essay 'Between you and I and the Apostrophe'. These matters, he states, should be left to the experts, i.e., what he calls

'linguists'. We linguists prefer to call them linguisticians, to differentiate between those who are fluent in foreign languages and those who know the theories. The experts (of which he is one) have decreed that usage rules. So Jeff Kennett was right to say "I congratulate he and his party", because he was "projecting common usage". And yet paradoxically the disagreement (he says) is between "the general public . . ." (isn't that where usage comes from?) ". . . with its self-asserting language pundits on the one hand and the credential-bearing, apparently expert academic linguists on the other"; or "the folk linguists" (such as the "media guru" Max Harris, his *bête noire*), and "the real thing". The professionals have a "relative view", and you can tell them by the fact that they know the difference between phonetics and phonemics.

The social effects of this apparently democratic approach to language need to be carefully considered. For many years to come, society is going to be divided between those who have no difficulty in remembering that after a preposition you say "me", and those who do not. The latter will be put in a different class, like those who say 'haitch' and write "its a nice day". No Oxford graduate is going to be caught out like that. Those from the well-read, cultured middle class, the product of a 'good school', would have had such solecisms and barbarisms knocked out of them at an early age, at the dinner table if not in class. The experts seem to make very heavy weather of this: I used to teach the simple rules governing *its* and *it's* and *between him and me* in no time, even to Bulgarians.

Dogmatism and punditry are easily branded as undemocratic, but isn't there a kind of unconscious snobbery at work in the easy acceptance of relativity? Rather like saying, "Let's not worry too much about what the natives do"? But what about the 'ethnic' immigrants trying to ensure a place for their children in our meritocracy? Will the ex-Latvian secretary who writes "Dere sir, Ever so thanks for yors of the therd" retain her job? Only if his/her boss has heard of relativity. For many decades yet, I suspect, those who seem only semi-literate will suffer - even if they can prove that "Proffesor Night sais its OK". So . . . Grammer rools - orl rite?

Knight maintains that because Shakespeare's spelling was shaky, we cannot criticise sloppiness. But surely little had been done to codify and regularize English then? At a time when English is rapidly becoming the only real international medium of communication, surely the world needs greater conformity, certainly of spelling, not less? Really permissive relativism is a recipe for



communicative chaos, because once you have admitted it as a principle, there is nowhere to stop.

I am unhappy with Knight's permissiveness regarding the pronunciation of some radio and TV announcers. We should not, Knight claims, object if an announcer says 'government' (to rhyme with 'bewilderment') because we do not pronounce the *l* in 'walk' or the *n* in 'autumn' – a suspect analogy, for we don't say 'autum[n]al'. The crucial fact is that the verb is not 'to gover'. Knight claims that although a New Zealander doesn't distinguish between the vowels in 'six' and 'sex' there is no possibility of confusion. Let me disabuse him: when we first set foot in New Zealand, the port customs officer directed us to the stairs, "then go to the lift". When I went back and said we couldn't see a lift, a very uncomfortable few moments ensued. If you still doubt the possibility of confusion, get someone to tell you the joke about the Kiwi sheep-shearer who refused to shear his sheep with anyone.

All this is the stuff of good debate. Knight argues cogently against mergers of publishers. He has some telling comments about Australian humor and its lack of high-spirits, the slowness of audiences to pick up subtlety and wit, the angry and vengeful quality of female comics (especially Wendy Harmer). His description of the Victoria Markets on a Saturday morning as the target-area for successive waves of marauders, is a little gem. First, the organized Hawthorns, with little Robert and Emma and a "mutant supermarket trolley", followed by the Fitzroys, bearded and black-clad, with rucksacks, uncounted Diarmids, Sioghans and Dylans. Then the Asians, decisive and orderly: "It's almost as if they should live next to the Hawthorns, and they may do so."

Stephen Knight has said in interviews that

invitations to dinner parties have been scarcer since the book came out, and one can understand why: his friends have taken pity on him, for he finds these occasions a source of anguish and tension, fearing lulls in the conversation. Very sad.

He views D.I.Y. with bemused surprise, as though Australians invented it. Although he sees the desire to restore some semblance of the past as a need to create a dimension in a historically featureless and geographically misplaced country, he finds attempts to accommodate past and present in house restoration very naff. D.I.Yers who don't become full-time painters or chippies are cop-outs, he says; but my experience is that by knowing how hard the design, planning and execution of first-rate decorating and carpentry are, one becomes aware of the dignity of skilled labor, the true marriage of hand and mind.

Australia is a "determinedly secular society", Knight complains. Possibly, but shouldn't we be glad to be spared the religious fanaticism and zealotry tearing other countries apart? He rightly regrets the absence of magical or mythical focus (apart from Ned Kelly), unlike New Zealand or North America. This is indeed strange, given the importance of Aboriginal and Irish cultures.

This is, then, a splendidly stimulating book, blending seriousness with humor and forcing one's own ideas to come to the forefront of the mind. Stephen Knight inspires amusement, approval laced with some healthy disagreement, but never a moment's boredom.

*Emeritus Professor Colin Duckworth studied at Birmingham, Cambridge, Lyon, Montpellier and Paris. His career as an academic mercenary has been in London, California, Auckland, and Melbourne. He now writes children's opera libretti, unravels Beckett, edits Voltaire, and plagues publishers with novels and short stories.*

### COMING IN OVERLAND 123 WINTER 1991

Geoffrey Serle "The Confusion of Australian History". Beatrice Faust "Benzo Junkie". Jennifer Strauss on recent literary essays.

Brian Matthews on John Barnes' *Furphy*. Clement Semmler on Geoffrey Dutton's *Slessor*. Elizabeth Jolley makes a speech.

Our reporter and photographer visit the Montsalvat Poetry Festival.

Stories by Bruce Grant, Rosaleen Love and others

Poems by Diane Fahey, Alan Gould, Peter Lyssiotis and much more



# on the line

As this issue was being prepared effect was given to United Nations Security Council Resolution 678 and the armed forces of a coalition of nations moved against the Iraqi forces to expel them from Kuwait. Australia was one of the first nations to make a military commitment. On 17 January the Prime Minister consulted his senior colleagues and quickly authorised our small naval task force in the Gulf to join in the attack. Very small beer compared with the huge amounts of armed force and materiel committed by the United States and even with those provided by many other members of the coalition, but significant for all Australians. The Prime Minister made his first fully elaborated statement on the issue in a speech to parliament on 21 January. He spoke of the need to preserve "three interests of truly global importance": conditions for peace and stability in the Middle East, prevention of Saddam Hussein's pursuit of a policy of domination of the world oil market, and now that the Cold War has ended the need to achieve a new world order "in which the goals of the Charter of the United Nations can at last be fulfilled."

One's reaction was confusion followed as the days and nights went on by more confusion. Various statistics – but with what authority? – had seemed to indicate that sanctions were at last being effective. Had they been given enough time to work? And what the hell was a tiny Australian naval force doing in that part of the world? An English newspaper called the United Kingdom America's poodle. What were we, the poodle's tail?

There had been other historic United Nations resolutions against military incursions of one country into another and the arguments for their implementation, by force if necessary, were as compelling as Bob Hawke's arguments for the Gulf War. But very

few resulted in military force by the United Nations. And, even here, the force was not under United Nations command but an uneasy and complex coalition, constantly changing in its levels of commitment, put together by the United States and with the conduct of the war under United States' control.

This was a war about which we were singularly uninformed when it came to hard detail and the lack of information was to be compounded as day after day, night after television night, we got a version of events coloured and transformed by military necessity.

Our unease and confusion were further deepened when we considered some of our "allies" in the coalition. Of the 22 Arab states there is not one democracy. Now we were part of the defence of King Fahd and his unspeakable regime, we were engaging in the rescue of the degenerate al-Sabah government of Kuwait which had crushed those who had attempted small moves towards democracy, and we saw the coalition's envoys in smiling conference with the monster of Syria, the Baath dictator Hafiz-al-Asad. We were told that Iraq had assembled one of the world's most powerful military forces. How? By sales of materiel, "smart" weapons and their technology, from France, Germany, the U.S.S.R. and many more western countries (Saddam Hussein was the man Mrs. Thatcher said she "could do business with") facilitated by billions of dollars of credit from the very United States now assuming the moral leadership of the world. We struggled, all of us, in a moral swamp while we watched the "smart bombs" of the television war. Huge and subtle propaganda campaigns from the United States, from the Arab world, from Israel, reached into Australia and further confused our ignorance and despair.

Some of us seized on the report that

April Glaspie, the American ambassador to Iraq, on 25 July had appeased Saddam Hussein, quoting her as saying "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border dispute with Kuwait." Later, much later, after what may be hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed or wounded, April Glaspie, so long silenced, asked the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee to believe that this report was "largely fabricated". Why did the U.S. State Department take so long to correct the record? Over time our confusion grows only deeper.

Meanwhile, immediately after Prime Minister Hawke had taken us to war, the anti-war forces rallied. In no time huge marches took place all over the country, especially in Melbourne and Sydney.

The speed of organised response was astonishing, the amount of *unreasoned* anti-Americanism depressing. I, who have always been sympathetic to careful opposition to the "American imperium" (to use Gore Vidal's term) and as aware as Vidal of the challenge to an open society and to international relations posed by the U.S. military-industrial complex, found little reason and less hard fact in what my friends were saying.

The invitation soon arrived. Would I join a Rally for Peace, join my friends in a cry "Stop the War, Ceasefire Now!"? Was this Vietnam revisited, all those marches from the small to the never-to-be-forgotten multitudes taking over the whole city in the last two marches? Was I to march now as then? Well no, actually. I do not like to march when I am confused, when I'm mired in a moral swamp. Did I believe that Saddam Hussein would negotiate if there was a ceasefire? Tom Uren and his friends, and probably many readers of *Overland*, thought so. Unfortunately all the evidence, such as



there is, made this hard to believe.

The marchers, naturally, brought up Portuguese Timor and the Indonesian invasion. There was a U.N. resolution about that. I was reminded that this moral debacle also floated on a sea of oil. In 1972 Australia had talks with Portugal about sea-bed boundaries and possible joint exploration. In 1975 the Australian Ambassador in Jakarta thought that negotiations would be easier with Indonesia than with Portugal or an independent East Timor. "I know I am recommending a pragmatic rather than a principled stand but that is what national interest and foreign policy is all about". Yes, and still are, even though our Prime Minister and the U.S. President were now asking us to believe that the Gulf War was based on a moral imperative. A friend in Canberra warned that analogy was not analysis. No, but there were, and are (Portugal v. Australia currently preparing for judgement at The Hague) troubling correspondences. Gareth Evans hopes for "a new world order" where the U.N. will stop military invasion of one nation by another, but he told the Senate that Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor should be accepted not only on a *de facto* basis but on a *de jure* basis. "There is no binding legal obligation not to recognise acquisition of territory that was acquired by force." But that was "long ago and in another country" my fellow Australian poodle pups, wasn't it? But the same moral swamp. The soft heads call it *realpolitik* and think they are pragmatists.

With East Timor in mind (and Panama and Granada, Suez, Hungary etc. all in widely differing contexts) one still had to face the fact of Saddam Hussein's aggression and its consequences for the world in general and for Israel as one pressing particular among others. His record was available, not least that part in his own words (like Hitler he told us what he was planning to do) and in those of his authorised biographers. The Lebanese journalist Fuad Matar first published his biography of Saddam Hussein in 1981 with the approval of his subject. *Saddam Hussein; a Biography* (Highlight) was re-issued in 1990. If one takes this tainted account together with much more scholarly works such as *Republic of Fear: the Politics of Modern Iraq* (University of California Press) by Samir-al-Khalil (a pseudonym of necessity) one sees quite clearly a record since July 17, 1968, which it is not too fanciful to compare with Hitler's. Indeed, in his

manipulation of the Baath Party, Saddam Hussein learnt a great deal from Hitler's methods with the Nazi Party and the ruthless and murderous suppression of all possible and even of improbable dissent. The story is too long to repeat here but any reading of it leaves us with no conclusion other than that nations could no more negotiate a serious ceasefire with Saddam Hussein than they could with Hitler. We were left, in our confusion and in our moral swamp, with no choice but "to defend the bad against the worse". We cannot have much faith in Bush's and Hawke's "new world order", we do not think that "solving the Palestinian problem" can be separated from a much larger context of huge imbalances of wealth and poverty in the Arab states and from the developed world's shocking record of supplying the region with military technology. As I write a huge new arms fair has opened in Singapore and the nations' cheque-books are open and bids are being made for the "smart weapons" of western technology, so conveniently tested and proved in Iraq. Our neighbours are buying. Trade ministers of the "new world order" are smiling and the bush-rangers of *realpolitik* are riding fast into the sunset of hope.

Colour drains from our hopes and, as you have seen, from this journal's cover. In the gloom of the Gulf War, the sky darkened by those oil wells continuing to burn and the black rain falling on the crops, I searched for an image to put on our cover. Stieg Persson's painting, one of a recent series based on John Donne's *Devotions*, fits the mood in which I write. The Gulf War poems which we publish in this issue were not sought or planned. They came in spontaneously. It is not a question of "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is it? If indeed it ever was. Nor of a strict aesthetic sternly ignoring temporary preoccupations. These are times when to bear witness makes its own demands and the poets, we noticed when putting their poems together, bore witness in the only way they could - not to the Gulf War but to the T.V. version.

Dorothy Green (1915-1991) died in February after a long illness. Her last book *Writer, Reader, Critic* (Primavera Press, \$14.95) was published a few weeks before her death and, fittingly, is beautifully produced. I hope Dorothy saw it and was pleased. The title describes her, the three roles were all connected aspects of the one powerful and distinctive sensibility. Few writers have achieved so much while con-

tinuing to respond with intelligence and passion, and as a part of her daily life to the central problems which assail everyone everywhere. Despite her workload as scholar, writer and teacher, and family demands, she yet was able to be a moving spirit in organizations such as Writers Against Nuclear Arms and Writers for an Ecologically Sustainable Population. Life was rarely easy for her and, sometimes as when she was working at the huge task of revising *A History of Australian Literature* by her husband H. M. Green (1881-1962), the strain showed. The extent of her work on the revised edition (1984) has perhaps yet to be appreciated in its dimensions. The tributes to her and her work are now many and heart-warming but there was an earlier time when she felt, more rightly than wrongly, perpetually "on the outer". Slowly, especially after the publication of her biographical and critical study of Henry Handel Richardson *Ulysses Bound* (1973), it began to be understood that Dorothy Green, as well as being a poet, essayist, trenchant reviewer and remarkable teacher, was a major literary critic.

Her public reputation, justifiably, was that of a formidable intellect and personality. The contrast with the private Dorothy, the little warm hand, the halting step, the conversation quiet and witty which left much room for listening, was piquant. I am glad that Veronica Brady and David Headon will be writing about Dorothy Green in our next issue.

*Meanjin* has celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, surely a remarkable achievement. To mark the occasion it has published, with Melbourne University Press, an anthology, *The Temperament of Generations; Fifty Years of Writing in Meanjin* (\$29.95), edited by Jenny Lee, Philip Mead and Gerald Murnane. Not only is this a most attractively designed book but the editing with its introduction and connecting passages of cultural history for each decade is consistently interesting and entertaining. This is a fine book, certainly to my mind the best anthology of Australian writing for many years, and an indispensable guide for those with a serious interest in our cultural history. More importantly it is a splendid bedside book. Do get hold of it. Stephen Knight will write more about this in our next issue.

The Fellowship of Australian Writers (Victoria) annual awards honoured, amongst others, *Cabin Fever* by



Elizabeth Jolley, *Velvet Waters* by Gerald Murnane and *Poppo* by Drusilla Modjeska (reviewed in this issue). A new poet and a familiar poet, both well-known to readers of this journal, also got major awards: Jean Kent for her first book *Verandahs* (Hale & Iremonger) and Elizabeth Riddell for "sustained work of quality and distinction". Don Charlwood received the Christina Stead Award for *Marching as to War* (Hudson) and Barry Hill's first book of poems *Raft* (Penguin) was also honoured. I thought I'd share my pleasure with you.

Send a stamped addressed envelope to Poetry Competition, PERTH PEN, P.O. Box 1131, Subiaco, 6008, for details of an international poetry competition in aid of PEN's Writers in Prison Fund. Poets may enter directly or can be sponsored. Closing date: 30 June, 1991. This is a way to help the Fund and also

to help the more than three hundred writers around the world currently in prison or detention because their writing has offended their political masters.

There appears to be a very welcome increase in well produced and inexpensive reprints of important Australian works of literature and history - "standards and classics" as librarians call them. It's a good chance to fill those gaps in your bookshelves. David Malouf's *The Great World* is now in paperback (Picador, \$12.99) as is Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story* (Allen & Unwin, \$12.95) in a revised edition with important changes and twelve extra pages. *Caroline Chisholm* by Margaret Kiddle - and surely this, first published in 1950, can be called a classic - is newly published in paperback (Melbourne University Press, \$19.95) with an introduction by Patricia Grimshaw

which is an important contribution to our knowledge of Margaret Kiddle. Perhaps the most impressive series of this current upsurge is the excellently produced Imprint Classics (Angus & Robertson). Amongst other notable books this series has brought back Christina Stead's *Seven Poor of Sydney* (\$14.95) and *For Love Alone* (\$14.95) with an introduction by Peter Craven; Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (\$16.95), with an introduction by Mudrooroo Nyoongah; George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (\$14.95) introduced by Brian Matthews; Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (\$12.95) introduced by Drusilla Modjeska; Kylie Tennant's *Ride on Stranger* (\$12.95) introduced by Kerryn Goldsworthy. Clearly a notable published achievement, for which much thanks.

Barrett Reid

## COMMENT

JOHN BARRETT

## History and Hartley Grattan

C. Hartley Grattan gave every appearance of being ill-informed in 1927 when, as Laurie Hergenhan reported (*Overland* 121), he complained that the only Australian history book available was a schoolbook by Ernest Scott. Even at this distance, it's a comment he should not be allowed to get away with. Certainly, at the time, he did not appear to be singularly ill-informed. Other influential people said or implied something similar in refusing to teach Australian history as a university undergraduate subject in its own right. The literature was inadequate, they said.

In reality, and like Grattan, they surely knew better. It was not the literature that was lacking, but their own ability to escape the straight-jacket of convention and established subjects. It was hard to make an escape when they had miserly funding, multiple teaching duties, meagre study leave and rudimentary staffs. (Our modern masters, please note.)

However, in 1927 Ernest Scott *did* introduce Australian history as an undergraduate subject at the University of Melbourne. The other universities were notably slow to emulate that example, and Melbourne itself, while repeating the subject periodically, offered it annually only from 1946. Yet, although Australian history had to wait another forty years before it became a boom industry, there was still in 1927 much available material.

A list of at least some of it is probably worth having. For one thing, there was another "schoolbook", although it's hardly fair to apply so contemptuous a term to either work: A. W. Jose's *History* (11th edition, revised 1925, "with chapters on Australian literature" and aboriginal statistics from the 1921 census). There were the documents collected with scholarly introductions in *Historical Records of New South Wales* (7 vols) and *Historical Records of Australia* (33 vols).

Planned settlement and represen-

tative institutions were treated in R. C. Mills, *The Colonization of Australia* (1915) and Edward Sweetman, *Australian Constitutional Development* (1925). Macquarie's time had been studied in Marion Phillips' *A Colonial Autocracy* (1909). A square look had been taken at Western Australia in J. S. Battye's history of the colony (1924), and at South Australia in A. G. Price's *Foundation and Settlement...* (1924).

A famous example of church history was Eris O'Brien, *The Life and Letters of Archpriest Therry* (1922 - later reissued under the title *The Foundation of Catholicism in Australia*).

Social, political and economic history was tackled in the still splendid work by T. A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia* (4 vols, 1918), and in W. Pember Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia & New Zealand* (2 vols, 1902, reprinted 1923), Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*



(1923), and S. H. Roberts, *History of Australian Land Settlement* (1924).

There were other books, not strictly histories but invaluable for the study of Australian history, even in 1927, and very appropriate to the kind of history in which Grattan was interested: Richard Twopeny, *Town Life in Australia* (1883) and Francis Adams, *The Australians: A Social Sketch* (1893). And both of those English visitors, in their appreciation of new developments among Australians, go some way towards giving the lie to Nettie Palmer's condemnation of English critics - although, if she had only Australian literature in mind, it has to be admitted that Twopeny was pretty dismissive back in 1883. Nevertheless, the same probably can't be said of Englishman Jose's assessment in his "schoolbook", and Grattan himself was hardly dripping with praise of Australian riches in 1929.

Another American visitor's book available at the time was Jessie Ackermann's *Australia from a Woman's Point of View* (1913). And, also in the Australian-society-and-people genre, were C. E. W. Bean's *On the Wool Track* (1910), his first two volumes as official war historian (1921 and 1924), and the two 1923 volumes by Cutlack and Gullett in the same series.

If a decent undergraduate course couldn't be constructed around those books, and others unlisted, something was wrong; but it had nothing to do with a lack of literature. Grattan must have known that his remark about Scott's schoolbook was wide of the mark. After all, he at once began to collect and read Australian books. So what was he up to? Looking for a fight to draw a crowd? Staking a claim, at the expense of other claims, to a clear field for the coming C. Hartley Grattan books on Australia? Among Nettie Palmer's reservations about Grattan were her judgements that he was "a queerish bird" who would "never admit that his statements may have been gained from previous investigators."

*John Barrett is an historian whose books include We Were There and Falling In. He had a single, brief meeting with Grattan.*

## "Aborigines" a Proper Name?

*Nancy Cato writes:* What is Dr Eve Fesl's objection to the term 'Aborigine' and 'Aborigines' for the original inhabitants of Australia? (*Overland* No. 120). She states that she strongly objects to this blanket term being used by "people who have not bothered to find out our real names." She prefers the name Koorie used in the south and east to mean "our people". This is now accepted as far south as Framlingham near Warrnambool, but is it known as far north as Mornington Island? It would not be possible to refer to all the multifarious clans by their 'proper' names (on the upper Murray the term for "our people" was the Yenbena) so the terms Aborigine and Aborigines were adopted to refer to the indigenous people. There is nothing derogatory about this term, which simply means "the first people", the original race, which is surely correct. Perhaps the dislike of these words has arisen because of the use by some whites of the abbreviations Abo and Abos - which are as racist and objectionable as Dago and Wog.

P.S. Dictionary definition. "Aborigine (usually with capital): One of a race of peoples, the earliest inhabitants of Australia; 2. a descendant of these people, sometimes of mixed blood. 3. (plural) the people living in a country at the earliest period."

## The Hillbilly Dictator

*Evan Whitton writes:* Many thanks for Sir Walter Crocker's review of my little neo-Burkhardtian analysis of a culture of corruption in Queensland, *The Hillbilly Dictator* (*Overland* 121).

A few minor slips are perhaps inevitable in a lengthy review of a book on a complex subject. With reference to Mr Alan Bond's catastrophic performance in an interview with Ms Jana Wendt he says I describe Ms Wendt as "deliciously beautiful", and that she reminded me of a "cobra".

In fact, the sentence read (in a chapter headed Bond Delirious): "Alan Bond subjected himself in January 1988 to an interrogation by the deliriously beautiful Jana Wendt, anchorperson for 'A Current Affair' . . ." There is no mention of a cobra. Perhaps he read anchorperson as cobraperson?

In view of Sir Walter's generosity it would be churlish to multiply instances, but I do have a tiny professional problem (I am currently Reader in Journalism at the University of Queensland) with his assertion that I have an 'ideological' objection to Sir J. Bjelke-Petersen.

It is true that, like most journalists (consciously or otherwise), my attitude to politics is largely based on Disraeli's hallmarks of a genuine conservative party - improvement in the condition of the people, the maintenance of the institutions, and the liberty of the subject - and that I objected, and surely rightly objected, to the Bjelkist regime's appalling failure on all three counts.

However, Sir Walter mistakenly asserts that I failed to give due credit to the National Party Government and Bill Gunn for instituting, and ensuring the success of, the Fitzgerald inquiry, and that I failed to properly birch previous Labor Party Governments for, among much else, inventing the electoral malamander. I get the impression from these little slips that he may believe my 'ideological' viewpoint is pro-Labor.

I hope to reassure Sir Walter on that point by noting that I doubt that the Hon N. K. Wran QC and the late Justice L. K. Murphy would have shared such a misapprehension.

Indeed, in August 1986 His Excellency the Hon E. G. Whitlam QC, who, as principal witness, had signed the documents at my wedding at the Palais Seidler (and scoffed the pressed duck at the Tour d'Argent after), registered magisterial disgust at my reportage of certain matters relating to Messrs Wran and Murphy. The great man boomed: "Evan, what will you do? All your victims are leaving the stage . . ."

That was of course before Bjelke-Petersen was frog-marched out of office; not by me, but by his own party.



## POEMS FROM THE GULF WAR

### SCREENING THE NEWS

Early February, 1991

What we will get now, through this aperture,  
in the war-days ahead might seem to be  
a movie, with the horror quite screened out  
for our better public health, although we'll see  
the captured (theirs, and, far more terribly, *ours*)  
the troops patrolling, resting, taking cover,  
the folks back home affirming hope and faith  
(parents, puzzled children, news-numbed lover),  
the Middle-Eastern experts, analysts,  
commanders, White House spokesmen who  
must squeeze  
the flesh and blood of conflict into forms  
that hide, at times, their latent sophistries . . .  
The camera-lens has learned, since '75,  
what things it should reflect and what pass by;  
it will not do to register too well  
(nor even indirectly) how men die.  
But still the viewer, given the bare clues,  
will, Hawkshaw-like, fill in the missing parts,  
and, like all exiles, reconstruct the scene  
with the imagination's troubled arts:  
the pools of blood in Khafji's empty streets,  
the shattered buildings and heat-blackened  
tanks,  
the punctured helmets, joyful Saudi troops  
(*for this relief, much thanks*)  
- these will suffice us, fragmentary truths  
are closer to the truth in any case  
- from Cannae to Kuwait all warriors, too,  
are maskers in a desperate dancing-place.

BRUCE DAWE

### ON A PRISONER OF WAR'S DAMAGED FACE

January 1991

From the TV war  
Horrors begin to emerge.  
Did anyone tell them  
it would be like this?

Whose friend were you, Calvin?  
Tales from the Arabian nights,  
refinements of beauty and torture.

Did anyone tell them,  
when the forces of destruction  
are unleashed, no-one,  
no-one can ever predict  
the consequences, duration,  
depth and nature of hostilities?

Ah, General, you have sophisticated arms.  
Ah, General, you have sophisticated enemies  
Ah, Commander, you have many warriors.

Ah, Mister President, we hope  
they are not, like Napoleon's troops,  
to be victims of a season,  
of an environment foreign  
and menacing to them.  
Said the Russians,  
'Let the cold of winter shrivel the Frogs!'  
Iraqis, waiting, say,  
'Let the heat of summer shrivel the Dogs!'

What will you say, then,  
of *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm*  
when *Desert Death* is all around?

Carpet-bombing soldiers is announced;  
heart folds in its hands, bows  
its head before such suffocation.  
We have yet to see  
little children, parents;  
have yet to be allowed  
to view the terror, wounds  
they wanted to pretend  
would never be.



The mind of the Goddess of Mercy  
- that clear pool receiving everything -  
trembles like glass about to shatter  
. . . barbed wire herding-yards  
in sand for refugees . . .

This was the sanitized war.  
this the surgical bombardment  
taking out military installations  
as one extracts teeth, ill bones,  
growths not yet malignant.

Whose friend were you, Madur?  
Tales from the Arabian nights,  
refinements of beauty and torture.

Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers,  
do you yet know what you  
have done to the people,  
to the world, to yourselves?

Condemned to rhetorical justification,  
lies hardening as the games  
break up under pressure -  
demolition, bruise and blood,  
bewilderment and blunt fear  
such as they have never dreamed.

Pale tales from movies, civil crime,  
tales from the Arabian nights,  
refinements of ugliness and torture.

Ah, dear God, Allah, Higher Power,  
Spirit of Love and Goodness, Life itself,  
all but ousted when the dagger jets  
fly fiery skies and drop  
their tubes of nothing more.

Professional soldiers claim a code.  
Who is this? Prisoner of war,  
terrorist, guerilla, war criminal?  
Boy-man out of school,  
man-man out of home,  
immigrant out of work;  
did anyone tell them  
it would be like this?  
Did anyone tell anyone?

No, because along with ferocity,  
you have to boost morale  
and, anyway, they did not know  
. . . temporary leaders commit existence  
to a future beyond strategy . . .

How to view this with the inner eye  
of faith, and what is that?  
Faith is the resolve to place the highest  
meaning on the facts which we observe.

Here, some Arabs rise to fight  
Caucasians stomping for centuries  
over the earth, patronising tribes  
to be disempowered, taking  
their resources all in arrogance;

moving borders, parcelling  
humans to this state and land to that;  
implanting a nation of beings  
identified as leaven spreading  
stateless through the world;  
that nation now grown racist  
on its memories of genocide.

Too late, Samuel, Madur and Calvin!  
Too late, too late for vengeance  
anywhere on this small, exquisite planet,  
rolling round the heavens of a galaxy.

GLEN TOMASETTI



## THE GULF PROGRAM

Maudie, I wish you could still see the TV.  
Pardon? Yes, you've got your transistor  
but it's not the same. Seeing is believing.  
First I thought the TV was on the blink.  
Then I thought it was the ABC. Auntie, eh?  
During the golf I saw this gulf program.  
Strike me lucky. It was over in a flash.  
Spencer or St Vincent or even Carpentaria  
I'm blown if I could fathom it out  
but about an hour later it came on again,  
another episode, the same but kind of different:  
these cross-hairs. Pardon? No, Maudie, sights -  
sights not quite crossing a circle in the centre  
this bomb with a laser so accurate it bombed  
through the front doors, a smart bomb, no,  
clever, you know, like the clever country.  
Another one went down a building like a lift.  
The last one I saw was this bridge, Maudie.  
Pow! into one end. Pow! into the other end.  
What? Yes, I thought it might be war too  
but war without any people anywhere, Maud?  
Then it hit me like a bolt from the blue.  
The ABC was running commercials, government  
ads.  
They're blowing up *old* bridges & buildings  
so they can build *new* bridges & buildings.  
Didn't think we'd live to see it, eh Maud?  
They've finally done away with the dole.

GRAHAM ROWLANDS

## WATCHING TV COVERAGE OF WAR

We are in the living-room watching  
Death happen. In Baghdad someone  
Holds a microphone outside his window  
So that we can share the sound of bombs.  
Even commercial channels indicate  
The seriousness of this, halving the number  
Of advertisements. This profusion of screen  
Experts makes us all feel expert, too.

Drama comes to the world's financial markets:  
Commentators emphasize their astonishment  
As oil prices drop. There is disquiet  
At unconfirmed reports of a hit on a Kuwait  
Refinery. Then back to the military  
Analysts. If it were make-believe  
These created tensions could be exciting;  
As it is, this wrestling of destiny  
With history dwarfs such temptations.

'The Mother of all battles has started,' says  
Our enemy. Our status as children  
Seems confirmed. But death itself?  
Now little more than a momentary  
Break in transmission.

SHANE McCAULEY



## BODIES ON TV

At first there wasn't any  
apprehension  
when the tellies moved in.  
What could they do  
that radio hadn't?

There was the evening news, of course,  
and the chance that pictures  
might hurt  
more than words . . .

but no one  
wanted  
to offend

and news

merged easily into films  
musicals  
and soaps

till somewhere around Vietnam  
when Westerns seemed  
almost dead

real  
bodies began to appear  
on black and white  
screens,

melting, blackening, flaring

with  
napalm

and a kneeling Vietnamese,  
hands tied behind the back  
was shot in the head  
in every lounge.

After that the medium  
couldn't  
go back,

though the flesh comes now  
from other wars, famines,  
one-off atrocities  
and the road toll

unlike radio  
which settled for talk shows,  
the top 40,

gardening

and nostalgia.

PETER MURPHY



Some people screw up newspapers and strew them on the floor around their bed so that if an intruder enters during the night they will be awakened by the sounds. But what if the intruders have a gun and shoot from a distance? Or poison my soup? Or pump gas in under the door?

Some people sleep under newspapers to keep themselves warm at night, or stuff their mattresses with them for the same reason.

I keep my newspapers in order. Before I sit down to read each one, (*Age* in the morning, *Herald* at night) I carefully cut out all the advertisements and throw them away. This can be problematic, given that everything has two sides. After that is done, I read through the newspaper, sorting and discarding items as I go. Occasionally, usually near a weekend, because for some reason the papers are more interesting then, I set an article aside which I then file in a cardboard box labelled 'The House of God through the Ages'. Of course, this is not what is in the box, nor as far as I know was ever in the box, but it serves well as a store and protector.

Grouped by subject are these words.  
Everything in order.  
*Alles in Ordnung.*

When I die, my grand-daughter will want to know why I collected these pieces of paper.

I don't know why.

*As with animals today, the duration of man's life in primeval time was largely decided by his teeth.* I have kept all of mine. My sister-in-law and mother-in-law would have had some of theirs removed before dying in Buchenwald I imagine. As with my collection of cuttings, I do not believe that their teeth had any bearing on their deaths beyond extending their lives an hour or two (queuing, extraction, and so on).

#### FOOD & THE BODY

*Salt-influenced history.*

*Where there is plenty of milk, and flesh is roasted rather than boiled, there is no need for added salt.* Now, how does this relate to the times when there is no flesh, apart from our sunken own? When maleflesh is, yes, sometimes roasted, but far away, and mixed with mud. We ate the grasses and all of us, peasants and up, would stalk the meadows and forests searching for a selection of the juiciest and tastiest known to us.

Much later on, fifteen thousand kilometres away, my grand-daughter sees this as closer to barbarism: humans living as animals in fields. I see it as more easily compared to her weekly delectation of *haute cuisine* herbs.

*Salt is intimately connected.*

It is the solution that runs into the crook of my arm as I nap with the cat in the backyard. I have also seen it suspended in plastic above me.

*Civilisation and the art of cookery.* Both seem to change what meets their standards. Life in Bayreuth for us just before 1933 took place in what had been Toscanini's old house. He who had complained of never tasting meat in his childhood due to the family's poverty no doubt made up for it.

I had several servants but was myself finally responsible for the cooking and table. Silver, starched linen, and every dish sauced. Every vegetable dish glutinous, floury, settling heavily on the stomach: providing fulfilment.

*The German snail king, Herr Schenkelberg, said, "Snails are gentle, lovable creatures."*

I have no taste for them, but for the fruits of their victims. My garden does not allow for them. And still he the German snail king, despite that he Herr Schenkelberg, because of that he farmed them.

*Alcohol has accompanied civilisation from the very*



earliest days of history . . . If moderately used, it refreshes both body and spirit . . . if abused it degrades both body and spirit to the level of beasts. To the level of beasts. Yes, that is it, that is it. With the total irrelevance of alcohol or not, *mein Gott*, my brother was reduced to the level of a beast. But a beast with an immaculate uniform, Herr General, and so concerned with the level of cleanliness he ordered my husband and child from their lives in our little town because of their dirty part-Jewish contaminated blood. So obsessed was he with cleanliness that after the war he came looking to me for a Persil job. By then, of course,

in bountiful juices stained with the blood of Spanish oranges; apple tartlets of honest Tasmanian origins; and so on. All arranged, rearranged, cut, quartered, kept for days, cut, cut again, and again. The sixteenths or less finally picked over, picked up, yes I can admit, and greedily compressed between thumb and forefinger against knife, then taken to the old, dry, attempting to salivate mouth. The grand-daughter watches, annoyed.

"Is it ever not going to be 1948?"

Fried, boiled, salad. Potatoes. Eaten every way possible. Eaten alone. Eaten with no



I was an anti-fascist heroine. *Alcohol reflects the condition of all human life which consists of a series of choices between good and evil.*

*And each rejoiced unfeignedly in the splendid and invaluable triumphs of the other.* Three sisters three brothers. Not true. Not true. But bound forever across continents, across continence (ha ha).

There is a family tradition which, as with all others, passes down through the women. My daughter also still eats her cakes like a refugee. Rum baba soaked

accompaniment.

At the beginning of this twentieth century when it was time for the potato harvest outside Magerdarm, the girl would be lucky and laughing to go with peasant women digging up the fields. A bounty. Buried treasure. With the grand-daughter much later, and not there, passing on the great excitement: the earth crumbly, moist, fragrant; pulling forth the roots and hard globes. Oh what a joy. And then to boil, salt and eat. Ahh. But the grand-daughter says she hears of nothing but



potatoes, with every meal potatoes, cooked mealy potatoes, cooked blandly, never baked in gorgeous fat.

"Is it ever not going to be 1916/1942/1948?" she asks.

"Potatoes," I answer, "have everything you need."

How wonderful, you have a potato? What a feast! *Gott sei Dank! Gott lob!*

The peasant women reappear, out of time, near Geelong sixty years later (The *Herald*). Laughing, hoeing; toothless grins fixed forever in a newspaper picture which as I handle turns black my fingers.

So-called *Italian trivialities* (forks in the Anglo-Saxon world): anything in the Anglo-Saxon world not so, suffers. Newly arrived in 1948 I gave my twelve-year-old daughter her first party. I cooked special things - like custard. The years haven't removed my bitterness.

"Only custard?" the other children asked, "Just custard?"

They wouldn't eat it. Can custard be something one weeps over for generations?

*Spices are light in physical weight . . . heavy with human fate. In the time of the first Queen Elizabeth (read always the assumption we refer to the kingdom of England) they had no tea, coffee, cocoa, or chocolate; no sugar, except as honey; no rice, jam, sago or tapioca; no bananas, oranges, peaches, apricots, pineapples or grapefruit; very few currants and raisins; no potatoes; no pepper, nutmeg, cloves or cinnamon. Really. In certain times of Hildegard Bauer quite often they had none of these things too: and also no meat, bread, butter, flour; just the stinging nettles.*

*Christmas and spices* Jews and food? (Dare I utter the predictable . . . ovens?)

. . . *in the course of their voyaging the Dutch (in search of spices) discovered Australia* Later, *spices ceased to be one of the dynamics of history.* Could there be a connection between these two occurrences?

*The influence of geography on social history is well illustrated in a comparison between the Inca civilisation and ancient Egypt. Because of the certain fertility of the Nile valley, much of the skilled and unskilled labour under the pharaohs was used for building royal palaces and tombs. In Peru food was very difficult to grow, the main energies of the Incan culture were devoted to agriculture. In present day terms does this mean that since we as single persons can live without growing food, planting it, watering it, tending it, cultivating it, harvesting it, storing*

it, preparing it, cooking it - in other words, can walk around the corner to Mr Thirlwell's hot food shop and bring home a meal for several dollars - why are we not all as Leonardo or Michelangelo? If I was Spanish my name would not be Jesus.

*The sixteenth century saw the introduction of four social narcotics into Europe - coffee, tea, cocoa and tobacco. Tobacco? Something not for ladies. But coffee - coffee black bitter and strong. What Australians call coffee bears closer resemblance to dishwater. A murky milk for a people still not weaned from mother's breast.*

*Darkened by time to the colour of tea, my hands are. Once they were white; plump but dainty: now swollen and calloused. My wedding ring I prised off years ago - a reddish gold, in form possibly mistaken for a curtain ring. Pale tea, my hands, China tea. The sort of tea one drinks from an eggshell Dresden porcelain, the fired clay itself the color of an inside thigh. Ach yes, the body relates to everything.*

*At one period the noses of smokers were cut off in Russia. But not now. They love their fumes. The sulphurous smell of Russian petrol hangs over the cobbled streets of Magerdarm now. The soldiers rasp on Russian tobacco. The men in the factory roll cigarettes with paper closer to wood than rice. Softness is an antique quality in all things these days, gel?*

*Caffeine stimulates the nervous system. The nervous system? Why else would we Germans have been drinking so much of it - through several systems. At the very least every one desired it, whether they could afford it or not was another matter.*

*The Kaffeeklatsch in Magerdarm: deciding it was time to get fit, svelte and chic for all the new gowns and old husbands, we three sisters began to make gymnastics. Naturally all this exertion depleted, yes, the system, and created the need for sustenance. Our group of ladies could only of course retire to the café for cakes and coffee. Natürlich!*

*Today I read coffee could interfere with heart rhythm in people who already suffer from disturbances (perhaps this will be the cause of my death). Or the disintegrating alumina from the saucepan I heat it up in. I do not suffer from disturbances. Should there be any disturbances I would hear them. I am prepared.*

*My world is a collection of paper, cuttings, letters, Brief. They contain. They also emanate.*

*When sorrows began to multiply around him. Begin*



to sing. There is a melody, a melody. 'Stand up stand up . . .' had a sawtooth rhythmic line far too rigid and brittle to cope with the scissions when sorrows began to multiply. Around him.

*The precise diagnosis of the presence of disease.* Yes (P.D.P.D. – the initials of the man the granddaughter wanted to marry. Irrig. Irish.) But you see, what does it matter when all turns to ash? The presence of disease is indispensable. I could spit it out for you. I will have to regardless.

*Auenbrugger was a very fine composer and musician, but he was far more interested in diseases of the chest. Heartbeats . . . within the walls.* Oh no. Oh no. What would Schubert have to say about this? I will not listen to Wagner. Diseases of the heart?

*Incrustations of dried blood and pus proved . . . experience.*

*The conquest of pain eventually is not enough.* There's nothing. Enough. My belly like an obscene pregnancy. Skin flaps against the chest wall. There was a lady once. I have the photographs to prove it.

*Infinitude of the infinitesimal. Doctors begin to feel their own helplessness.*

In the hospital where accidental amputations are performed my body lies on a bed and there I am above. The grand-daughter swims through the air (sometimes she the size of buildings sometimes just a duckturn while waiting for a tram). I do not fly nor swim. I give my daughter a dissertation on the meaning of life:

Night.

A weatherboard house, timber furniture.

A single bed pushed up into the corner of the back room. At its head, a full bookshelf topped with a cabinet radio and desk lamp; underneath, stacks of papers. At the foot, a pile of papers partly covered with a crumpled synthetic floral bedspread. To the right, on a bedside table, a mass of letters in opened airmail envelopes and several collations of newspaper cuttings all spilling over the half-dozen medicine bottles with their varied contents and almost identical printed labels.

Three pillows support the lolling head of an elderly woman. Her mouth hangs open, her breathing is discord of phlegm and flesh. A greyish dressing gown is half wrapped around her shoulders.

The papers smoulder.



Peter Murphy



I wake up flying somewhere over the Pacific, and a line comes to me: 'Thus, in the beginning, all the World was America . . .'. It is John Locke, expounding his theory of property in his *Second Treatise of Government*. I have been teaching Locke this semester along with Pope, Johnson, Boswell, Burke and some others, looking at some of the ways in which money and property figure in 18th-century literature, and I find I know bits and pieces of Locke's treatise by heart. America, for Locke, was a place where "no such thing as money was anywhere known"; but he had a shrewd idea what would happen when it was introduced there: "Find out something that hath the use and value of money amongst his neighbours, you shall see the same man will presently begin to enlarge his possessions". Semester has ended, I tell myself, and all those essays really have been marked. I try to get some more sleep, dozing a little, stretched out as well as a Qantas economy seat allows, giving myself up to images of the Manhattan skyline, Yale University, and the melancholy face of John Locke that looks toward you as you pick up his great work. Now he is not telling me about money but merely asking if I would like some earphones for the in-flight movie. I jolt awake from a deep sleep of some thirty seconds, and take the earphones from the steward.

Strange as it seems, going to New York is a little like going home. Although I was born in England, and have lived most of my life in Australia, there is a part of me that only comes alive when in America. I do not have a name for that part of me, but I know that it has something to do with poetry. Like other Australian poets of my generation (and the generation before), the English poetry that first mattered to me, that spoke directly to me, was written by Americans. Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, W. S. Merwin, e. e. cummings, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Bly: these names, along

with a host of others, took over my adolescence, jostling with other, stranger names like Pablo Neruda, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Vasko Popa, Zbigniew Herbert, Salvadore Quasimodo and Yves Bonnefoy. For me, all those names will always be associated with the heat of an endless Brisbane summer: finding them in anthologies sold in the American Book Shop or the Red Book Shop, then taking them home, reading them to the beat of a fan churning the wet air. Almost inevitably, then, it is a steamy New York evening when the plane lands at Kennedy airport. I walk out through a pressing crowd of people, many waiting for individuals they don't know, some of them wearing placards with a stranger's name written in large block capitals.

You can buy a glossy calendar in New York which informs you of the poetry readings scheduled there for each day of the year. Luxuriant choices present themselves: I could hear two African poets at the Y, catch a cab updown and take in Anthony Hecht, then finish off the night on the lower East Side with an unprogrammed reading of local poets. The devotee of poetry readings never relies on the calendar, of course, but checks with a dozen sources - bookshops, universities, cafés, theatres and warehouses - before making a move. A few years ago in New York Richard Howard was reading poems by Alexander Pope. Howard arrived dressed for the reading in red shoes, socks and tie (everything else black). He had an audience of over four hundred people, all equally interested in exploring a singular idiom. Two questions: was the audience more intrigued by Howard or by Pope? and did he read these lines from *The Rape of the Lock*, or am I imagining it?

And now, unveil'd, the *Toilet* stands display'd,  
Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.  
First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores



With head uncover'd, the *Cosmetic* Pow'rs.  
A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,  
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;  
Th'inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,  
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.  
Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here  
The various Off'rings of the World appear;  
From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,  
And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.  
This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,  
And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box . . .

In New York too the "various Off'rings of the World appear"; it is a city that appropriates anything and everything, easily folding large cultural spaces into its bookshops, museums, even its street life. "You want to hear the latest in Brazilian lyric poetry? Sure, there's a reading tonight in Soho . . ." But it's a hot night, and it's been a long, long flight: I decide not to search out a reading.

If you buy a lot of books, especially poetry and criticism, it could possibly be less expensive to take a cheap flight to New York for one week a year and buy everything in one go rather than haunt the local Melbourne bookshops. The discerning poetry reader quickly develops a highly skewed mental map of New York: The Gotham Book Mart, Books and Co., New York University Bookroom. Vast as it is, the Strand Bookshop, down in the Village, is not famous for its poetry shelves. Amongst the tatty Victorian editions of Goldsmith, Crabbe and Longfellow you find lots of UQP poetry books all gathering dust. I pick up a volume out of curiosity, and realise that it's exactly the same book I looked at for exactly the same reason two years before. If Australian poetry moves slowly at the Strand, literary criticism has a rapid turnover, and what you don't put in your basket today may not be there tomorrow. Walking over to Washington Square, I look around the NYU Bookshop: bookcase after bookcase headed 'Literary Theory', followed by row after row of 'Literary Criticism'. Without a list of specific titles in hand, it's impossible to choose what you want. I've come to New York thinking I'll catch up on the latest material on Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas; but just to buy everything new on Heidegger would make my VISA card go limp.

The NYU Bookshop must have just about everything you want in poetry and criticism, but the shop that sets the pace and style of New York reading is Books and Co. on Madison Avenue. On your left as you enter you see 'The Wall', a vertical plane of select hardbacks and paperbacks. A glowing

review in *The New York Times* will secure you a place on The Wall; or by the same token, getting a niche there is as good as any review. Upstairs, more literary theory and literary criticism: an entire table of books by George Bataille is an eloquent reminder that French critique remains a powerful force in New York. I go through the criticism and theory shelves author by author: Adorno, Blanchot, Cixous, Derrida . . . then, approaching S, I find a notice taped beneath some books: Please do *not* push Edward Said off the shelf! A political city, this, at every point and at every level.

The first name on my mental list of poetry books to look for in America is A. R. Ammons. Last time I was in New York every shop in town had copies of *Sumerian Vistas*, *Lake Effect Country*, *Worldly Hopes*, *A Coast of Trees*, and here and there you might chance upon one of his earlier collections. This year, though, no Ammons at all; most places have one copy of the expanded *Selected Poems*, but that's it. In his magisterial *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye talks with high distaste of "the literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange. That wealthy investor Mr Eliot, after dumping Milton on the market, is now buying him again; Donne has probably reached his peak and will begin to taper off; Tennyson may be in for a slight flutter but the Shelley stocks are still bearish . . ." What's persuasive in the lecture theatre is not always convincing in the market, though, and in New York the bookshops reflect the rise and fall of stocks in contemporary poetry. Invest heavily in Rilke, they tell me, buy Charles Simic, James Wright; keep any Ashbery you have, but for goodness' sake dump Ammons, Bly, Duncan and O'Hara! (Literary history hardens one against fashion: I decide to keep firm hold of Ammons and Bly.) Needless to say, the bookshops are silent on the question of Australian poetry. One or two shops carry a copy of the American edition of Les Murray's *The Daylight Moon* or Chris Wallace-Crabbe's *I'm Deadly Serious*, and – apart from those dusty UQP volumes in the Strand – that's it.

The first poet I encountered as an undergraduate at ANU in 1973 was Alvin Feinman. I had read quite a bit of modern American poetry while at school (as an escape from the Queensland curriculum, not as part of it); but had never heard of Feinman. For the first tutorial, however, we had to read some of his poems from our anthology, John Hollander's luminous *Poems of Our Moment*. I will always remember those first moments in







to all those letters that keep arriving. "One day I will answer", he says, "One day when I am dead and can at last concentrate. Or at least so far away from here that I can find myself again. When I'm walking, newly arrived, in the big city, on 125th Street, in the wind on the street of dancing garbage. I who love to stray off and vanish in the crowd, a capital T in the mass of the endless text".

On the way to lunch, walking down Fifth Avenue, I pass a double trestle covered with popular books on Kabbalah surrounded by people who have stopped to look for a bargain or a guide. A fast, dangerous city, this: people want to know what's going to happen a minute or so ahead of time. If Kabbalah won't deliver the goods, then there are plenty of astrologists. Or perhaps these people flicking through books on *Zohar*, gazing at diagrams explaining the *sefirot*, have tried the astrologists, and find they need something slower, a guide to themselves. Well, Kabbalah will slow them down, I think to myself, going over to see what's on offer. I look for Bloom's *Kabbalah and Criticism*, but with no intention to buy. (In book shops I develop a proprietary interest in books that mean a lot to me: H'm, I see they're out of Stevens's *Collected Poems* . . . Wonder who bought that copy of *What Is Called Thinking?* . . .) We try to possess our great loves, even as we let them go.

Having just marked a batch of essays partly on Locke, his words come easily to mind: "Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property". When Bloom reads a poem by Hart Crane or Wallace Stevens, or an essay by Emerson, Nietzsche or Freud, he joins to it "something that is his own", he appropriates it, makes it a kind of property. I remember something to the point in his *The Anxiety of Influence*, and later look up the book in Yale's main under-graduate library:

Poetic misprision, historically a health, is individually a sin against continuity, against the only authority that matters, property or the priority of having named something first. Poetry is property, as politics is property. Hermes ages into a bald gnome, calls himself Error, and founds *commerce*. Intrapoetic relations are neither commerce nor theft, unless you can conceive of family romance as a politics of commerce, or as the dialectic of theft it becomes in Blake's *The Mental Traveller*. But the joyless wisdom of the family romance has little patience for such minor

entities as might entertain economists of the spirit. Those would be generous, little errors, and not grand Error itself. The largest Error we can hope to meet and make is every ephebe's fantasia: quest antithetically enough, and live to beget yourself.

I read American poetry all the time. Why? It is (and has been for the past century) the only poetry written in English that speaks distinctly, powerfully and directly. The high clarity of sublime poetry is only reached by going inward, toward a dark region that perhaps contains the self or – equally likely – the not-self; and proceeding along that path one begins to realise that directness is the most mazy thing around. All the same, when reading literature we are always in quest for the unique, the untranslatable idiom. You hear it in every drug-store, every diner, in New York. John Ashbery's got it easy, I half-think, all he's got to do is sit down here and write it all down. (Which is like saying that Boswell had nothing but plain sailing, just having to sit at the Mitre, drink port, and report Johnson's pronouncements.) Being overseas you hear idiom more finely, American idiom and, by a reflex action, Australian idiom, too. In a 1983 interview with *Le Nouvel Observeur*, Jacques Derrida tell us that the word 'idiomatic' means, "A property you cannot appropriate"; and he goes on to say that "it somehow marks you without belonging to you. It appears to others, never to you – except in flashes of madness which draw together life and death, which render you at once alive and dead". Where would I have to stand to hear myself, to catch my own idiom, my self? There are moments when death invades life, to be sure; but are there times when my *own* death invades my *own* life? The question gathers force around me as I drink more coffee; but gets pushed around by other questions, "Can you own your life? Your death? Are they possessions, property?"

Years ago when leaving America for Australia, the last thing I saw at Kennedy airport was an African-American man in a T-shirt which proclaimed, "When you leave New York you ain't going nowhere". Perhaps the world is now ruled by the Yen, not the US dollar; but it's far harder to leave New York than Tokyo. For you can never completely leave New York, even if you wanted to. Its traces are everywhere. You can either live there, or live in its shadow. I can imagine a history book written in the future in which, reflecting on late 20th-century cultural and nuclear politics with a mixture of grief and puzzlement, the author can do no better than begin her chapter, tongue in cheek: "Thus, at the end, all the world was America . . .".



## FROM: PLACING THE SONNET SERIES

### Letter play a la Derrida

It might be a priori but it is not a priority knowing  
it is only an 'i' with a 't'  
Added, yet it stands for all that which is unmanly,  
for the neutered not  
Androgynous universe. This type of  
reconstruction shows the difference 'i'  
Can make to sound inferences, that the  
phallogocentric can, after all, become  
Phonocentric when all is on and the look is  
sound. For instance, here is  
Some cant, 'Can' with a t added, not the thieves'  
language, but part of the  
Kant of deconstruction, drawn from the truth in  
painting and signifying a  
Figure inside and outside at the same time,  
literally an *hors d'œuvre*, on the  
Sidelines, out of the work, like letter play, which  
at the risk of crossing it  
Out, nominalises this network of lines. There is  
something - and maybe  
This is it - in the adroit play of typography,  
glassy reflections of a mind in  
Action, beyond the scrabble for meaning. There  
is much more painting in  
The woe and ardour of words than the letters  
can ever draft into sense.

### Post-modernist fantasia in Brisbane's C.B.D.

He could see the citations on a mental video: a  
cuisine of Leotard's, the  
Foreign accents of an umbrella dessert that  
shielded him from acute  
Intellectual rasure. The amplitude of Foucault's  
pendulum was echoing in  
The puns if not the punishment. Who said  
Derrida made no difference to  
The typo's. Behind a Victorian facade, the Myer  
Centre, a mercantile  
Habitat cum bread and circus machine, showed  
its post-modernist lines. Its  
Metal unconscious exposed to deficit figures, its  
ever moving stares and  
Guarded galleries of manufactured dreams,  
evoke imaginary synergies of  
Piranesi's Carcere set to music and light. This is  
just the atrium to keep  
The prisoners of consumption free and frenzied.  
Professeur Foucault, the  
Panopticon has gone electronic. The security  
cameras have traversed the  
Shopstore of his mind, recording deferential  
thefts from Lyotard's *Nouvelle  
Philosophie*. All this from a piece of silicon  
disciplined to say yes to  
Everything. Now, that is the power of  
microphysics over this Topos.



## North Stradbroke Island Trilogy

1.

In championing the trivial, the language of captions is conspicuous in the Falseness of its praise. There is no animadversion in advertising, only Errors. On North Stradbroke they specialise in the creative use of the Blackboard to capture custom, to purchase the driven eye. In the font of Lettery exaggeration live and cured beach worms, tailor and fresh sandies Bait the surfing Baudelaires on Dickson way, giving new dimensions to the Hyperbolised messages of capital. Not to overstate the matter, a point to Lookout for, close to Adder Rock, is "Myora Pies, the best in the world." Naming pies after places is, after all, a recurring theme in the Australia Cuisine, as if the pastry and the meat take on the taste of the typography As in Brie. Yet these pies, whose sound evokes a gallish preciousness and Art in an age of mechanical reproduction, exist in name only, as a solitary Epitaph in a eucalypt forest, tantalising those captious epicureans Determined to relish their own hyperbole in the aura of Adder's surf.

2.

At the Community Club, the sound boxes are in place, the lights in motion. With Cholestrol and enough power to stomach the evening's bitterness, Amity's dancing to Jo-Jo's rage machine. With music borrowed from the History of rock, these rough and tumble Pisceans, gambolling with Enebriation, fawn to aquarian dreams of a big catch. Stereo technology has Added new blues to the drama of life, new cassettes for the memory. Gypsy Kings in one ear, John Cougar out the other. The transformation is almost Audible in the electronic circuitry of the social cocktail, in the power of Sound to amplify the worldliness of Amity. As marriages twist and jive Themselves into existence and anniversaries announce themselves to Elvis,

The chicken dance has the whole hall flapping and clucking its fingers. For The students of culture, visiting this nightspot of populism, who did not Know the real movement of 'world' music, there was more than a note of Exposition in a München drinking song translated into Amity accents.

3.

Amity Point is no place for the date hungry. There is no cemetery Commemorating surgeon generals and quaranteen station commandants. The only official monument to history is the plaque alongside the jetty, Which sets in stone Mr Coleby's contribution to waters and harbors; like An Exclamation mark in the bay, an ironic construction on the erosion, it Seems to lure all of Amity to its end - at least it appears that way. It is a Monument to the practices of everyday life, to the power of labor over Maritime forces. As the ratchets of the fishing rods cast lines into space and Words of piscatorean lore are aired on how to microwave the butterbream, A mother schools her children in the technology of death. She disentangles Their lines, rebaits their hooks. A still life in the turbulence of childhood, There is no resistance to her tuition. In the sediment of memory, even the Most prosaic can become history when the plaque belongs to poetry. No Wonder the fish seek internment when repast is such a tasteful change.

4.

The trilogy was no New York, though its interiors, like the ultra-violet sun Were acutely felt, subtitled the cosey cottage, adding work to the austere Bliss. Less accustomed to the habits of the flesh, they amused themselves With crosswords and in their most sublunary moments developed a taste For farinaceous food in the city of glass. With hessian ideas watered Down with chardonnay, they listened to conversations about there being



No word in French for foreplay and pondered on  
ghosts in anagrams, the  
Hidden meanings in scrambled words.  
Language games are not just part of  
Philosophy, they are a way of life, and come in  
squares where nothing is  
Exactly black and white only cryptic. They are  
part of a life sentence, the  
Subject and its verb. We cannot, after all, talk out  
way out of language, it  
Is part of the baggage of existence which defines  
our relationship to life;  
Like the French and their sexual operas without  
overtures. Or the puritan  
English who have to make their holidays  
otherwise they work at them.

COLIN SYMES

### DEREGULATION, MY ARSE

Tristesse, trimaran, Tricontinental,  
wheycoloured politicians adrift  
in their daggy jogging shorts  
have got into harebrained competition  
with their chums, the feral bankers,  
to stuff the country completely.

Electric-blue, the big day comes  
when hornyhanded Labor finally drops  
the last pine plank from  
what might have been its platform,  
to use a spatial metaphor  
stuffing the country completely.

Dear Federal Treasurer,  
may all your nightmares be tortoises  
while the PM trowels pure crap  
onto his toast, like honey,  
and Libs keep shooting their toes off, trying  
to stuff the country completely.

*'La ci darem la mano'*  
when everything goes down the gurgler  
that John on dusty Patmos expected.  
Wimpish, plotless novellas  
will drip off our presses this year  
stuffing the country completely.

But let's end the whole thing neatly  
in the rouged, wimpish nineties  
with a pick-up footy match  
between Marxizing shits and the IPA  
(the losers to be disembowelled)  
and stuff the whole country completely.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE



## MUM'S DIARY

mum writes to dad every day  
just telling him what she's been doing  
well gerry & barbie have a bouncing boy  
this time round, poor old aunty nell's  
finally gone,  
poor dear  
my old lady in th home turned 100  
just last week,  
she went into a coma  
but I saw her peeking at th telegram  
irish or not,  
they cut out that bit  
on my tongue,  
now I'm as right as rain  
I know I'm rambling as usual  
they've closed down th local shop  
but gloria & gordon help out with th groceries  
you'll be pleased to hear that they've split up  
tho' it was eighteen years,  
gordon will have to  
come to terms with it,  
th way gloria's talking  
poor gordon, & him with his knee operated on  
so he could keep trying to beat her at squash  
eric's pinching grandad's letters for his poems  
it was good to meet your mother at last  
if only in a photo,  
I know your dad did promise  
to tell you who your mother was,  
in his will  
we weren't to know that you'd die first  
he lasted til he was ninety th old devil  
his eighty-nine year old brother clem  
strolled over at th funeral & said -  
'well molly,  
if I'm ever going to break my word  
in this life,  
I'd better do it now'  
& show me th photo with her name on th back  
she was pretty  
determined jaw  
th blacksmith's daughter,  
so it wasn't all for nothing

all my love  
molly

ERIC BEACH

## TWO POEMS BY JOHN PHILIP

### THRENODY

Since my father died  
his nonagenarian face  
watches from mirrors,  
old meat without grace.

The wizened visage  
for the moment masks  
eyes full of the world,  
a brain that asks.

I'll live on my wits  
a few years more,  
though none escape  
the Second Law.

And genes are nicely tuned  
to a trivial cause:  
their own survival,  
not mine, nor yours.

### FOUR DIMENSIONS

Now is here  
and then is there.  
Speech is palimpsest  
and music golden wires.

Human life is  
stretched symmetrically  
from the progenitive worm  
to the funebral one.

Peer ahead at the past.  
Unseen, the future  
stumbles behind you.

Never is nowhere  
and always is everywhere.



## WOMAN AS JUG/ THE 'BLUE LADY' POEM

*A real thrillin' game  
of the old fuckin' bull  
I handed in, today, lady* – the speaker  
swaying on his way to get some  
lifesustaining plonk  
to put in the empty,  
jug-like, blue  
malleable container, it being  
half after four – p.m. – he  
having 'signed off'  
from whatever it was  
that he'd  
done – that he'd  
dismissed – with such  
mustard-mouthed self-derision.

Stout baby pigeons with stubs for tails  
& shoulders built like sumo wrestlers  
scatter, street-smart,

from the weaving,  
mocking course  
his squash-a-bird-or-kick-it feet  
might take – with viciousness –  
over the Neild Avenue pavement. He

is heading roughly for the Cross & it 's  
too near for him to be sober –  
sour – when he gets there. It was he  
bashed in a glass  
& timber door, late, one  
moon-away, bleakish night back in winter –  
his need found a backstreet's junk – a  
part white-ant-rotted spar of timber –  
he used that – to spring his force through  
into a renovated chicken shed where he  
bashed you from your handbag with its  
food-money – thirty dollars.

*(Another real unthrillin' game  
of the old fuckin' bull,  
that night, blue lady?)*

Subliminal  
glimpse, in a smash of glass,  
he lives – like this? – & also  
heaving bricks through car  
back windows/ seizing/ by accident  
of finder/ heroin stash in a worker's lunchbox/  
cassettes – or better –  
cash – to fill the thirsty mouth  
of the mute & docile  
greedy blue container.

All his seasons are in it:  
whether it 's empty or full.  
Eyes say – he 's not worth a song – ;  
he makes his own: singing to no one  
dancing to nothing.

When its mouth's full,  
mouth to mouth, he & it  
sway together, fucking deep,  
having their own  
bitter party . . .

He'd spit in your sheep-stupid face  
if you offered help – food, a bed – money –  
& bash  
you blind when your back  
was turned – to steal

some  
of what you'd offered. There's too  
much anger – & raging pride – for him to ever  
get what the blue jug wants  
except by raiding for it/ smash & grab/  
against the world/ or perhaps –  
if he could find one to gull – by conning  
a holy innocent.

One day he'll think a person dead:  
unless he does extra well by it,  
he'll not remember killing anyone . . .  
Not a crease on his paper face . . .  
Not a scratch on the blue lady . . .

All his reasons live in the jug.  
Empty or full is the only weather.  
If it's full, it loves him.

It is  
his blue  
lady of the air  
& true  
to him only.

J. S. HARRY



## TWO POEMS BY HEATHER CAM

### THE FRIDGE

Mother stepped back  
as though she'd been hit in the face  
and she had,  
hit squarely  
by the white arctic spaces  
in my half-size fridge.

But what took Mother aback  
(more than how little my fridge contained)  
was what it so visibly lacked.  
It was true  
bean-sprouts and root-ginger,  
aubergine and yogurt  
didn't conjure up my childhood  
and memories of Mother's meals  
and her after-school snacks.  
The few brown paper bags  
humped in my fridge  
were no consolation.  
No, the food in my fridge  
offered Mother no comfort:  
there wasn't enough of it  
and it wasn't the right sort.  
It offended, it frightened,  
it filled Mother with horror  
to think she'd raised a daughter  
who had a fridge  
like that!

### LOOKING BACK

As a kid  
I always did  
things-attached-to-strings  
yoyos and tetherballs,  
hammocks and swings,  
cat's cradle, bat-a-ball,  
and that's not all,  
I had a mini-parachuter  
and a paper kite.  
Strings -  
that's what I liked.

It was years later  
they discovered  
my sight  
wasn't quite right.

*"Correction and apology. We published in error only part of "The Fridge" in Overland 119 and compounded the error by publishing the missing part of this poem as part of "Looking Back" in Overland 121. Our sincere apologies to the author."*



## TWO POEMS BY GEOFFREY DUTTON

### ANIMAL KINGDOM

Little Amanda  
Was always terrified of the animal kingdom.

What if the tortoise-shell cat, so sleepy-fluid,  
Sprang on her back with soundless paws  
And sunk in those bag-needle claws?

What if the white cocky,  
So benign, with his sideways glance,  
Bypassed the sunflower seeds  
And closed his beak on her coaxing finger?

What if in spring she was walking  
Between the willow and the lemon-scented gum,  
Listening to the magpie's dreamy gurgle,  
And down came a black-and-white arrow  
To delve in the roots of her downy hair?

Little Amanda,  
She seemed as transparent as tears.  
Compared to the animals, she was also  
Simply dangerous as glass.

### BARON-KUKUP, SOUTH JAVA COAST

*For Emma*

We came to the strange, familiar sea  
By hills of rock terraced with stones  
Like black, socketed skulls.

Whiskered fish and hammerhead sharks  
Hung from the mango-trees, and on the dark  
sand  
Slender fishing-boats balanced on outriggers.

We swam in the friendly sea, inside the sandbar  
Where warm springs bubbled against our cool  
limbs.  
A man brought his creamy oxen down to drink

And they stood belly-deep in the pale water  
As he washed them. A fishing-boat slid  
Down the surf by the cape, and everyone ran

To push it by the outriggers up on the sand  
And peer into the belly of the boat at the sharks,  
Ribbon-fish, mackerel, starfish and murex shells.

We bought five fish and had them grilled,  
And as we were eating a man came  
Jogging down the hills with a python

In a plastic bag over his shoulder. The chillis  
On the fish cut like the sun through thunder-  
clouds.  
We drove back, foreigners in the terraces

Where in the desperate patches of earth  
The size of a mini-bus, you can count  
The green seedlings of maize or tamarind.

Only the sea was the same, the salt on our skins  
Gently prickling as we edged past  
The washed oxen drifting home.



# » The Gremlits «

Lofo identifies some invisible little critters that really do exist.

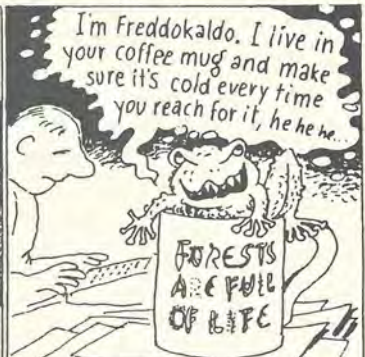


I'm Plotto the Nocturnal, supplier of brilliant plots that evaporate at sunrise



I'm a PC switchbug. Every time you type "the," I turn it into "teh." I have 28 ways of spelling "unnecessarily."

Spellcheck? I eat spellcheck for breakfast!



I'm Freddokaldo. I live in your coffee mug and make sure it's cold every time you reach for it, he he he.

FORESTS ARE FULL OF LIFE



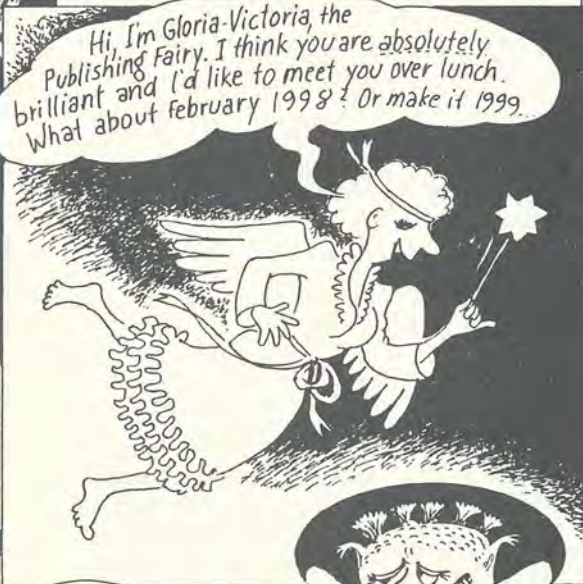
I am Nanette, patroness of daydreamers. I have many ways to entice you away from your typewriter. Self-abuse is a much under-rated source of enjoyment don't you think?



I'm Trixofix, controller of fleas and of room temperature and anything else that breaks concentration. I have shares in Atlas Air Compressors - listen, I think I hear one now...



I'm Muffi. I put invisible bags over the heads of authors being interviewed, causing audible panting and a stifling of witticisms...



Hi, I'm Gloria-Victoria, the Publishing Fairy. I think you are absolutely brilliant and I'd like to meet you over lunch. What about february 1998? Or make it 1999.

I'm Onko. Did you know you have cancer? Why bother, I'm tellin' you you'll never finish your novel anyway...



NANCY PHELAN

## Envoy

*From The Romantic Lives of Louise Mack to be published in April by University of Queensland Press. The writer Louise Mack (1870-1935), born in Hobart and educated at Sydney Girls' High School, was well known for her novels and books for children. She was on the staff of the Bulletin and author of its 'A Woman's Letter' from 1896 to 1901 when she left for England and Italy. Nancy Phelan is her niece. 'Envoy' is the final chapter of the book*

I have found the apartment by the Arno, the Villa Trollope, the Verdi and Niccolini Theatres, the Pergola, where Louise saw Duse in *Hedda Gabler*. I have walked along via San Gallo, looking for the building that held the office of *The Italian Gazette*, and as well as San Miniato I have searched unsuccessfully in the cemetery outside Porta Romana and in the raised oval island of headstones and cypresses at Piazzale Donatello, where Elizabeth Barratt Browning lies under a monstrous sarcophagus designed by Lord Leighton.

Villa Trollope is easy to find, on the corner of via V.Salvagione and via V.Dolfi, facing Piazza Indipendenza. It is still large and impressive but its setting has changed. The garden with the lemon trees has been built over, though a few disheartened leaves appear above the wall; the Piazza is now slightly scruffy, the lawns have bald patches, colored youths and young back-packers squat in the sun and eat out of plastic bags at the base of Bettino Ricasoli's elegant figure.

The villa itself has a sign saying *ENTE. Ferrovie della Stato*. I am not allowed in to look for Room 30.

"All offices, signora. No garden," says the man in the hall. He has never heard of the Trollopes and seems surprised when I point to the plaque above the door. Today is 12th April and the plaque says:

*Il giorno 13 Aprile 1865, morì in questa casa Theodosia Garrow Trollope, che scrisse in Inglese con animo Italiano delle lotte e del trionfo della libertà.*

"She wrote in English with an Italian soul," I say. "She died here exactly a hundred and twenty-five years ago."

"Ah si," the doorman replies, humoring me. Then he lifts his chin and pronounces the word that explains all forms of foreign madness. "*Inglese!*"

In 1944 the Germans mined the Florentine bridges, though they spared the Ponte Vecchio. Buildings along the river were damaged or destroyed and as I cross the reconstructed Santa Trinitá I wonder about Number 20 Lungarno Acciaiuoli. It is very close to the bridge but it looks much as it does in Zocchi's 18th century engraving. It might have escaped destruction. It is slightly shabby, yellow, with brown shutters and little iron balconies and an unpretentious sort of penthouse on the top.

The heavy arched door is ajar so I push it open and trespass. Inside is a stone floor and a notice that says VIETATO INTRODURRE CICLO EL MOTO. The curving stone stairs look neglected and very worn, they may be the ones that Louise climbed. I see from the bells outside that her first-floor apartment is now an analyst's rooms.

There are shops on each side of Number 20, traffic tears frantically past and tourists shrink back against the wall by the Arno. The air is full of fumes and noise but the view of the bridge and the river have not changed, there are still lamps to shine down on the water and perhaps throw reflected light into the rooms of the analyst.

With my *Geographica Militare* map of the country round Florence I set off to look for the Villa Masini. I am hoping to find information at the Harvard Centre for Renaissance Studies, in Berenson's villa, I Tatti.

"Don't go right up to Settignano," says the friendly Italian librarian when I telephone. "Get



off at Ponte a Mensola. It's only ten minutes' walk."

But the bus swirls me on up Viale Gabriele D'Annunzio to the terminus so I will walk across country to the villa, just over the Fiesole border.

Settignano has not changed since I saw it last year. The clock still says 3.45 (or 9.15); Niccolo Tomaseo, the church, the bell-tower with its witch's hat, still doze in the sun, there is still a great clamor of bells at midday. Cars still slither down the steep hill but it is early April, the full tourist season has barely begun.

On a stone bench in the piazza I study my map. I see that the via Capponcina meanders downhill, past D'Annunzio's villa, where the via della Madonna della Grazie branches off and goes uphill again to Ponte a Mensola. It is a longer road than the bus route but part is marked as unsurfaced and the cold, clear spring day is perfect for walking.



Portrait of Louise in London (Source Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

At first, villas and gardens are so close together I might be in an affluent suburb; then comes D'Annunzio's la Capponcina, with spikes on top of its high yellow wall and large excluding gates. The villa is not visible but I am more interested in Duse's house across the road.

As I turn into Madonna della Grazie there are glimpses of la Capponcina and its grounds, but soon I am on a real country road with the great Villa Strozzi on one side and on the other a view down over vivid green farmlands. There is no one about. I pass a workman who says, "*Buon giorno*", and an elderly lady, perhaps English or German, cautiously riding a bicycle in the middle of the road. The air is scented and there are wild flowers by the path.

Ponte a Mensola is not spectacular but beyond it the road to Berenson's villa runs by the side of a stream and leads into beautiful country. Spaced out on the hills are villas and farms and at a fork in the road there is a board with the names of painters, writers, sculptors, architects, scholars, philosophers - Italian, English, American - who lived or worked in the district.

Walking along the shady banks of the Mensola, picking my way through the poppies that grow in the grass, I come to another fork in the road. There is a cottage and water rushing under a bridge and a road wandering into the hills. A sign says *San Martin a Mensola* and I long to explore but the dark trees of I Tatti are just ahead so I walk on up to the gates.

I am not very optimistic about finding the information I need. The Villa Masini is not among the properties shown on my map and I fear it may not have been important enough to be written about. When the Librarian at the British Institute suggested the Harvard Centre it had seemed a good idea, but the trouble is that I know almost nothing about what I am seeking. I have only a name, found in a newspaper prone to printer's errors, a name that could mean a house or a family or both, since villas were sometimes called after those who owned them.

In the library at I Tatti pools of light shine down on polished tables and up into shadowy bays of books. Time passes but I make no progress, no history of Settignano mentions the villa or family Masini; then, perhaps intrigued that I have come from Australia in search of an obscure villa that is not even listed, three young librarians come to the rescue. In a huge volume, Luigi Zangheri's *Ville della Provincia di Firenze*, we find that the pink house has been hiding under its alias. Its proper name is Villa di Doccia and in Louie's day it was known by the name of the family to whom it at one time belonged.

Once more I arrive in Settignano with my map but I now have the pages photocopied for me at I Tatti.



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His car reached Settignano, turned to the right through the dirty little beautiful village and along the road that ran swiftly out into the open country . . . exquisite villas among their black cypresses . . . the faraway purple Apennines golden in the sunset . . . The grass on the hillside was red with wild tulips and early poppies . . . the green shutters and pale pink walls of his home came gleaming at him through the twilight . . .

This is Louie's description of Denis Arden returning to his Villa Virgilio, but it is a bright spring morning as I also turn to the right out of the piazza and walk down the via del Rossellino. Sunlight drenches the olive trees, the warmth brings out scents of rosemary, lilac, wistaria. In the gardens, azaleas, purple iris, immense tulips grow under fig, loquat, blossoming fruit trees. Smooth complacent cats sun themselves on roofs, doorsteps, windowsills; blackbirds are beside themselves with happiness and little birds twitter and swoop. Ahead on the skyline are pines and thick groves of cypress.

So much sun, so many flowers and scents, so much beauty. I sit on the low stone wall by the roadside and look down, across the green amphitheatre of olive groves, strewn with buttercups, daisies, red poppies and great purple iris growing wild. Across the road are thick hedges of rosemary and far below is Florence. The sun glints on windows, small distant sounds float up and suddenly I hear a cuckoo, faint and far, but clear.

I have often been critical of Louie's over-ecstatic descriptions. Now I feel I should beg her pardon.

A pretty girl passes carrying a tiny puppy. I ask if I am on the right road to la Gamberaia and she says Yes, but that it is terribly far. She seems to doubt that I will make it.

It is not at all far but even if it were I should not notice the distance, not only because of the sun, the scents, the birds but because I am possessed by an extraordinary feeling of recognition. I have never been on this road before but it is familiar, there are no real surprises. Months of reading and thinking about Louie and now literally following her footsteps have brought the odd sensation of having become the young Louise of a lifetime ago.

*Clang! Clang! Clang!* It is midday. The bell-tower in the piazza has gone into action. I pass a group of houses and already can see my principal landmark, the famous Villa Gamberaia. Just beyond it I should find the Villa di Doccia. La Gamberaia's great gardens have been described by Edith Wharton, Janet Ross and many others but it is too late to see them, it is twelve o'clock and the gates close as I reach them.



Suddenly I feel nervous. The search for this house has been like an obsession; now it is almost over I do not know what I shall find. Will the pink villa be there? Will it be a disappointment? Modernised? Spoilt? The description speaks of a high wall. Will I be able to see anything? Have I come to the right place? I glance at my photocopied directions.

*“Dopo il cancello di villa ‘Gamberaia, salendo verso via del Crocefisalto, la residenza di Doccia si mostra sulla sinistra . . .”*

I have passed the gates of la Gamberaia; the road climbs, there is a wall on my left and beside it a lane that leads uphill. Ahead is a sign pointing to Crocefisalto and where road and lane meet there is a corner shrine in the wall, with a madonna. It is the right place. I have found the pink villa.

The wall is high, nothing is visible but the tops of trees, a glimpse of a roof. I walk up the lane by the wall of the house but the windows here are shuttered and all seems deserted. A few steps more and I come to the gates. They are open and inside I see a courtyard and a wall covered with small yellow climbing roses. The scene is so *simpatico*, so informal that I venture in and knock on the door.

A grey-haired woman appears. She has a sweet face and seems not at all surprised by my story. She tells me her name is Cristina. Suddenly I am inside the pink house, in the wonderful salon that Louise described as the only room she had ever known that was too beautiful for flowers. Books piled everywhere, old elegant furniture, and beyond the long windows, the garden, the view. If I could sit here, with time to absorb it all . . . but it is a private house and the owner is away.

In the garden I talk to Cristina’s husband, Emile, who tells me about the villa. Since Louise lived here the entrance and drive have been altered, a previous owner converted some of the farm land into gardens and there is a swimming pool under the trees, but sunlight, flowers, blackbirds, olive trees, the view are unchanging and so is the house itself. Square, with a little tower, green shutters and faded terra-cotta pink walls, it looks out over its garden, past la Gamberaia’s magnificent groves of cypress, away down the green amphitheatre towards Florence.

I walk slowly back to the village, stopping frequently to sit on the low wall. I feel that I am returning from a past life or emerging from a powerful dream that continues long after walking. It seems almost miraculous that the villa should be unchanged, that this idyllic landscape has escaped the greed of developers. I realise that it

is valuable farming land, owned and worked, that perhaps the pink house has survived because it was once part of la Gamberaia. There were many good springs on di Doccia’s *podere* and in 1623, needing water for his gardens, the owner of Gamberaia bought the property, house and farm.

None of these explanations diminish my wonder at finding it all unspoilt by time.

The walls of the Settignano burial ground are lined with cypresses, there is a waterfall outside the gates. The graves are ablaze with flowers but none of the headstones carry the name I am looking for. I will never find it now but I no longer care, even though I think I have found the grey stone house “high on the hills above Fiesole”. It has the farmlands and gardens and woods, and perhaps the stone floors and painted ceilings, the loggia with the fantastic view, but I shall not find out. I have no proof that I am right and I feel that it doesn’t matter now. The whole story could be a fiction.

For days I have walked about the hills, taking promenades recommended to readers of *The Italian Gazette*, on paths that Louise must have known. Up to Vincigliata, to Crocefisalto; down the beautiful via Desiderio di Settignano to Corbignano; past the Casa di Boccaccio to Ponte a Mensola. To San Martino a Mensola, one of Tuscany’s oldest churches, said to contain the remains of an Irish saint; up the hill past Poggio Gherado, where Boccaccio’s three youths and seven ladies first sheltered from the plague, and further again, past the Villa Machiavelli, the Villa Palmieri where the Decameron story-tellers finally stayed; past farms and banks of iris and bay and men who sing as they trim their olive trees; on up to Fiesole.

After knowing all this richness, how could Louise, with her romantic passion for beauty, endure life in a back street of Chatswood, the ugliness of her pathetic absurd Villa d’Estes, the restrictions of urban poverty, the rejection and humiliation she met? It is easy to say she had always survived by retreating into a fantasy world, imagining herself somewhere else; the real explanation lies in her courage, her refusal to be defeated, her love of being alive.

Her life had rarely been easy; even in Settignano there had been “times of waking in the morning with a feeling that the day must be *endured* . . .”, when she felt “that to be dead is to most truly express yourself . . .”. There were days of depression when she saw herself “so twisted and muddled, so expressive of what I am not; so false and unreal and unlike my other Self . . .” – the self she hoped was immortal; but no matter how low her spirits,



how deep her despair there had always been the moment when "I looked up and saw the olives on the hillside; The wind touched them. The whole hillside turned from grey to silver as the leaves turned. And in a moment I felt my courage flash back. Ah, that feeling of something breaking through one's misery and tiredness and disillusionment! Something sharp, bright, fleeting but *certain*, suddenly illuminating a hope to a fuller, more faithful life, somewhere else, some other time. Perhaps that is as perfect an emotion as we can get from life. It is the very essence of life itself.

When the moment passes and the light fades we are reconciled. We know that the divine gleam came then and so may come again."

Though so far from her beloved olive trees she had never lost this conviction. To the very end she could say, "I don't want to die! I want to get hold again, to grip life and myself.

"I'll begin tomorrow."

*Nancy Phelan's novels and travel books are well-known. Her most recent books are Home is the Sailor (Hyland House) and Charles Mackerras; A Musician's Musician (Gollancz/O.U.P.).*

### THE DESTRUCTION OF SYDNEY

The town planners are eating raw money,  
shitting out huge holes in the ground.  
Architects computing blueprints of the bank  
juggle laptop martinis with projected rents.  
Developers zap polaroids from helicopters:  
prime cut fillets of prestige CBD.  
Entire histories are wiped out in a week.  
Nooks, crannies, layerings of footsteps and  
whispers, reflections, urgent corridors all  
smashed to piles, loaded quickly into trucks.  
The deep holes wear high fences out of  
shyness,  
narrow slits where pedestrians peer in,  
see lithe men working, dot high in celestial  
cranes.  
Yellow pile-drivers on solid sandstone beds  
are banging steel rods through an ancient  
beach.  
The brainwaves of corporate clients, square-  
eyed  
with investment/return ratios and boggling  
estates  
are fed repeatedly into the small blue screens.  
Industrial sunsets, absolute waterfronts, the best.  
Some holes sprout complex foundations, and  
stop,  
all greys and rust. The big boys are going bust.  
Call in the foreign capital: from the skirts of  
Mother England to the pants of Uncle Sam, to  
the new  
silk suit of imperial Japan.  
Countryside starts arriving in heaps.

RICHARD TIPPING



GRAHAM ROWLANDS

## After Poetry 8, A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry

### STRUCTURE OF FEELING

I'm happy to review books individually, one by one and leave it at that. Sometimes, however, more can be attempted. As an undergraduate in English I read much Western literary criticism. The late Raymond Williams wasn't on the reading list. He was recommended by a tutor in Economics. (It was the late 1960s.) I've rarely read better literary criticism before or since. To become a true Williamsonian, it would be helpful to cover several centuries of writing, be commissioned to produce a full-length book and probably to have tenure as well. Even so, settling for less shouldn't mean ditching all of Williams.

The study of history is both precise and imprecise. The significant dates 1776, 1789, 1917 and 1949 are precise. Charting, say, the spread of democracy *can't* be precise. The small area of Australian poetry is also characterised by precision and imprecision. In 1986 John Tranter said (on an Australian Defence Force Academy video) that he no longer believed his Introduction to *The New Australian Poetry* (that large body of 1970s Modernism where notions of relativity and the subconscious produced self-referential poetry). In 1990 John Leonard's anthology *Contemporary Australian Poetry*, despite some glaring omissions, became the first anthology in twenty years to give a balanced coverage of 20th century Australian poetry.

The following categories receive fair representation: Modernists, non-Modernists, women and both ethnic and performance poetry. The first fifty pages create a major impact. Concentrating on poets born this century, Leonard follows A. D. Hope's four poems with two by Elizabeth Riddell and three by Barbara Giles. Anne Elder appears beside Rosemary Dobson and Gwen Harwood. The black performance poets Jack Davis and Oodgeroo Noonuccal appear beside Dimitris Tsaloumas.

Of course Leonard hasn't achieved everything. Jeff Guss, John Millett and Philip Neilsen are among the more important poets to be excluded. More of Tranter's 'Modernists' could have appeared. (Perhaps news of Tranter's video is spreading.) The ethnic coverage is better than the coverage of performance poets. The omission of the following is unfortunate: Eric Beach, P.O., Rae Desmond Jones, Billy Marshall-Stoneking, Nigel Roberts, Jas H. Duke, Shelton Lea, Geoff Goodfellow, Lyndon Walker and Jenny Boulton.

It may be that Leonard's anthology *expresses* changes rather than *makes* them. Even so, from now on any narrow-minded anthology will risk unfavorable comparison with Leonard's.

Like the anthology, this article covers some of the current diversity of Australian poetry. Any reader of Williams, however, knows that what appears to be significant now isn't necessarily what will have significance for future readers. For example, the Western world's changing attitudes towards nature over the past twenty years may be of more significance than any other changes. Robert Gray, Mark O'Connor and Jennifer Rankin hold or embody varying responses to nature. I've taken some pains to compare and contrast them accurately, though at a length which lets me give space to other poets.

Robert Gray's expanded *Selected Poems* reveals him as one of Australia's best lyric poets. It's impossible to overrate his visual imagery. He interrelates the elements. He compares and contrasts social constructs with the natural world and vice versa. His images are sometimes ends in themselves. More often they lead to, express and embody insights into the human and natural world. These poems already assure him of a permanent place in Australian poetry. If only he would leave it at that. All four of his collections, however, attest to his continuing



attempts to write political, historical and philosophical poems that remain beyond his poetic range.

A few vivid lines into 'After Writing All Day' Gray doubts whether he should be a poet, defending himself by saying that he has always loved direct and sensuous writing. 'Description of a Walk' embodies the defence. By the time he has described the walk, he claims to have forgotten its purpose. This is imagery for imagery's sake.

Imagery can also be used to express and embody meanings. 'Telling the Beads' is a Buddhist poem:

One drop is laid in each nasturtium leaf,  
round as mercury,

and there are several on  
every looped frond of the long flat grass;

these  
clear sacs of plastic, tucked and full.

Plump, uncontained water,  
precipitous,

held together by the air.  
They are the most fragile particulars . . .

This is authentic manna, it contains  
no message and no promise,

only a momentary sustenance.  
Run the drops from a stalk across your lip

they're lost  
in the known juice of yourself, after the  
ungraspable

instant. Long-reputed but unresponsive  
elixir.

Experiencing you, I see before me all the most  
refined  
consolations of belief and thought.

Many image clusters evolve into human significance. For example sex/love in 'Matins' and 'Rainy Windows', imagined flight in 'Byron Bay: Winter', illness in 'A Summer Evening' and the physicality of the solar system as encouragement to human perseverance in 'Mist'. But do human beings ultimately matter?

There are gradations of human disappearance from Judeo-Christian centre stage. In 'A Garden Shed' someone who sees that he's nothing will bear everything lightly. In 'Fire Sermon' genealogies are insignificant compared with moving sunlight. The scene in 'Very Early' would *exist without anyone*

*seeing it*. This isn't the Romantic agony. Or even the Romantic ego.

The most obvious examples of Gray's failed attempts at other kinds of writing are the two long poems 'Dharma Vehicle' where he argues about Socialism and Buddhism rather than embodying them and the recent 'Under the Summer Leaves' where he discovers a Buddhaless Japan buying up the Australian soil on which it's still possible to be a Buddhist. He lacks the poetic means to cover the history of religions and the economics of international trade.

I'm pleased to see him omitting unsuccessful political comment such as 'A Storm'. Perhaps he could also jettison the superficial and over-generalised 'Scotland, Visitation' and 'Walking in an American Wood'. He has rarely written well on overseas subjects, as, for example, on his American victims Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Zelda Fitzgerald.

When Mark O'Connor writes at his best in his selected poems *Fire-stick Farming*, he achieves fine poems about zoological and botanical life on earth. He doesn't write for poetry's sake, his own sake or the human race's sake, but for the inherently fascinating description of all cycles of nature. He's a genuine greenie:

On this cliff where the thistledown blows up  
a thousand feet a minute, the crow's soar  
tells all you need know of the mountain wind.

Humans aren't excluded completely. For example 'The Diver' contains underwater narrative when the poet is nearly trapped by a giant clam. Even in his best poems, however, humans receive a bad press. 'Wentworth Falls at Evening' ends:

Men have leapt from these heights  
to oblivion, wrapped  
in irrelevant words of cities.

In other poems humans receive almost *no* press. O'Connor simply describes clocks, surgical instruments and historical facts. Any comments aim to instruct the reader, not to focus or interpret, let alone provide meaning. Odd? Not from a poet who regards the human invention of the straight line as "meaningless".

His poems show continuous improvement in technique. His diction and rhythm have become more idiomatic and his visual imagery more vivid and frequent. He has gradually eliminated the personification of nature which always contradicted



his intentions. In fact he reversed the method of personification in the beautiful poem 'The Edge' where, rather more literally than Gray, he wants to be able to fly.

Despite improving technique, however, O'Connor continues to cause difficulties for the reader. Most poems aren't obscure but they're immensely detailed, even encyclopedic. While it might appear that his fascination with nature underlies his vast battery of data, he treats *everything* in the same way. It's difficult to imagine more *factual* poetry—factual about shipwrecks, sculptures, cities, philology, churches, human anatomy, quarantine stations. Detail for its own sake seems to underlie even his fascination with nature. I think this creates more difficulty than the poet's preference for the noddy tern over himself, his poetry and his readers.

Judith Rodriguez should be congratulated for editing Jennifer Rankin's *Collected Poems*. It consists of Rankin's collections *Ritual Shift*, *Earth Hold* and *The Mud Hut*, many uncollected poems and one of her six plays. It has to be said, however, that only the best of her uncollected poems, for example 'Earth Bird', would have enhanced her books. Moreover, the uncollected poems pose a problem for Rodriguez's Introduction. They contradict each other.

Biographical data *may* assist literary criticism. Rodriguez makes a plausible case for the relationship between Rankin and her poems. But I'm not sure that her best poems lend themselves to such a degree of psychological reduction. In fact her techniques seem to have been developed to avoid it and go beyond it. Ironically, the biographical interpretations are easy to confirm *only* in the uncollected poems where characters interact in comparatively clear, distinct and traditional literary relationships.

This isn't the way I read the collections. I'd trust the tale rather than the teller if it weren't for the fact that, in Rankin's case, the tale and the teller are one and the same. I believe her last line of 'Earth hold':

Pre-thought. Pre-history. Mapping out my  
landscape.

The poet calls up her subconscious in description that has little to do with society and human history. Any poem of hers shows excellent rhythm and timing. Her descriptive ability comes from juxtaposing moving shapes and colors; not from dazzling similes and metaphors. Using these

distinctive gifts, she made the immediate tensions, textures and structures of her poems into a search for lines of penetration between earth and sea, wind and sky, air and earth, wind and earth, cliff and sky and all the permutations created by adding trees and black wings.

Her best poetry reveals its origins about as easily as do the novels and stories of Franz Kafka. The head of a bird which becomes a human skull when seen sideways in 'Night Bird' is a horrific symbol of . . . what? Fear, oppression, death, schizophrenia, war, the survival of the fittest. In 'Forever the snake' the reptile is a moving line. It's also a killer and both a phallus and an ancient symbol of women. In arguably her most ambitious poem, Rankin chose the eternal striking of the snake to draw the line between space and time:

Far-out in space the snake is still speeding  
rushing through grass to attack.

Closer in space the spade has been raised.

Here on the grass the black nerve is broken.

Yet always the snake is now striking  
in the quiet, in the space beyond time.

Impressive! But it doesn't exist without Rankin, does it?

Katherine Gallagher in her most recent collection *Fish-rings on Water* practises the art of imaginative omission. Several members of her family have died untimely deaths. She's an expatriate. Several love affairs have resulted in loss and pain. Despite this, the overwhelming qualities of these crisp, clear poems are poise, fairness, understatement and a commitment to accuracy, as in:

the past without you seemed remote

The *past*. Her loss of Australia doesn't mean that she can't appreciate Europe anymore than European architecture obliterates the Australian sky which she wants to "store". It's no coincidence that 'Plane-journey Momentums' on the subject of international air travel is one of Gallagher's most successful poems.

In her first collection *The Moon's Hook* Heather Cam writes two kinds of poems: mainly autobiographical Australian-Canadian revelations about relationships but also exotic image clusters around specific items or feelings. She succeeds best when the autobiographical poems are concise and



employ studied timing, as in 'The soap lasts longer' about an ended relationship, 'Eradicative measures' about a relationship that's difficult to end, 'Beached' about suicidal whales and 'Tarot reading' about the poet suffering severe burns.

Her poems of intense visual detail are effective when inextricably connected to human significance. Some are better connected than others. The most effective are 'Songs for a lover', 'How I come to own a black leather jacket', 'The fridge' and 'Positive' where the newly pregnant Cam feels like:

. . . an ivory seed from India  
containing,  
smaller than a child's fingernail,  
a complex, carved elephant,  
perfect in every detail.

Jean Kent's recreation of childhood merges with her adult perspective on childhood in her first collection *Verandahs*. The merged child-adult world of domestically-based dream and fantasy is so exotic that it threatens to overwhelm her other poems. In the adult-child world, for example, tennis balls are served like oysters out of their shells, silence isn't peeled open like a sardine can and white roses flutter like nurses. While there are fine self-contained poems such as 'Now We Are Six', 'Angels', 'Jigsaw' and 'Boots', Kent's child-adult world can be thought of as one on-going poem. A haunted, haunting and vulnerable world.

Some readers will prefer Kent's other world. It contains other people examined psycho-sexually and socio-economically. Carol, Cheryl, the pre-apprentices and April who opens a window and dries her *mother's* eyes form well-made portraits from a tough-minded poet. Section 6 presents family relationships more objectively than does the child-adult world. More importantly, the poet becomes as hard on herself as on her portraits.

Kevin Gilbert's expanded selected poems *The Blackside* is impressive for its range of black experiences—protest, history, portraits, stories, customs, land affinity and incitement to reclaim the land by violence if necessary. He hates whites because they stole his land, murdered many of his ancestors, destroyed his way of life and often still hate their victims. He isn't just anti-white; he doesn't think much of Western civilisation itself:

'Go for Gold' means genocide.

He despises upwardly mobile blacks who won't fight for Land Rights and reserves his most obvious

sympathies for black alcoholics and prostitutes who are presented as fatalists:

It only hurts when I'm sober . . .  
I'll try not to get sober again.

A quite recent refrain in 40,000 years of performance poetry.

The world of Eric Rolls' *Selected Poems* is devoid of religious or any other ideology. It exists. He celebrates that. Accordingly, his best poem is an elegy, the deeply moving 'Four Poems for Joan'. His only enemy is death, non-existence:

I tell her I love her, I tell, I tell.  
What can I tell her to take with her, where?  
There ought to be something to comfort her with:  
A word, a phrase to startle death.  
We exhausted our talking this last mad year.  
I stroke her, I fail her, I finger her hair.

It would be possible to divide Rolls' work into rhyming and non-rhyming poems. Although his second collection *The Green Mosaic* largely avoids rhyme, it's not clear that the poems are better than the best of his sometimes anachronistic first collection *Sheaf Tosser*.

There's a more important division in Rolls' poems. The rhyming ballads and narratives with regular stanza lengths remain light verse in the sense that he isn't involved with the subject matter. There's no way, however, that this could apply to his treatment of sexuality. He's at ease with his own feelings, with wives offering one breast to the baby and the other to the husband, and with the sexual practices of Papua New Guinea women. In fact sex tends to merge with his descriptions of Australian and Papua New Guinean flora and fauna.

In any historical anthology of Australian performance poems, rhyming poems are always candidates. In *The Green Mosaic*, however, there are also poems such as 'Bamboo' which use repetition of one word as their central organising principle. These poems could easily be enjoyed in the same venue as Eric Beach.

Geoffrey Lehmann's 'Parenthood', already well-known, begins his most recent collection *Children's Games*:

I have been wiping clean the fold between young  
buttocks as a pizza  
I hoped to finish was cleared from a red and  
white checked table cloth.



I have been pouring wine for women I was hoping  
to impress  
When a daughter ran for help through guests  
urgently holding out  
Her gift, a potty, which I took with the same  
courtesy  
As she gave it . . .

This fine angry-funny wail from a single parent is unequalled in the collection, but there are other poems of merit. Lehmann juxtaposes different levels of perception: game/reality, dream/reality, fantasy/reality, allegory/reality. He depicts these juxtapositions in suburban or staged landscapes, often using narratives that the reader is supposed to question. Some poems alternate between parody and satire. Irony frequently becomes humor which sometimes becomes bellylaugh. These well-made poems are located in social interaction rather than nature.

R. H. Morrison was a multiculturalist long before multiculturalism. His French, Ukrainian, Italian, Chinese, Spanish and Russian – particularly his Russian – translations have appeared since the 1950s. I can't assess the quality of translation in his recent *Poems from Mandelstam*, but the American Russian scholar Ervin C. Brody has no difficulty in using them for a long and complex Introduction. I was interested to see how the Russian Revolution affected Mandelstam by intensifying his Judeo-Christian faith and although viewing this as compensatory wish fulfilment, I concede that the Christian inheritance has outlasted the nominal Communism of Eastern Europe. Morrison's Mandelstam could hardly be more timely.

I'm keen on satire. Perhaps it's just as well. Hal Colebatch is a poetic ideologue who's good for Australian satire. It's fascinating to follow his arguments in his most recent collection *The Earthquake Lands*. He loathes all shades of Communism. Even his ACTU is a Communist front. Post-war Eastern Europe was so dreadful that he celebrates the running aground of the German flagship *Nymphe* manned by drunken Norwegian officers in charge of its German crew. He celebrates the event because at least the ship didn't run aground under the Red flag. Elsewhere he's attracted to a parking inspector because such a job makes authority look ridiculous. In another poem he opposes any government. His Right-wing position becomes anarchism.

Not that he's sold on the plastic trappings and decadent literati of Capitalist democracies. He despises social justice and pressure groups who want

to ban monsters in fantasy games. Indeed he appears to have a special affection for all sorts of monsters and dragons. 'The Retired Vice-Chancellor Wears his Order of Australia Button into the Supermarket' is blistering satire. David Lange is reduced to seal blubber, not because the then NZ Prime Minister threatened to bar Russian ships over a Russian seal massacre, but because the war in Afghanistan hadn't produced the same result. Does Colebatch like anything?

He likes sailing because the elements prevent sailors from being charlatans. He's intrigued by model ships and Viking chessmen. He likes exceptions, which can include being part of an Anzac Day march. He comes close to religious feeling in European castles and abbeys where he also feels close to 'history'. Incredibly, however, his strongest religious feeling is inspired by the film *Star Wars*:

. . . Something still defines  
with crystal clarity the concept of the high,  
the knightly, the unchanging simplicity, the  
straight lines.

A small event to send one's thought so far,  
but they travel in good company . . .  
Above the street the straight lines tower,  
certain and mythical as the sky. The quest abides.

The *straight* lines? Gray's? O'Connor's? Rankin's?  
Anyway, Hal, the force be with you.

Graham Rowlands teaches Australian Politics in Adelaide. His most recent poetry collection is *On the Menu*.

- Heather Cam: *The Moon's Hook* (c/- Poetry Australia, \$9).  
Hal Colebatch: *The Earthquake Lands* (Collins Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).  
Katherine Gallagher: *Fish-rings on Water* (Forest Books, \$14.95).  
Kevin Gilbert: *The Blackside* (Hyland House, \$14.95).  
Robert Gray: *Selected Poems* (Collins Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).  
Jean Kent: *Verandahs* (Hale & Iremonger, \$12.95).  
Geoffrey Lehmann: *Children's Games* (Collins Angus & Robertson, \$12.99).  
John Leonard (ed.): *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Houghton Mifflin Australia, \$16.95).  
R. H. Morrison (trans.): *Poems from Mandelstam* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, \$26).  
Mark O'Connor: *Fire-stick Farming: Selected Poems 1972-90* (Hale & Iremonger, \$12.95).  
Jennifer Rankin: *Collected Poems* Judith Rodriguez (ed.) (University of Queensland Press, \$17.95).  
Eric Rolls: *Selected Poems* (Collins Angus & Robertson, \$12.99).



## The Saints in Glory

It's the last month of their last year at university. Most of them are teacher trainees who've gone through on generous scholarships, and they've been given their first appointments. Some are keen to start, some are unsure. Others have no intention of facing the classroom, and spend a lot of time discussing ways of breaking the Education Department's *bond* – revealing term!

A question hangs over their heads. What's it going to be like? When they're together, even those who don't care for each other, they inquire, "Where are you going?" or, for those who swear they won't be teaching, "What are you going to do, then?" These questions are asked not so much to elicit information as to determine the extent of apprehension or certainty in the other; fear and regret lose some of their power when shared.

A week before the last of the parties that will bond them in this time of dispersal, a number are gathered at Keith's place. Someone has brought the new Karajan recording of the B minor mass, and has it on the gramophone, very loudly. Most of the group gathered in the house and garden take no notice, but the conductor's tempi are annoying for Keith. He grumbles occasionally through three sides, but the chorus *Cum sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris* makes him get up angrily. "This bloke must have a train to catch," he says. "He's rushing it, it's meaningless. It's terrible!" When the side ends he says, "Please don't play any more. When we've had something to eat I'll put on a decent recording. I don't want to play it now, not on top of *that!*" He gestures with disgust.

Some hours later he pulls out the Hermann Scherchen recording of the same music. The first rock and roll records are infiltrating their city, but this generation of students, especially those destined to be teachers, think they're subversive. Blackboard jungle! High culture hasn't yet been condemned as élitist; they are a generation whose mission it is to improve . . .

Johann Sebastian, mighty Bach! Scherchen takes the chorus in which Karajan offends at a measured, stately pace which grips the young people and stops them talking – except Keith, who says, "This is the right way to do it. The beat in every bar is a step, a forward movement. They're going somewhere. This is Bach's conception of entering heaven. Isn't it fantastic!"

And it is: faith will always prevail, or at least impress, and the young people are gripped by this sturdy, relentless, apparently simple music from an age of faith. *Cum sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris*: the Catholics among them, and there are several because those generous scholarships allow the sons and daughters of working class Catholics to go to university too, the Catholics know these Latin words, and the vision they embody . . .

. . . of an all-powerful divinity reigning in unimaginable splendor, throned in radiance, attended by his son who died for man's salvation, and by the Holy Spirit, the dove of peace; and about them flights of angels, their wings quivering in the brilliant air; and about them, too, the saints and martyrs whose lives on earth have earned them a place beside God's throne; and approaching them, soaring above the fearful darkness at the bottom of which is hell, damnation and eternal punishment, are the saved, the blessed, the fortunate, led by angels and welcomed by archangels as they march, exultant, humble and desperately relieved, to their positions in the everlasting stasis of redemption and God's glory!

Amen! In the concluding bars the conductor alters the beat by not so much as a fraction, but manages to draw some extra conviction from his musicians so that, as often in Bach, at the moment of ending, the purpose, the destination, of all that's preceded comes clear. "The saints in glory!" Keith says to his friends, and no-one can find anything to add to, or dispute, his claim.



The last party's held at Frank Tate Hall, a mansion converted to house female teacher trainees. The young men are in suits or quality slacks and coats; no-one lacks a tie. The young women are in gowns of aqua, magenta, rose, buttercup yellow . . . colors forbidden the males and expected of the 'opposite' sex. They dance in the spacious rooms of the former home. Louis Armstrong's trumpet pierces the house and penetrates the garden via the open doors. *Oh wenna saints*, says big black Louis, *Oh wenna saints, oh wenna saints go marchin' in* . . . A line forms and the dancers swing in loops and curves through the staid rooms. *Oh how I wanna be . . . innat num-bah . . . wenna saints go marchin' in!* As soon as the record's finished the needle's dragged back so the bouncing, swaying line, the chain of energy that joins them, isn't allowed to break. The gravel voice, the fat lips, start up again. *Oh wenna saints . . . oh wenna saints . . . oh wenna saints go marchin' in* . . . When the song's put on a third time they're cheating because it's midnight by the hall clock and the education lecturer who acts as superintendent and chaperone is at the bottom of the stairs, acting her roles as Patience and Forbearance. They're singing it now, as the superintendent moves near the gramophone to make sure it doesn't get a fourth run, they're singing along with Louis: *Oh how I wanna be in that num-bah . . . when the saints go marching in!*

It's over. Some of the young women go upstairs. Groups gather in the drive, the front garden, near the gate. Headlights of cars come on, engines start. They belong to the night now, and the future.

The group that were at Keith's a week before stand in Dandenong Road. There isn't much traffic. Then a strange thing happens. Barbara, a music student, clasps her hands in front of her in the approved *lieder* fashion, and sings:

*Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden.*

It's Schubert's *An die Musik*; she's dedicating herself. They look at her in amazement, rather wishing she'd stop. Nick, a swarthy fellow with restless eyes, says, "Oh Christ Barb, give it a break! It's like a bloody hymn!" She turns so the last line is directed straight at him:

*Hast mich in eine bessere Welt entruckt.*

She sounds the final 't' crisply, as she's been taught to do, then says to her unwilling audience, "All right people, I needed to do that. Now I need a taxi." Nick says something, and she says, "Oh shut up Nick, you're tone deaf anyhow." A taxi comes. Most of them want to head off for coffee in Saint Kilda, but Nick thinks he's had enough for the night, so he finds himself sharing the taxi with Barb, despite the tiff. He sits in the front with the driver,

she's in the back. They wind down their windows and wave as the cab heads off to . . .

. . . the life of a singing teacher for Barb, and thirty years in the opera chorus, backing up John Brownlee and Sena Jurinac, Ronald Dowd and Kiri Te Kanawa, at the edge of the glory but never its focus.

And Nick, who wasn't a bonded student, finds his way to a job with a magazine based in Honolulu, does well, becomes manager of the group, sees holes in its accounting methods, takes advantage, and is jailed for embezzlement.

Another taxi's hailed for four of them, Keith takes three in his car. They find a sleazy place in Fitzroy Street. It's exciting to plunge downward, socially. The respectable years are ahead. They drink coffee. Keith surprises them by asking for grilled flounder, never mind the Frank Tate supper. Another boy has a mixed grill, two of the girls have toasted ham sandwiches - the fare that's offering. They talk about the thousand things they've talked about already, then ask themselves what they'll do next, trying to make the night more exciting than it is. Bill says they can go back to his place, near the beach in Brighton. They talk about this on the footpath of derelicts and prostitutes, making up their minds. Five say yes, Sigrid, Neil and Jane say no. There's a muddled conversation about taxi sharing, and routes from one home to another, and in the end they decide they need separate taxis, so the group, knowing how out of place they are, and feeling good about it, stand under the vulgar lights, despatching, as the taxis come . . .

. . . Sigrid. Who wins a scholarship to study German literature and history at Freiburg, but goes first to London to see the British Isles. She meets an Australian boy, an agricultural science graduate, and they travel together, using as a base a flat they've taken in Marble Arch. It has two bedrooms, and she won't let him into hers, despite the fact that he's distracted by her and says he'd like to marry. Troubled by the situation, she says she'll make a decision when she gets back from visiting Freiburg, where she'll meet her teachers, plan her course and find accommodation. She visits the ancient university city and meets a young German who's doing post-graduate study in nuclear physics. He's engaged to a German girl in another city, but he and Sigrid are attracted to each other. One gloomy day, as they walk by a lake, they discuss their feelings and decide they're going to marry. They go back to town and buy two rings, which they exchange at the edge of the water, at the spot where they reached their decision. Relatives on both sides are perplexed and indignant. Angry letters are



written, the German family are amazed to find themselves with the wrong daughter-in-law, but the young couple are serenely confident that what they've done is right.

. . . and Neil. Who takes up his teaching appointment in Omeo, an old mining and cattle town in the Gippsland mountains, where he finds that his modest abilities as a footballer make him good enough to captain the local side, which he leads onto the field each winter Saturday, the number 1 on his back meaning that in a district starved of entertainment he's the town's most discussed figure, something which amuses him as a twist of fate for a man who's always preferred to be withdrawn.

. . . and Jane. Who hasn't done very well in her course, and is given a primary teaching position in a remote settlement where, lonely and isolated, she falls in love with a married man who won't make the commitment her passion demands. When she sees it's hopeless, she drowns herself. A non-swimmer, she takes a boat out on a lake not far from his farm, and eases herself over the side.

The five whose destinies remain to be unfolded go back to Bill's. "At bloody last!" he says. "Thank Christ I'm here!" He uncorks a bottle of Bundaberg rum and fills a Kraft cheese tumbler. "Down the hatch!" he says, and downs it, before offering the bottle around. Only Paula accepts, Paula, who's going to teach in the town where she was brought up, and laughs when others say they'd hate to make their first mistakes in front of people who know them. She sips once or twice, then puts the glass by her chair, forgotten.

With rum inside him, Bill tells stories. About being lost in the bush. About falling down an abandoned mineshaft and having to get back up again. About snakes, and the characters he met around the countryside with his grandfather. When the bottle's well down, and he's been told he's repeating himself, he stands up. "I'm off to bed," he says. "Do what you like, but don't wake me up, and don't finish off the rum. Paula!" She laughs at him and he goes to his bedroom, goes to the Northern Territory in his leather jacket and army boots, taking the geiger counter which he hopes will find him a mountain of uranium and a fortune beyond the spending power of a normal man.

Keith searches through the piles of records - the house seems to be inhabited by several tastes - until he discovers Ginette Neveu's recording of the Sibelius violin concerto. They listen, Paula, Keith, Roger and Eileen, drifting towards the edge of sleep, pulled back to consciousness by the intensity of the playing. Keith cries in the slow movement. He tells them the violinist was killed in an air crash.

They lift their heads to listen, then droop again, half concentrating, half drowsing. When it ends they don't feel like speaking. The night's exhausted them. They notice that the uncurtained window is no longer black. The pink light of dawn is stealing into the sky. They decide to walk.

When they step outside they smell salt water, and head in that direction. A few minutes later they're sitting on the sea wall and, even in the weak light, Paula, who's in ultramarine, and Eileen, in magenta, seem brilliant beside the sludgy sea. "I'm glad we did this," says Paula. "It's beaut. And I'm glad we didn't plan it. It's best to just let things happen." Keith takes off his coat. She thinks she knows how to read him. "You don't agree, Keith, do you?" He smiles. "I've always been a planner, an organiser, until now, but I think it's pretty limiting. Maybe I'll break out, now I'm through. Maybe I won't be able to." They look at each other. It hits them, having outlasted the night, that something, quite a lot in fact, is behind them. "Let's walk up the beach," says Eileen, and Keith jumps onto the sand. "You go," says Paula. "I want to sit here a bit longer."

Roger and Paula are silent for a minute, then he takes her hand. She presses herself against him and rubs his shoulder. They've been out together a few times but whatever makes love flare up between two people hasn't happened. "I really care for you," she says. "We're not to lose track of each other. When you get home, promise you'll write to me." He promises. They look along the beach to see the others disappearing around the end of a line of bathing boxes. Eileen will take up her appointment in a Wimmera wheat town with a railway line down the middle of the main street, will marry a policeman who has a farm outside of town and will live on the farm, bringing up four children; and Keith, so serious and so keen to break out, will pay off his bond and get a job as a colonial administrator in New Guinea. He'll write letters to his friends full of hair-raising stories about his encounters with tribal and de-tribalised New Guineans, and he'll die when the light plane he's chartered crashes into a shrouded mountain.

"You are going to write to me, aren't you?" Paula says. The sun's tipping the horizon behind them and the air's full of light. It makes her blond hair blaze and he thinks she's never been more beautiful. The color of the sea's becoming richer and deeper, and her gown seems unnatural. They walk back past Bill's place, where the outside light's still on, to a main road where they hail the last of their night's taxis. He drops her off in Prahran, picks up his stuff from his college, and has himself taken



to his train. He fills in the long journey reading *Crime and Punishment*.

His brother meets him at the terminus, in farming clothes. Roger is still in his suit. "How're you feeling, now you've finished?" says his brother. "I don't know how I feel," he says. "I've been up all night. Ask me when I've had a decent sleep."

He goes to bed early and sleeps like a log. It's the sheep that wake him in the morning, the smell of them hitting his nostrils, the dust they kick up drifting through the window. Sheep, he thinks, all my life these bloody sheep. When they're not being castrated and having their tails cut off they're being driven to the shearing shed or they're being carted away, in trucks that drip piss and smell of shit, to be sold. His father and two dogs are pushing the mob along the lane, his brother will be ahead, opening and closing gates. I'd better get up and help, he thinks.

For a fortnight he immerses himself in the life of the farm, and their little town. Then he remembers that he's promised a letter - and he remembers the circumstances, the parting, when he made the promise.

Which he keeps.

Paula teaches, marries, brings five children into the world, lectures, goes into local politics, becomes president of her shire, enters state parliament on a big by-election swing, then consolidates the seat.

Her party becomes the government, and she's a minister. In a bout of factional wrangling she loses this position, but not her dignity. She's widely admired. At the next state election, the government - her government - just scrapes home. They're terrified of a by-election. She tells the premier that she has to resign her seat because she's got cancer and it's beating her. Her resignation creates headlines, and a few days later there are more headlines, because she's gone. It's a big funeral; the premier, the opposition, her colleagues, and the prime minister are there. In the days that follow her burial, the indecencies of the power struggle are kept out of sight, quelled by respect for her absent spirit. Another strange thing happens: she has what might be called a political resurrection, a secular triumph over death. Both parties put up women candidates claiming to represent Paula's views on everything she's stood for.

Roger, knowing none of this, wonders if he'll ever see her again; he has a feeling that most of those he's been close to in the last four years are lost to him now. He's not sure that it's a worthwhile thing to do, but he finds his mother's writing pad, goes to his room, and begins, as this story ends: "Dear Paula . . ."

*Chester Eagle's latest book is Victoria Challis, published by Imprint/Collins A & R.*

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS CAN  
DISRUPT THE SMOOTH  
FLOW OF MESSAGES FROM THE BRAIN

(The smooth flow of messages from the brain)

For more information on Multiple Sclerosis and its symptoms call the Multiple Sclerosis Society in your State.

**MS**



# books

## Passion, Poetry, Politics

June M. Hearn

Dorothy Hewett: *Wild Card; An Autobiography 1923-1958* (McPhee Gribble, \$19.99).

This is the story of half the life (to date) of Dorothy Hewett, writer and political activist. But this frenetic half-life almost says it all.

The book is crammed with the experiences of an Australian living through the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War – mammoth events which are only sketchily drawn but which serve as gloomy backdrops to an intensely personal account of frustrated ambitions, failed relationships, tragic losses, pain, humiliation, degradation, commitment, dedication but, above all, unrelenting passion. It is this passion which saves the book from being merely a chronicle of mainly depressing experiences and marks it as an exciting addition to the output of one of Australia's most outstanding literary talents.

Dorothy Hewett was born into comfortable middle-class surroundings on a wheat and sheep farm in the south of Western Australia. Her childhood memories of family life on the farm, together with the annual visits to Perth and to the south coast paint a picture which borders on the idyllic, especially when it is remembered that most Australians at this time were suffering tremendous hardship as a result of the world economic depression. Yet, despite the material comfort, Dorothy was an unsettled child – seemingly unloving and unloved or, at least, not loved enough. Her fantasy world, derived from books and a vivid imagination, feeds her emotional needs unmet by the family whose members are described with a cold detachment – the mother, strong-willed, frequently cruel, probably sexually frustrated and given to displays of favoritism towards Dorothy's

younger sister; the father, a softer (and weaker) figure, devoid of malice, resigned to moderate success in business and failure in marriage; the younger sister, a model child (and adult success story), and the envy of Dorothy; the maternal grandmother, a cunning, mischievous, perceptive woman who enjoyed the clash of personalities and physical altercations between Dorothy and her mother; the maternal grandfather, a caring, sympathetic, free-thinking being, anxious to protect Dorothy but usually overshadowed by his wife and daughter.

The account of her family relationships as a child sets the tone for the rest of the book. In her first thirty-five years Dorothy Hewett never feels really loved or understood – not at home, not at the Anglican private school she attends in her adolescent years, not at University, not with a succession of lovers (including one husband) and not in the Communist Party, although the latter afforded her a life-boat to which she clung for many years, rescuing her from herself at a critically dangerous period in her life. As a girl and a woman she is indeed a 'wild card' always throwing caution to the wind but continually feeling unrequited, and more than once suicidal, yet still craving the elusive 'true love', for herself and for her creative work – poems, short-stories and chapters for as yet unpublished books. With few exceptions (Frank Hardy being one), Dorothy Hewett's literary contemporaries offered her scant encouragement. Nowhere is her quest for response and recognition so poignantly portrayed as in the brief description of her devastating 'audience' with the great Dame Mary Gilmore; on this occasion Dorothy feels the full brunt of damning and dismissive criticism from one of Australia's leading writers, and (adding insult to injury) a female to boot – hardly an appropriate role model for the young aspiring writer! This incident must surely have reinforced her long-standing contradictory nature which vacillated endlessly between self-doubt and arrogant self-



confidence, desperate to prove to herself and to the world that she could make it – ‘it’ being any one of lover, writer, political activist, mother – seemingly in that order.

There is a disarming frankness about this book, for example, the author’s admission that she had the reputation for being ‘the university bike’, and the disclosure of her lustful pursuit of her later to be diagnosed “paranoid schizophrenic” lover, at the expense of deserting her first husband and ill-fated baby. This is an honest, introspective, warts and all portrait, and the resulting profile is not at all flattering. By the age of thirty-five, Dorothy Hewett has lived in the fast, if grotty, lane, spending several years in the slums of Sydney in order to serve the Party and be with her lover and father of her three sons, most often living from hand to mouth and relying heavily on financial and child-minding support from parents whom she barely respected and whose values she publicly and vehemently denounced. The stark contradictions in her character are also revealed; parallel with her self-centred private life-style is a totally unselfish commitment to causes beyond herself. Her attraction to the Communist Party was certainly partly rebellion against her middle-class origins but it also reflected genuine affinity with the under-dogs – the working class, Aborigines, women – and enabled her to create a counterpoint to a succession of hopeless personal liaisons. She promoted public causes with a fanatical tirelessness and self-sacrifice only beginning to wane as the book ends, significantly in the late 1950s when the early signs of the disintegration of the world communist movement appeared.

By 1958, Dorothy Hewett’s life, like her political world, is in turmoil. She has made a desperate exodus from a doomed relationship, is battered and worn beyond her years, but alive and, if not optimistic, then resolute, returning to Western Australia, in the hope of being rekindled by first truths. Her life has been confused, painful, often unbearable. (A description befitting the times as well as the writer.) Her first novel, *Bobbin Up*, based on her experiences as a factory worker in a Sydney spinning mill, has been published and widely acclaimed, but further triumphs as a poet and playwright lay ahead of her. What else? The second half-life cries out for the telling. A sequel, perhaps. Readers should be so lucky!

Those familiar with Dorothy Hewett’s earlier works will not be surprised at the high standard of literary style and presentation evident in *Wild Card* which also manages to incorporate all the excitement of a racy novel. The book may shock

those who are affronted by any female daring to take centre stage as a reckless, non-conformist, lusty, promiscuous, creative and, most importantly, real-life character. (Unfortunately, double standards persist and what passes as ‘swashbuckling hero’ is often translated into ‘fallen woman’.) Similarly controversial women in literature, who so dramatically mirror their time and place, have largely been fictional creations or the subject of others’ portrayal. Dorothy Hewett has courageously told her own story. *Wild Card* is not without blemishes; for example, the inclusion of an excessive number of acquaintances and friends who are peripheral to the main theme and serve only to clutter the reader’s mind with information to try to remember or forget; there are also some editorial errors, especially in relation to proper names, but these faults detract only slightly from a remarkable autobiography undeniably stamped with a poet’s prose.

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## An Imagined Biography: A Book of the Year

Mary Lord

Drusilla Modjeska: *Poppy* (McPhee Gribble, \$16.95).

This is both the most enjoyable and the most provocative book I’ve read in a long time. It is suspenseful, emotionally charged, intellectually challenging and, at the same time, a straightforward ‘good read’. *Poppy*, both is and is not a biography of Modjeska’s mother in the generally accepted sense of the word. There is little doubt that it is, in part, true to fact and that it depends heavily on selections from family history and on information dredged out of the author’s memory and the memories of others. Modjeska uses letters, papers and notebooks, but, above all, quotes extensively from her mother’s diaries to bring a very remarkable woman to life. It is all very powerful and persuasive in spite of the dedication of *Poppy* “for my mother who died in 1984 and never kept a diary . . .”.

Even the most superficial reading of *Poppy* makes it difficult for the reader (however innocent of



contemporary literary debate) not to reflect on the relationship between literal and imaginative truth and on the extent to which biographers depend on the techniques and resources of fiction to bring their subjects to life. Even in the process of deciding what to leave out, what is important, how to enliven dull parts of the tale or how to show the biographee in the best possible light, the biographer is inevitably distorting the past and not simply recording it. In inventing Poppy's diary, which is quoted extensively in the book as documentary 'proof' of historical fact, Modjeska crosses the implicit border of biography into fiction. Blanks in the story which she cannot fill from known fact she supplies from her imagination. Modjeska has complete control of how much and how little the reader is told. Sometimes, for example, the 'diary' breaks off or a section is 'lost' at points where the reader's curiosity is aroused but where the author wishes to tantalise rather than reveal, to preserve an element of suspense.

The name 'Poppy' is a fiction as are the names of all the other characters, though it seems probable that the factual outline of Poppy's life is the same as that of Modjeska's mother. That is, that she was born in 1924, the rejected daughter of Chine and Jack, who preferred sons; a member of the comfortable upper-middle class who married the successful politician, Richard; mother of May, Phoebe and Lalage (the narrator, Drusilla?); probation officer for young criminals; and lover for many years of Marcus, a Roman Catholic priest. When Poppy's illusion that she would find fulfilment in a happy domestic life with a successful and devoted husband and charming children shatters, she has slowly to re-educate herself to build a new self and a new life. Her story will have familiar overtones to many women who have come to maturity in the years since World War II and who have found the sentimental pieties of their parents inadequate preparation for today's world.

*Poppy* is much more a work of fiction than contemporary biographies are wont to be and much more biographical than some, but by no means all, modern novels. It defies simple genre classification, implicitly calling into question the validity of the imaginary boundaries supposedly dividing fiction and non-fiction. Its structure is fluid, the story moving freely backwards and forwards in time and place and through several narrative voices. It is described by its author, very aptly, as "an imagined biography".

Drusilla Modjeska writes that she set out to discover her mother by writing her biography in the belief that in coming to know her she would

come to know herself. The paradox here, one of the many structural and textual paradoxes in *Poppy*, is that in order to know herself through knowing her mother, Modjeska has had to invent a mother to know. Which leads to the charming and logical conclusion that, since 'Poppy' is an invention, Modjeska is evolving or inventing herself; the act of creating the book is, in itself, part of the continuing creation of the author's self.

*Poppy* offers many pleasures to the thoughtful reader, so many that it invites re-reading. For those who are provoked by it into a consideration of some of the literary and feminist issues it has as its philosophical underpinnings, the author has provided a bibliography of sources, some of which I propose to consult. It is a book which works on many levels and offers a variety of rewards to those who seek them. It does a number of things extremely well, not the least of these being that it sustains a regretful, even elegaic tone in its re-creation of upper-middle-class family life in England in the Fifties. As well, it is a memorial to the life of its subject and a celebration of it.

*Editor and critic Mary Lord's latest book is her Penguin Best Australian Short Stories published recently.*

## Biographical Penetration

Geoffrey Serle

Craig McGregor: *Headliners; Craig McGregor's Social Portraits* (University of Queensland Press, \$13.95).

When did the biographical features which are now so frequent in our weekend (and the world) press, to the neglect of articles on ideas and issues, come to dominate? Was it about ten to fifteen years ago? Apart from Melbourne *Punch* in the 1920s, Cyril Pearl's *People* in the 1950s and John Hetherington's *Age* profiles in the 1960s, biographical articles – even straight interviews – were rare until recent times, as contributors to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* know to their cost. But as those of us who riffle through the trashy, yuppy-oriented, weekend color-supplements (to see whether there is anything worth reading) well know, 'biographies' have inherent attraction.

The public obsession with 'celebrities' and 'personalities' – primarily showbiz and sporting but leading public figures also – and its insatiable, perverted curiosity about their private lives is a reflection of the rule of television over us all. And



of the way in which television, in so favoring the glib, the bullshitters, the cunning self-promoters and other cravers for the limelight, largely rules out seemingly dull people, however worthy and able, to goodness knows what national cost.

Every rising journalist now tries his/her hand at the more-or-less in-depth interview. The admirable Martin Flanagan has recently (*Age, Extra* from 5 Jan.) produced superb, restrained articles on Veronica Brady, Hugh Stretton and others, allowing them to state their views almost without comment – professional, principled, old-fashioned journalism at its best. Some journalists, among whom Craig McGregor is outstanding, are much more ambitious, becoming highly proficient in attempting serious biographical penetration. But it is a hit-or-miss affair. The trouble is that the treatment, however competent, must be essentially shallow, confined to perhaps only two or three weeks of (well paid) work, very clever but liable to lamentable misunderstandings.

In this selection of fourteen of his many 'social portraits' McGregor has no trouble in handling the few poseurs, guided by their image-makers and seeking every scrap of publicity. The majority indeed, whether submitting to interview as a necessary consequence of their position or complying good naturedly, come through frankly and straightforwardly.

An excellent writer, McGregor is brilliant on Clive James (who, incidentally, claims he gets 'stuck into' Murdoch: "Somebody has to. He's got to remember somebody is out there who can't be bought.") And, reproducing his superb writings of 1977 and 1983, on Hawke.

He is very good indeed on Simon Crean, Elizabeth Evatt (though whatever is a judge doing, agreeing to be interviewed?), on Harry Seidler (so far as I can judge), and on Bruce Dawe, our national treasure. (There is a nice, accidental contrast between Leonie Kramer rubbishing Dawe while praising Les Murray, and Murray judging him as "one of the best three or four poets we have had".) And very good on Peter Brock, a serious man yet "a folk hero to literally millions of Australians"!

He is on the whole rough on Kramer, John Cain and John Howard, those he least understands, and they might reasonably resent their treatment. Alan Border comes across as the straightforward battler he is, but is under-estimated, especially as a captain; the best cricket writers leave McGregor for dead.

His revealing interview with Jill Wran is strong meat: interesting that it won a Walkley award.

The Keating piece dates seriously. McGregor repeats the guff about "the best postwar Treasurer

Australia has had" (what about Chif and Artie Fadden?) and the probable next prime minister (what odds now?). But he recognises the tragedy of a man of such talents ending up a reactionary.

Overall McGregor is a very good read (and invaluable for eventual *ADB* entries). But there are far too many typos and mis-spellings of names: so many Australian publishers still need to learn to do the elementary things. And I must say I have an old-fashioned respect for Harold Nicolson who, even when he was an M.P., tried to keep his photograph out of the newspapers and stated that he would "loathe being recognised in public places".

*Geoffrey Serle, author of The Golden Age, John Monash etc, and former General Editor of the ADB, has recently completed a short biography of Sir John Medley.*

## The End of the Beginning

Barry Jones

John Ritchie (General Editor): *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Volume 12 1891-1939 Smy-Z (Melbourne University Press, \$53.00).

There have been dictionaries of Australian biography before, notably Percival Serle's two volumes, published in 1949, but nothing of the range, depth and detail of this great series, now taking the biographical record of European settlement to the outbreak of World War II.

1939 was the end of the age of innocence when, with a population of less than seven million, Australia was essentially white, English speaking, Empire loyalist, psychologically dependent on 'Home', insular, racist, sexist, culturally fixed on a rural mythology which was never grounded in reality.

The prime mover for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* was Sir Keith Hancock, or as *ADB* form will put it in some unnumbered future volume, Hancock, William Keith (1898-1988). From 1957 he pushed and cajoled Australian universities to collaborate in the project, chaired the editorial committee and persuaded the Australian National University to create a chair for Douglas Pike, his choice as the first general editor, in 1962.

Volume 1 1788-1850 A-H appeared in 1966, ran to 572 pages and cost \$12.00. The lengths of entries varied greatly, with the longest being accorded to Governor Gipps, Chief Justice Forbes, Bishop Broughton, Governors Hunter, Arthur, Bourke and FitzRoy, far more than the



comparatively modest entries for Joseph Banks, James Cook and Caroline Chisholm.

Douglas Pike set out the aim of the work, rather romantically, as "to inform and interest the lonely shepherd in his hut as readily as the don in his study". He took the work up to Volume 5, retired in 1973 and died soon after. His successors as general editors were Bede Nairn (Volume 6), Nairn and Geoffrey Serle jointly (Volumes 7 to 10), Serle *seule* (Volume 11) and John Ritchie (Volume 12).

The series has had a total of 7211 biographies (6000 were originally estimated) and Volume 12, 611 pages long, contains 684 entries by 498 authors.

The longest entries are for J. C. Watson, the first Labor Prime Minister (11.2 columns), E. G. Theodore, Queensland Premier and Scullin's unhappy Treasurer (10), W. A. Watt, Victorian Premier and Acting Prime Minister (7.5), John Wren, "entrepreneur" (6.9), General Sir Brudenell White, citizen soldier (6.8), Sir George Turner, Victorian Premier and Federal Treasurer (5.8), Frank Tate, a reforming Victorian director of education (5.5), Sir Baldwin Spender, anthropologist and connoisseur (5.2), A. G. Stephens, literary critic (5.0) and Ethel Turner, author (4.8), the only woman to make the top ten.

Bede Nairn's 'John Christian Watson (1867-1941)' contains some revelations. His birth in Valparaiso, Chile is well known, but not the name of his father, Johan Christian Tanck. His mother later married a New Zealander, George Watson, who adopted Chris. What happened to his seafaring father is not explained. Watson was an opponent of Federation but, once the Commonwealth of Australia was established by popular vote, determined to make the new system work. With the House of Representatives split three ways, Watson served in 1904 as Prime Minister, but for less than ten weeks. He left Parliament in 1910, went into business, followed Billy Hughes and W. A. Holman out of the Labor Party over conscription in 1916, and became foundation president of the National Roads and Motorists' Association (N.R.M.A.) in 1920.

Edward Granville Theodore, nee Teodorescu (1884-1950) was the most famous Rumanian in Australian politics, as Bob Hawke earnestly assured Nicolae Ceausescu at an official lunch in 1988. Pragmatic, aggressive, widely read and intelligent (even better than 'clever'), 'Red Ted' Theodore became the boss of Queensland's A.W.U. in 1913, Premier 1919-25 and, after some years of hiatus, Deputy Leader of the Federal Labor Party 1929-32. Scullin handed him the thankless task of Treasurer and by 1930 there was far more than

a technical recession. Theodore, alone among Australian politicians had read and understood Keynes, long before he was fashionable, and proposed expansion of credit through the Commonwealth Bank. But Theodore faced implacable opposition from the Bank's conservative board, a hostile Senate, some nervous Nellies inside Caucus and Cabinet, and accusations of corruption based on alleged conflict of interest in allocating Queensland mining leases, years before. This forced him to stand down as Treasurer at a critical moment.

The ALP then split, Langites to the Left, Joe Lyons, J. E. Fenton and a handful of others to the Right. Theodore's formerly huge majority was wiped out in December 1931. He never returned to politics, made a fortune in gold mining, was chairman of Frank Packer's Consolidated Press and worked for Curtin as Director-General of the Allied Works Council 1942-44. Neville Cain's entry is a masterly piece of compression.

James Griffin's 'John Wren (1871-1953)' takes us through the Collingwood Tote, trotting, football, picture theatres, politics, his surprising support for conscription in 1916, the criminal libel case over Frank Hardy's *Power without Glory*, and his sudden death (a double with Jock McHale) after Collingwood won the 1953 premiership.

General Sir Brudenell White (1876-1940) was described by C. E. W. Bean as the greatest man he ever knew. In 1918 Bean pushed White's claim to command the Australian Corps in 1918, in preference to Monash. Earlier, White, a consummate chief of staff, had been privately critical of Birdwood's capacity on Gallipoli. As Chief of the General Staff 1920-23 he wound Australia's armies down: as Chief of the General Staff in 1940, he wound them up until his death in a plane crash in Canberra in August which killed three Federal Ministers as well. Jeffrey Grey's entry devotes only six cm to the vexed question of White's involvement in the right-wing 'secret armies' in the 1920s and 1930s. He gives White the benefit of the doubt.

Sir Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929), foundation professor of biology at Melbourne University 1886-1919, had an extraordinary range of interests, zoology, anthropology, ethnography, Aboriginal bark paintings, Australian landscape painting, photography, sport and exploration. By 1919 all his departmental colleagues were women, a situation unique in Australian universities. His field work with F. J. Gillen in Central Australia produced movies and sound recordings of unique value and he was a pioneer advocate for Aboriginal land rights. In addition, he was president of the Victorian Football League 1919-26. What Victorian could



ask for more? He also had an alcohol problem. Spencer died, on the job, in Tierra del Fuego.

There are some extraordinarily interesting shorter entries, for example Sumsuma (1903?-1965), a visionary New Guinea patriot from New Ireland, who led strikes in the 1920s and later collaborated with the Japanese, William Sutherland (1859-1911), an isolated pioneer in theoretical physics, Herbert Thomson (1870-1947) who built his own steam car in High Street, Armadale in 1899; David Unaipon (1872-1967), preacher, author and inventor, an Aboriginal who confounded all the current stereotypes about his people's capacity; John William Wainwright (1880-1948), a South Australian public servant and efficiency expert ("some thought his glass eye the kinder of the two"), Grant Watson (1885-1970), biologist, novelist and mystic whose work has been revived by Dorothy Green; and Ellen G. White (1827-1915), prophet of the Seventh Day Adventists who lived from 1895 to 1900 at Cooranbong, NSW, a place which has acquired recent celebrity.

The best known contributor is undoubtedly Sir Donald Bradman who writes warmly about W. M. Woodfull.

Entries on Sir Josiah Symon (1846-1934), South Australian lawyer, Senator and advocate of Federation and Sir Frederick Stewart (1884-1961), New South Wales businessman, politician and philanthropist make them sound far more interesting and sympathetic than I could have imagined. Symon's entry says that his eloquence to the jury "made the death penalty largely obsolete for more than a generation" in South Australia. I doubt this. Between 1904 and 1929 there were 12 hangings in South Australia, more than Victoria which had twice the population. Stewart was a Tory radical unusually sympathetic to the rights of labor.

I have detected few errors and oddities. Arthur Streeton was created knight bachelor, not KBE. The entry on the painter Blamire Young says that he "became involved with the innovative poster work of James and William Beggarstaff", suggesting real people. This was a *nomme de brosse* adopted by William Nicholson (Ben's father) and his brother-in-law James Pryde. J. S. Rosevear (mis-spelled on p. 88) was not Speaker in the 1930s, but a temporary Chairman of Committees.

The entry on Geoffrey Street (another victim of the 1940 Canberra plane crash) says that he joined the A.I.F. in 1914 "persuaded that Europe rather than New Guinea would be the focal theatre of war". Who on earth would have thought otherwise?

These are very minor blemishes in a splendid

achievement. I have two more cavils. The inner margins on each page are too narrow for notations or corrections. I can see no advantage in leading off each entry with the birth certificate names of each subject, rather than the names they habitually used e.g. William Pearson Tewksbury was always known as Pearson W. Tewksbury, Cyril Brudenell Bingham White only used his second name, as did William Blamire Young.

We are greatly indebted to those who have devoted their professional careers to this project and have maintained such an exemplary standard.

Reviews of previous volumes in *Overland* were as follows: Vols. 1-2, *Overland* 36, p. 42 (Stephen Murray-Smith); v. 3, *Overland* 45, p. 51 (Ian Turner); v. 6, *Overland* 66, p. 71 (Barry Jones); v. 8, *Overland* 86, p. 61 (Barry Jones); v. 9, *Overland* 96, p. 69 (Barry Jones); v. 11, *Overland* 114, p. 89 (Barry Jones).

*Barry Jones, author and politician, is Chair of the House of Representatives Committee for Long-Term Strategies. His books include the Macmillan Dictionary of Biography (1981) now in its third edition and Sleepers, Wake!: Technology and the Future of Work now in its 16th impression. He is consultant to Who's Who in Australia.*

## Our Other History

### Kevin Hart

Les Murray: *Dog Fox Field* (Collins/Angus and Robertson, \$12.99).

In *The Great World* David Malouf pictures a man talking at a poet's funeral of the role poetry plays in Australian life. Poetry must speak up "for what is deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded: all those unique and repeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things, that is our *other* history, the one that goes on, in a quiet way, under the noise and chatter of events and is the major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet, and has been from the very beginning. To find words for *that*; to make glow with significance what is usually unseen, and unspoken too - that, when it occurs, is what binds us all, since it speaks immediately out of the centre of each one of us; giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own".

Malouf describes a poetic which Les Murray might happily endorse, for it runs right through his



career. You find it in luminous early lyrics such as 'Driving through Sawmill Towns' and 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow'; and it informs the best of his later work, poems as different as 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle' and 'The Future'. In a number of recent essays, talks and poems, Murray tells us that this poetic answers to the right side of the brain: the part associated with dreaming, feeling, intuition and play. The left side, by contrast, is devoted to analysis, calculation and reason. Nothing could be more evident than that modern thought, at least since Descartes, has been profoundly biased towards the left-hand side of the brain. And though they may not appeal to such a simple model, those stern critics of modernity Heidegger and Jung have done nothing but warn us that we neglect those right-hand values at our peril. We must begin to honor 'our *other* history' and, accordingly, the artists and sages who observe and preserve it.

In his latest book of verse, *Dog Fox Field*, Murray hails this right-hand realm. He calls it "the other hemisphere", the place where otherness is accepted and nourished. It is a state of mind or – better – an estate of the soul. Even so, perhaps there is a sense in which Australia belongs to that other hemisphere. Not, certainly not, as the great south land of the Spirit that Captain Quiros sought, for when Murray speaks of "the three quarters of our continent/set aside for mystic poetry" he talks tongue in cheek. We may not be a nation of visionaries, or even much drawn to the contemplative life, yet we can be inventive and we generally have the knack of doing at least one thing with grace:

With pensive butt in mouth  
 some can cut jacks and aces  
 or start a Model T  
 or make a bodice fit;  
 others can unzip a  
 live snake from its skin  
 or walk a biplane's wing  
 and think nothing of it.

That's the positive side. The negative aspect, all too obvious in the world Murray views, is a rationality which might appear imposing and confident but which is diagnosed here as timid, forever afraid of authentic creativity.

"Nothing's free when it is explained", we're told, since it is always possible to conjure worlds "through the gap/between theory and sleight". One might agree that totalisation tends to reduce texts rather than illuminate them, while still wondering what is to be gained by all this bidding up of dreams, song and mystery. It is not a defence of vatic

exuberance, for these poems tend to be more tightly thought and wrought than those in *The Daylight Moon*. It is, rather, part of Murray's continuing polemic against modernity. The modern period, he contends, is an age of prose; its hallmark is a rage to define and demystify. Thus 'The Billions':

And though, as immemorially,  
 all our dream-ships come,  
 and go, to Cervis Paradise,

now when day puts us ashore  
 we walk on gritty ice  
 in wideawake cities  
 with tower flats and smog horizon

and there we work, illusionless,  
 scared lest *live* rhyme with *naive*  
 till the evening lights come on.  
 That's the Enlightenment: Surface Paradise.

Modernity, then, is an enlightenment project, what is elsewhere dubbed "a Luciferian poem". One recalls how the *Encyclopédie* features an engraving of the tree of knowledge in which philosophy is the tree's trunk while theology is relegated to a remote branch, next to black magic. Diderot and d'Alembert conceive a world where spirit has no place, where knowledge derives entirely from the senses and the self. And it is, Murray suggests, the groundplan of the world in which we live.

Reading 'The Billions' and poems like it, reveals that Murray works with two poetics: one recreating 'our *other* history', and one engaging directly (and often astringently) with ordinary history. In some of Murray's most impressive writing the two poetics are braided together; while his weakest verse tends to work solely in his public register. There one hears the voice of a cultural commentator, sometimes a wee bit shrill, or of a lecturer telling us that poetry should follow a dream logic (when the text itself can be rather prosaic). At their worst, these poems are merely boos or hurrahs:

Prose is Protestant-agnostic,  
 story, discussion, significance,  
 but poetry is Catholic:  
 poetry is presence.

There are impressive exceptions: the title poem, for instance, is a terse meditation on the Nazi test for feeble-mindedness (the suspects had to compose a sentence using 'dog', 'fox' and 'field'). The poem gains moral force not by stating a view about society but by exposing a political unconscious.

Although *Dog Fox Field* offers us nothing of the order of 'SMLE' or 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday



Song Cycle' (and no poet always writes at full stretch) it boasts several worthy additions to the Murray canon. 'The Emerald Dove' concludes with one of those lovely rushes of language which come only to the fully empowered. A dove flies into a bedroom; it is "an emerald Levite", and "Levite too"

in the question it posed: sanctuary without  
transformation,  
which is, how we might be,

plunged out of our contentment into evolved  
strange heaven,  
where the need to own or mate with or eat  
the beautiful  
was bygone as poverty,  
and we were incomprehensibly, in our  
exhaustion,  
treasured, cooed at, then softly left alone  
among vast crumples, verticals, refracting air,  
our way home barred by mirrors, our  
splendour unmanifest  
to us now, a small wild person, with no idea  
of peace.

Also impressive are 'Feb', 'Masculeene, Cried the Bulls', 'The Tin Wash Dish', 'The Ballad of the Barbed Wire Ocean', and (not listing all of them), a wonderful piece of blues: "Yes, I've wrestled with an angel: there is no other kind./ I wrestled with an angel: that wrestling's the only kind./ Any easier wrestling finally sends you blind". Murray sings in the final bar that the angel wounds and blesses us by letting us see things from both sides. What he doesn't let on, though, is that angels attack in the dark, when we least expect it: sometimes from the left but sometimes from the right.

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## Hart's Thought and Art

Peter Steele

Kevin Hart: *The Trespass of the Sign; Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, \$45). *Peniel* (Golvan Arts, 21a Mary Street, Hawthorn, 3122, \$11.95). *The Buried Harbour* (The Leros Press, P.O. Box 18, Duffy, ACT, 2611 \$13.95).

"Once there was an Aztec (or a Gael, or a Serb) who was known as Jesus Christ." No such sentence

has become part of the christian story, but if it had, that story would have had a very different look. It would not just be a matter of different costumes, and a different set of directions for the extras in the eventual biblical spectaculars from Hollywood: the whole matrix of the story would have changed. Anticipations of how such a figure would have comported himself, and of how he would have been encountered by his contemporaries, and of what the upshot would have been for him, and of how Australian eyes at the end of the twentieth of the "christian" centuries would have been turned on him, would be shaken up, hard.

To a degree, such a possibility has been entertained in christian art. As I write, a Thai representation of the Madonna lies on my desk: and by now, many thousands of such transmutations of christian iconography are commonplace - far more commonplace, for instance, than local or temporal transmutations of Shakespeare (though I once saw a Bhutanese rendering of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* at about fourteen thousand feet up in the Himalayas, and it made its customary poignant sense). And indeed, the claims of christianity would collapse if it were *not* urged that Christ was a god/man for all seasons, all milieux, and thus up for rendering in an indefinitely large array of cultural modes.

But suppose something a little different: namely that the wedding between greek philosophy and christian experience did not take place. It was not inevitable that it should have done. By now, with first Augustine as broker of the deal with Plato, and then Aquinas as that of the deal with Aristotle, and subsequently a melange of middlemen between the christian story and Kant, or Heidegger or Marx, this seems hard to imagine: however, let us imagine it. And let us imagine that when, as the centuries passed, christian professional articulators (preachers, polemicists, and so forth) framed their words, they did so after the forms of the arts, so that the equivalent of a Robert Hughes or a Lionel Trilling was the normal renderer of christian self-understanding and of proclamation. In that event, the intellectual history of at least the western world would have looked utterly different. The peculiar mingling of saying and not-saying which is endemic to all of the arts would have suffused all second-order christian talk. Those who are now theologians would not be reverting to the thickets of metaphysical or counter-metaphysical cogitations: they would be keeping an eye cocked now upon the gospels, and now upon Henry Moore or Rene Magritte.

I do not know what Kevin Hart would make



of such a scenario, but his *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* suggests that it might engross him. One does not, unironically, dedicate a book "ad maiorem Dei gloriam" - "to the greater glory of God" - if the religious lacks meaning, or preciousness indeed: but the whole thrust of Hart's book is to make intellectual alertness to the religious much more limber than, characteristically, it is. My colleague John Honner begins his review of this book in the theological journal *Pacifica* by saying "This is a very serious book", and so it is: but I think that part of its seriousness would be missed (and with loss) unless one remembered that Hart is also a poet and translator of poetry whose work displays both passion and finesse. In other words, he is emphatically at home in that terrain of the mind in which the indicative is twinned with the subjunctive, where what must be is habitually haunted by what might be: and in which language dismisses the blurred only to admit the evoked.

Stravinsky, seeing the Grand Canyon, said "that's serious!" Deconstruction, whether in the canonical version according to Derrida, or in the alternative redactions, wants and doesn't want to say the same about the conduct of its affairs. Peering over the edge of the defined - a 'defined' itself taken for territory under perpetual earthquake by deconstructionists - one undergoes a kind of atheistic baptism of dismay, the frisson of vertigo as one sees not Alps on Alps arise but chasm engulfed by chasm of dubious meaning. That's serious - or is it? What one makes of all this attitude, provided one does not think it precipitated by philosophical misconceptions, will depend upon whether one thinks that the Canyon is, if not a stage property, at least predominantly a tourist attraction. Stravinsky, after all, was making a good joke rather than having a Pascalian experience. Deconstruction now appears to many a more-or-less good joke, a contribution to our humane cheerfulness rather than either the incarnation of nightmare or the blowing away of mystical dreams.

Hart does not regard deconstruction in this way. His is a delicate and robust mind: he is original, zestfully learned, a philosopher's philosopher and a poet's poet. He has the readiness for exposition, and for the contemplation of alternatives, which characterise the real teacher as distinct from the *flâneur* or the ideologue. I read his formidably ambitious book in the same spirit as one might read the writing of any author who has, prominent among his designs, to free the reader from ignorance and bias, including bias for or against the argument. One does not go on doing, this for more than a

few pages unless the book continues to exhibit intellectual authority. Hart's book does just that for me, even though I completely disagree with what seems one of its key suppositions. The last words of the book are:

However, if we add the Derridean problematic to theology what results is a general negative theology, one which places the value of the proper name in question, and thus provides us with an account of the only possible way in which a theology can resist the illusions of metaphysics.

It is good to ward off illusions in any discipline, from gastronomy to astrophysics, but I take it that, here as elsewhere, Hart is offering metaphysics something between an aubade and a coup-de-grace. By contrast, I think that the season for metaphysics is just beginning, and beginning precisely in virtue of the excellence of a book like Hart's, which, in abolishing illusions, makes room for legitimate hopes. Still, that is another discussion for another time. What should be said in the clearest terms at present is this: *The Trespass of the Sign*, bedded though it is in certain terms of reference favored by European philosophy of the last couple of centuries, is not confined in its importance to that context. A combination of intellectual tenacity and imaginative flair is so unusual a thing in Australian discourse that so fine an instance of it as this one should be grasped, meditated upon, and prized. This is the real thing, a canyon for the mind.

All that being so, it would be surprising if Kevin Hart's poetry did not combine the formal and the vivacious, and that is exactly what we get. *Peniel* follows *The Departure* (1978), *The Lines of the Hand* (1981) and *Your Shadow* (1984). I make the guess that part of what has attracted him about the Derridean venture is its singular preoccupation with falterings and flickerings, with intersections and counterventions, and most of all when words are being put to silence, or silence makes its claim to be worded. Certainly, that demeanour is centrally important in his poetry. He likes meltings into meaning, and out of meaning. Ultimately, he seems to find our condition a *commedia*, and to find the same warrant for that as Dante: but while things proceed, the jokes may be tart or tangy. So, "*Haranguing Death*" concludes,

And people come to funerals, half-pissed,  
in *Life Be In It* T-shirts! You - a king?  
Don't be absurd! A decent crown would fall  
over your skull and rattle round your neck.



Besides, you smell – and haven't done a thing about it for, well, centuries at least.

Your manners are appalling – shoving past the queuing years – and all those epitaphs! (you really haven't any taste at all),

your column in the paper lacks all style  
(I can't see how you ever got the job)  
and, worse, your jokes are bad, close to the bone.

Since we all lose with death, we might as well do it with style if we can. But Hart is one of those who have made their own, poetically, the mortality which veins even the best of our vitality, and he is capable of resonating with a ceremoniousness which finds exemplar and warrant in Yeats. In "Peniel" itself, remembering Jacob's scarring wrestle in *Genesis*, he says,

At thirty-five, all those I love have passed by  
Peniel,  
and everyone longs to take another name,  
and everyone knows a blessing is a wound,

and yet, what help is that? I do not know;  
those stories tell me nothing but themselves:  
at three a.m. I find myself asleep

beside some tales I hardly half-believe,  
and doze again, as hearing my name sung,  
a name no one has ever called me by,

half me and half a child I never was –  
my mother's child.

I wake sometime round four  
and find the moonlight sleeping on my cheek.

These are the troubles of us all, which is why we go on reading about them: but a poetry like Hart's helps us as well to read them.

His translations of the selected poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti have the same essential stamp: a man has found his shadow. So, for instance, Ungaretti's "Universe", "Col mare/ mi sono fatto/ una bara/ di freschezza" is turned as, "Universe", "Out of the sea/ I have made for myself/ a coffin/ of freshness": and "Una Colomba", "D'altri diluvi una colomba ascolto", as "A Dove", "I listen for a dove from other Floods". A reader of American poetry will hear in both of these the note of Merwin, but then Merwin did not come from nowhere. What we have from Ungaretti/Hart is the pool of silence, the falling word, and the cadence of echo.

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## Both Sides of the Frontier

Bain Attwood

Henry Reynolds: *With the White People* (Penguin Books, \$16.99).

Worthy causes deserve worthy historians, the eminent historian of the American South, C. Vann Woodward, once noted, and 'the Aboriginal cause' has been well served for some time now by Henry Reynolds. If the task of the historian is to be a slayer of myths and the creator of stories which reveal something more like the truth, Reynolds has fulfilled this responsibility more than any other Australian historian in recent years. In *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981) and *Frontier* (1987), he challenged several of Australia's most cherished myths – that Europeans settled an empty continent rather than invaded an occupied land, that this was a peaceful process when in reality it was marked by bloody conflict, and that Aborigines were passive and acquiescent in the face of the European incursion instead of resistant and adaptive. In this, the final volume of his trilogy – and in many respects it is the most ambitious of these studies since he is concerned with both sides of the frontier – Reynolds effectively lays to rest yet another of the heroic pioneer legends: "that pioneering was the exclusive achievement of Europeans and that Aborigines contributed nothing to the successful colonisation of the continent".

Reynolds clearly shows that both explorers and settlers drew, indeed depended, upon Aborigines' tracks and wells, shelters and camping grounds, to say nothing of highly skilled Aboriginal guides and diplomats who provided invaluable knowledge of both the country and its owners. This land was, moreover, far from an untamed wilderness; the Aborigines' fire-stick farming meant that it was peculiarly well suited for exploitation by the pastoralists. The indigenes' expertise in the bush was also deployed in another crucial fashion when they were recruited as native police troopers to help crush Aboriginal resistance, a fact which Reynolds does not shy away from like other historians have done previously.

Many more Aboriginal men as well as women and children aided and abetted European colonization as workers in the pastoral and maritime industries, constituting a cheap, skilled and readily available labor force for masters and mistresses who sometimes treated them kindly but more often dealt with them in a harsh and brutal manner. At the time many of these colonists



acknowledged the enormous contribution such Aborigines made to pioneering, but as the 19th century drew to a close, Reynolds points out, racial prejudice deepened and these Aboriginal pioneers were either demeaned or forgotten.

The broad thrust of Reynolds' argument here is irrefutable. However, he overstates his case in at least one respect. Through concentrating on the underdeveloped colonial economy of central and northern Australia (a regional bias apparent in Reynolds' other work), he exaggerates the importance of Aboriginal labor. As he concedes but nonetheless underplays, Aborigines were much less important elsewhere in Australia where the general trend of capitalist economic development resulted in very low demand for their labor.

The other major focus of this monograph is how Aborigines sought to accommodate themselves to the new European order. In his earlier studies, Reynolds emphasised conflict between Aborigines and Europeans and in doing so established what has become the orthodox interpretation of relations on the Australian frontier. Of late, this interpretation has drawn criticism from historians who have contended that interactions between black and white were also characterised by accommodation. In addressing himself to this pattern here, Reynolds adopts a rather defensive tone, asserting that he has always been aware that "collaboration was as common as confrontation". While this is undoubtedly so, in my opinion Reynolds is not entirely converted to that perspective and consequently his treatment of accommodation is less assured than his earlier examination of conflict.

As Reynolds notes, Aborigines who cooperated with the colonizers "have been condemned as collaborators and traitors to the Aboriginal cause", and in this study it was necessary to enter into both the experience and consciousness of such Aborigines. Reynolds seems to have been unable to satisfactorily perform this difficult task, however. For an historian who pioneered the study of racial relations from the Aboriginal perspective, the overall balance of this book is oddly eurocentric. The relationships of accommodation are assessed in terms of their implications for whites and white Australian history much more than they are from the perspective of Aborigines and their historical standpoint. Thus, Reynolds' account is more penetrating when he considers those Aborigines who have undergone the least cultural change and describes those relationships which were distant rather than intimate. For example, he completely overlooks the experience of acculturation for Aborigines on missions and reserves, and in

examining the Aboriginal men who served in the native police forces his emphasis is upon their skills, the operations of the forces and its impact, rather than on how the policemen understood their roles.

An examination of accommodation poses a question of fundamental importance to the student of racial relations: why didn't Aborigines become integrated into colonial society? In the most strongly interpretative chapter of the book, Reynolds offers a two-fold explanation. First, that European racial prejudice ensured that Aborigines were either rejected or only offered "the life of the poor and powerless" at the bottom of the social hierarchy and no chance of upward mobility. (Here, Reynolds' analysis of the workings of class and gender is quite superb.) Second, he argues that Aborigines were uninterested or unwilling to join European society - that the whites' cultural values (individualism, materialism, the work ethic) and the poor incentive and rewards (poor 'pay' and subservience to their bosses) held little if any attraction. Reynolds equivocates over which of these two factors was more important, but tends to favor Aborigines' agency rather than Europeans' structures.

While I am not persuaded by this interpretation, I believe the more serious weakness in Reynolds' consideration of accommodation resides in his failure to provide a model to explain the variations in Aborigines' responses to colonization - he describes at considerable length both Aboriginal resistance and accommodation but proffers little rigorous analysis which would account for when and why they adopted one strategy over the other. Differences in European economic and social patterns are only briefly noted and needed to be more carefully delineated, as did changes in these - there is, in fact, little sense of chronological development in Reynolds' account.

As in his other books, Reynolds can be criticised for offering too many examples and quoting sources too often and at too great a length, failing to closely interrogate and interpret them. As a fellow scholar and teacher rather than the general reader, I would have liked this book to have been more firmly located in the existing scholarship; Reynolds handsomely acknowledges the work of other historians in his preface but seldom refers to their specific studies in the text. This said, however, one must not lose sight of the fact of the manifest virtues of this book - Reynolds writes in a very lively and engaging fashion and has a good eye for telling examples. And there are some well chosen illustrations which supplement the text nicely. In the final analysis, Reynolds should command our admiration and respect for his exceptional ability



to pose questions about our past which are of fundamental importance to black and white Australians in the present.

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## Find the Stuffed Platypus

Alex Selenitsch

Terence Lane & Jessie Serle: *Australians at Home: a Documentary History of Australian Domestic Interiors from 1788 to 1913* (Oxford University Press, \$195).

I write this review at a time in Victoria when 'history' appears to be grinding around to begin (or end) another cycle. Our government appears to be exhausted, Melbourne has torn its city centre to shreds in a frenzy of speculative building and our paddocks are jammed with unwanted sheep. All discussion of these things appears to be possible only in numerical terms, and the statistics are always

monetary. As the missing billions are announced, we reel in shock at a kind of pornography of speculation. Already there have been calls for a fresh apolitical no-nonsense re-start to our public life.

What has made these thoughts surface is, I suspect, the cumulative effect of the 479 plates in *Australians at Home*, nearly all views of Victorian, i.e. 19th century Australian, interiors. What this long march of overstuffed rooms reveals – among other things – is the same mercenary ethos that appears to have got hold of us again. One came to Australia in the 19th century to better oneself: the hope was to make a killing and stick it up the noses of those 'at home'. Under such circumstances, where wealth meant quantity – think about that one – , the only sure indication of progress was accumulation. Its aesthetic was display, with every room a Department Store.

This is the kind of response that one could hardly produce when faced with existing analytical books on Australian interiors such as Suzanne Forge's *Victorian Splendour*, or even the populist renovator's opportunities by Ian Evans. That it is possible with *Australians at Home* shows that it is an archive – an





assembly of materials waiting to be interpreted. As a portable archive, this book is a beauty. Heavier than most books (it needs a table to be read or handled in comfort) it is nevertheless lighter than a filing cabinet. The twelve years of research by the authors and their ability to gather material from a surprisingly wide range of sources has been distilled into an accessible anthology which is nevertheless a rigorous work of scholarship.

The book itself is split into two sections with the usual complement of prefaces, acknowledgements, foot-notes, bibliographies and index. All of these are extensive and useful. The acknowledgements must contain the longest such list I have seen in a work of this kind. It includes just about everyone involved in the heritage industry from antiquarians, patrons, bureaucrats to archivists, historians, curators etc., etc. It must be the closest thing possible to a tribal listing and is an apt social analogue of the crowded reception rooms shown in full bloom in the book's photographs from the 1880s.

Of the two major parts of the book, the most substantial is the section of Plates. These are illustrations – watercolors, pencil and ink sketches, some oil paintings, some architectural drawings, but mostly photographs of rooms. The Plates are set out in chronological order. The first is the celebrated 'Sketch of Bligh's arrest by Lieut. Minchin' c. 1808, showing a room with nothing but a crumpled bed from under which the Governor is being extracted. The final plate shows the tastefully arranged 'Drawing Room in Madame Melba's Residence, Coombe Cottage, Coldstream' photographed in 1913. In between the Spartan dictator's bunk and the cosmopolitan aesthete's hideaway, a conventional history of white supremacy is mapped out. First come the Georgians and their attempts at restraint, then the tents of the goldfields, to be followed by an increasing density of silks, cottons, woollens, feathers, furs, canes, leathers, papers, books, pictures, mahogany, gilt, glass, ferns etc., etc., etc., ranging through town houses, homesteads, government houses, cottages, apartments, bark huts and caves. Every attempt has been made to be representative, in the face of the fact that the book includes what has been *recorded*, not everything that was there.

It's at this point that the collection treads a fine line. It is neither a representation of how things were, nor is it a history of taste, although it contributes substantially to both.

The problem of discovering how things really were is only present for those looking for some sort of complete representation. On this score,

*Australians at Home* can be described as a cheerful gerrymander, over-representing the rich. The tents and dugouts are there, but the numbers are on the side of the large houses. This bias in the records is in itself interesting and is another of the socio-economic questions that leap out of the plates.

Although socio-economic factors may be seen as questions on the margin of interior design, the history of taste is not. The authors of *Australians at Home* appear to be wary of presenting a strong thesis. However, a documentary approach and a strong idea need not be isolated from each other. Charlotte Gere's *Nineteenth Century Decoration, the Art of the Interior*, published in London in 1989 makes a useful comparison to *Australians at Home*. Gere's opus – about the same size and weight as the Austral work – presents the thesis that the artistic interior of the city house is *the* aesthetic achievement of the 19th century, just as the country house interior was of the 18th. This doesn't interfere with her encyclopaedia of illustrations, some of which incidentally, appear in the Australian collection.

If there is any thesis to be found in *Australians at Home*, it is the acceptance of our achievement of a second-rate me-tooism (not necessarily the attitude Gere takes to all the Australian illustrations she uses, by the way). An idea floated by Lane in his essay in *Historic Interiors* edited by Masie Stapleton in 1983, it is true it can be supported by many of the interiors in this collection, for example, the interiors of *Auchendarroch* in South Australia. A collection of William Morris designs is used in these rooms to produce an ambience of outstanding ordinariness, utterly unlike the Pre-Raphaelite visions that Morris and his circle put forward. The only interest in such a self-deprecating theory is in the question of how the fashions were adapted for Australian conditions. This reaches its symbolic height in the stuffed platypus which is deftly integrated into a chocka 'Library and Sanctuary at Penghana, Tasmania, c. 1903' (plate 395).

In fact, the illustrations suggest a number of different theses. Not being of English descent, I am unconcerned with the antipodean echoes of that insular powerhouse, but being a Reffo, I find the illustrations of hut and tent interiors very appealing. These are simultaneously rude and sophisticated, the walls make-do (almost make-believe) with the latest in technology arranged upon or around them. These interiors set out the raw and the cooked in the one place. The makers of these interiors may have been English men, but the results indicate something of their new and unique conditions.



These kind of interiors persist throughout the 19th century, but the masculine touch doesn't. Where did all the men go when the taffeta arrived?

Another aspect of this collection concerns furniture and photography. The two terms are related. The interiors are nearly all installations of objects, often displayed in symmetrical groups to create smaller spaces within a larger given room. Is this because people took to occupying existing spaces and made them their own by a distribution of portable goods? The nomadic aspect of domesticity – certainly a feature of modern Australian life – goes a long way towards explaining the mix of styles and the dearth of interiors where the building fabric and furnishings are of a piece. There is a corresponding minority of designer's drawings: the documents in this book are images of rooms as they were, as the work of their occupants, not the projection of imaginative visions. Hence the use of photography, as earlier on there were water-colors. It took professionals some time to respond to this business of furniture arrangements and one can see such a take-over attempt in plate 381 'A Drawing-room Corner' where an Edwardian architect has designed some angled arches over the end of a room to reinforce (fix in place?) a small grouping of furniture. Is the asymmetrical and tortuous carcass of the Queen Anne house a late response to the business of arranging furniture groups? One can sense the beginnings of the modernist program of building the furniture in, for taking furniture out of the hands of amateurs.

Lane and Serle use two different methods to support the Plates. The first of these is what can be described as the other half of the book – the Introduction. This is a set of essays, a book on its own. The essays are a bit of a mixed bunch. They attempt a history of interiors design, of living habits, economic development, technology and fashions, and move about these topics without finding a way of integrating them. The essays are presented as chronological units, and imply a history of irreversible and complete change, with its associated idea of being behind-the-times and hence second-rate. The essays are slightly at odds with the Plates which show eclectic interiors of new and old things mixed, with much of the old being brand-new. It's a phenomenon still with us in brand-new baroque and colonial interiors in contemporary houses.

But the notes to the Plates share none of this difficulty. Each plate is accompanied by a set of notes, sometimes the length of a substantial essay describing the picture, quoting excerpts from relevant contemporary written material, and even offering some interpretation of unusual features in

the plate not easily taken in by the casual observer. Every so often the pace of the notes changes, with excursions into the 'servant problem', or sewerage, or other issues not visible but related to the picture. These notes are a pleasure to read and turn the archive into a literary work. They can be read in bits, grouped, or attacked as an epic novel. They pass with flying colors the test whereby the reader feels the need to read excerpts out loud to those around her.

A final comment: other reviewers have noted the high cost of this book. I would just like to point out that a *real* English publisher would have given us cloth-covered boards with a stamped monogram, and French fold wrappers.

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## The Marriage Market, a New Colonial Text

Elizabeth Morrison

Mary Theresa Vidal: *Bengala, or, Some Time Ago*. Edited by Susan McKernan. Colonial Texts Series. (New South Wales University Press, \$19.95).

Mary Vidal (1815-1873), an Englishwoman, spent five years in New South Wales during the 1840s. *Bengala* is set in the Penrith district south of Sydney where the author lived. While the work has affinities with fiction by contemporary colonial novelists – in particular, Catherine Spence's *Clara Morison* and Louisa Atkinson's *Gertrude, the Emigrant* – it needs to be recognised as belonging with a long line of novels about the Australian colonies written by visitors: Charles Rowcroft and Alexander Harris before Vidal, Henry Kingsley contemporary with her, Anthony Trollope, Francis Adams and many others coming after.

*Bengala* (like *Clara Morison*) is an English marriage-market novel transplanted to a colonial bush setting – an illustration of the ironic 'universal truth' which launches Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife". The cast of characters includes several unmarried men and women from various levels of colonial society. In the course of the story most are suitably matched up, but a few misfits fail to attain nuptial bliss and suffer tragic fates. The principals are landowner John Herbert and young Isobel Lang, daughter of a neighboring settler. Divided by class (Herbert, we are told, is descended from an "old north country



family" while colonial-born self-styled tomboy Issie comes from a line of Nottingham tradesmen), the two are separated also by years. First meeting when Isobel is twelve and Herbert an adult, there is an instantaneous sparring attraction between them – a rapport which is pursued through perversity and adversity over the years.

The social comings and goings of the residents of the district (house visits, picnics and the like), the multifarious activities required to extract a living from the land ('barking' and burning off, mustering and boiling down of stock), the immediate presence of ticket-of-leave men and the lurking fear of bush-rangers provide a rich background to the interwoven personal stories. The centrality of the Herbert-Isobel relationship is signalled in the epigraph prefixed to each of the two volumes of *Bengala* (in the present edition bound together): a quotation from *Much Ado About Nothing*: "If I should speak/ She would mock me into air: O she would laugh me/ Out of myself." In the play the words refer to Beatrice; quoted in the novel they apply to the outspoken and would-be independent, but vulnerable, Isobel. Attentive readers will note several occasions where Herbert's too diffident attempts to 'speak' to Isobel are deflected, before seeing how reduced circumstances (hard times turn Isobel, like Clara Morison, into a governess) and sundry sobering experiences entail a getting of wisdom which tips the balance.

Parallel with the Herbert-Isobel saga is an acrimonious conflict between Herbert of Warratah Brush and Lang (Isobel's father) of Langville about the location of a bridge over Bengala Creek (an intended metaphor?) – a disagreement which Isobel attempts intermittently to resolve. The squabbling and negotiations prefigure the treatment of class divisions (and the necessity and means of their being overcome in colonial proximity) which is the theme of Trollope's *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* (1873) – a story of enforced conciliation between squatter and selector, undergirded by intermarriage. A literary window onto class in colonial society, *Bengala* has many of the standard ingredients of colonial novels depicting adaptation to Australian life: the effete if good-humored Englishman, Mr Henley the new chum, tossed from his horse into a baptism of mud; the robust, capable Australian girl – a type later portrayed by Ada Cambridge (Sue Delavel in *A Marked Man*) and Catherine Martin (Stella Courtland in *An Australian Girl*).

Apart from the matchmaking in a country colonial setting, the novel has a dimension which the editor Susan McKernan skilfully helps modern readers to be aware of and appreciate. In her introduction and explanatory notes she describes Vidal's

life and literary career, relating this and the events in *Bengala* to economic and social features of the early 1840s. Informing us that Vidal, married to a clergyman, was caught up in contemporary religious movements, McKernan outlines the Tractarian and Evangelical (High and Low Church) developments and Anglican reactions to growing numbers of Catholics in New South Wales. This context, together with background material about the treatment of priestly celibacy in 19th-century novels of faith and doubt, helps to illuminate the incidents involving Jesuit Father Mornay. The priest, explicitly attracted to Isobel, serves subtextually to arouse Isobel's own sexuality – with Victorian discretion, a few covert allusions convey this. But, as was deemed proper and conventional for the Victorian novel, passion in literature (intended to model life) had to be restrained or it would devastate.

Published by the London firm of J. W. Parker in 1860, *Bengala* appears to have had limited impact on English and colonial readers at the time, which partly explains its omission from most Australian literary histories (H. M. Green's is one of the few to have discussed it). The contemporary reception may be understood in terms of the book's subject matter: dealing with a period long past, before the heady goldrush era, it might well have been perceived as dated. (By contrast, Kingsley and Spence set their works in the 'present', though *Geoffry Hamlyn*, opening in 1857, does flash back to earlier times.) Vidal's tiny niche in Australian literary history to date has been based on her homiletic *Tales for the Bush* published in Sydney and London in the 1840s when there was a big market for all kinds of 'emigrant' literature. *Bengala*, a far more ambitious, accomplished and enjoyable work appeared too early for an established colonial reading market. The 1870s and 1880s saw the flourishing of a colonial literature which reconstructed romanticised images of a convict, pastoral and goldfields past. The greater part of it, published in newspapers and magazines, still awaits modern scrutiny, although publishing ventures of the past five or so years – boosted by bicentennial historical awareness and women's studies – have begun to make it accessible.

The Colonial Texts Series, the General Editor's Foreword tells us, aims to provide "reliable texts of nineteenth century Australian literary works which have been out of print or difficult of access throughout most of the present century". Republication of *Bengala* in the series may well provide the first opportunity for a wide appreciation and considered appraisal of this thoroughly readable



and quite fascinating work. (This reviewer gleaned so much more on the second reading, and is contemplating a third!) The wider availability in libraries and on private bookshelves should mean that the book and its author will get the serious attention they deserve in the literary histories and reference books yet to be written.

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## Dispersion and Passion

Catherine Kenneally

Peter Rose: *The House of Vitriol* (Picador, \$12.99).  
Gig Ryan: *Excavations* (Picador, \$12.99).

a disappearing universe  
gone mad with dispersion

lines from 'Alsatian traveller' by Peter Rose, not inapplicable to the world of *The House of Vitriol*, though applied, in context, to a "grizzled, vice-regal" dowager-dog being driven through the suburbs.

There is something typical about the subject of the poem, too: one that can be treated in a distant, ironic, sage and humorous style.

Rose's is very much the Classical rather than the Romantic approach ("Classical, of course, sets everything out neatly; the Romantic just throws everything into a heap," as philosopher of the airwaves, H. G. Nelson, so succinctly has it.) Rose finds a *locus* or *topos* for a poem in much the same way Renaissance wordsmiths did: through *inventio*. Not 'invention' in our sense, implying an inspirational visitation of the Muse, say. Rather through the deliberate and methodical exercise of a trained logical facility which, in expression as in conception, has due regard for rhetorical principles. *Decorum in omnia*.

These poems would strike exponents of Renaissance poetics as admirable, the poet's matter being disposed in harmonious and mellifluous language and in such a way as to display his expertise.

For it is not inough to roll in pleasant woordes,  
nor yet to abounde in apt vocables or  
epythetes, vnlesse the Inuention haue in it also  
*aliquid salis*. By this *aliquid salis* I meane some  
good and fine deuise, shewing the quicke

capacitie of a writer. (George Gascoigne,  
1575).

*The House of Vitriol* is certainly a showcase for the quicke capacitie of this poet. Having found ('inventio' meant 'finding') such *topoi* as serve him for 'Our Man in Eden', say, he decorates the theme with schemes, tropes and devices recalling some of the Early Fathers of this century - Wystanus Audeniensis, for instance - again in harmony with the rhetoricians' dicta about imitation (to wit, that there can't be enough of it).

Life's dull without the Kents  
and they still haven't dreamed of Bourbon  
Send me back after a few good crops.

"Apt vocables and epythetes" are too numerous to list, though Gascoigne might have cautioned against "strange words, or *obsoleta et inusitata*, vnlesse the Theame do give just occasion". Latinate and obscure words abound in these poems, and in most cases it was hard to decide whether the occasion justified the use. The flavor of the poems is often so arch and archaizing you can't tell whether it's all mannered or partly 'real'. Is 'matutinal' a word Peter Rose in *propria persona* would choose (ditto 'oscitant', 'fulgid' and 'lacteous' - 'claqueurs'? 'costive'?)?

What is the joke, exactly? It's obvious in some cases, like 'Fascicles for Emily', which Peter Porter's blurb says would have had E.D. in litigious mood:

Blunt ecstasy is anodyne -  
The Eiderdown of Sense -  
Abnegation in a tumbler -  
Three gills of prurience -

but is it funny so much as rather mean and a bit sneaky?

How shrunk she was - when first she died -  
Quite wizened to a Husk -  
The Empress of Longiloquence -

It's an attack *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*) more than a parody of style. Another Australian sage, John Clarke, could provide a few clues on how to keep the two separate.

Death is something - it happens -  
It follows something else -  
Or nothing -  
Or something other than either -  
Possibly this.



"Emmy-Lou Dickinson" in  
*The Complete Book of Australian Verse*

But I took as my text "mad with dispassion". This is the really curious thing about Rose's poems. Porter says they're 'infinitely knowing', 'wonderfully impure'. But what do they *do* for you? Here's a brief poem, 'Obscure Figure', that might have been erotic if the eroticism hadn't been sucked under by the classical allusion, leaving only a purplish tinge on the surface:

Perhaps it was Patroclus I dreamt of.  
Perhaps it was him I watched,  
wearily shedding his bloody armour  
then leaning, enigmatic,  
over a low-slung spartan bed,  
naked, brown-skinned, alone,  
until the moment of Achilles' return.

I'd prefer the poem to have a local habitation and a name: maybe a dedication to a living individual. Or maybe (horrors!) I've missed something. Maybe some of the poems are actual translations from the classics? Is 'Kitchen' a Catullus I've forgotten?

Lesbia, Lesbia look at me now.  
Stop fretting tomorrow night's *boeuf*.  
It's only cow! . . .

If the intention is to be the Eliot *de nos jours*, why not take a leaf out of his book and provide a glossary? Even the most po-mo of sensibilities is going to lose Rose in some of the set-pieces ('The Return of Helen', or 'Tender Scenes': "Oh, we had to have Narcissus put down/ I know it was a liberty"). The connection with *nos jours* is frequently inscrutably obscure, though the net effect may be witty, brittle and amusing. There are some poems that don't seem to have ironic intent, but they too have a quaint 1920s or '30s Robert-Gravesy feel ('Prime Minister's Grandson') or an Oxbridge undergrad cleverness, again of a dated kind:

Master  
  
Saurian  
senescent  
so so Somerset Maugham  
urbane in everyday velvet  
still ramrod with monkey glands

Gig Ryan is your polar opposite. In the sense of being full of passion and (apparently) willing to convey it. On the other hand, she's not a model of limpidity either.

As far as 'diction' (horrible word) goes, there are certainly no obfuscatory Latinisms. More a reliance on plain Anglo monosyllables – or what seem at first to be plain words but turn out to be disconcertingly opaque. Where Rose can write:

If asthma fêtes another charismat  
hubris groins the internecine strife

and make you want to write a philistine letter to the Minister demanding that Classics be dropped from the syllabuses, Ryan writes such lines as:

The wind a door I hack

or

The sky passes like a stick

and you can't imagine why – being so seemingly straightforward – it doesn't instantly compute.

There's a tight-lipped density about the poems in *Excavations* that is reminiscent of Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark*; in a word: macho.

Dawn breaks through the droog blanket's  
chipped flavour  
As another slam beams its cuts on his face.

That Clockwork-Orange spitfire argot has just as passé a taste as Rose's Isherwood/Spenderisms. The poem just quoted, as it happens, is called 'Achilleus', and provides a revealing comparison with Rose's 'Obscure Figure':

the muffled snow flicks down  
and reckons you're clapped in death  
I watch the fight from the brown shore.

Where Rose is content to make his poem turn on the classical reference, the elaboration of the Patroclus-Achilles conceit neutralizing the subjective jumping-off point ("I dreamt"), 'Achilleus', like nearly all Ryan's poems in this collection, with the exception of a few overtly topical and political ones, come back to focus on the sentient, suffering subject:

I don't know what close means, being dead  
all a life.

But this confessional urge is stymied by the 'virile' stance – the Poet of Few Words persona adopted by the speaking 'I'. What the reader is led to expect in the way of revelation of inner states is confounded by Ryan's unwillingness to be expansive, to



elaborate, to explain. The primary principle of Ryan's poetics has been compression: admirable in that poetry ought to make words mean all they can, but perplexing when the result is distortion and impenetrability. Titles aren't much help here. 'R.I.P.' begins: "her idle life spells its trained quarters to a price", and – as with Rose, but for different reasons – you feel you need a key to the code. Verbs and prepositions have to work hard in lines like that, and sometimes they won't bear the strain. Pronouns, too:

Her lizard hands held him with its trowel and  
tin

The flipped-out, aggressively alienated themes (I don't suggest they're inauthentic. How can you tell?) seem strangely 1970s: a tough rather than a blissful psychedelia:

The old piano teacher's turned to dust  
and joins me with sheets of death  
unconvincingly, which we commit all the  
same  
his soft pavilion resides  
(Your cheating heart your lost exhilaration)

So that the uninterrupted narrative flow of a poem like 'Notice to Quit' is a relief.

Quietly, the smells of food fill the house  
He polishes it all off  
while we watch TV  
and considering I can't cook, he's justified  
to hover at the table, his body forms a nest  
for his plate  
Living with him is like living with no-one

No gritty similes, no indecipherable verbs.

There are a few poems like this in *Excavations*, and they're the ones I like best. 'Rent', for instance, moves away from elliptical density and away from extreme statement ("shoot and forget", "the eyes pump lead" sort of thing) – both of which tend to blunt response – towards a looser manner that doesn't try to bludgeon you.

Always, he manages to weed around to sex  
I mean it doesn't matter if we start on work  
or books or sport

I'll go for a line like: "I chip in, trying to imagine liking somebody" over "his raffle kiss blows like a station" (which is a title) any day.

Rose and Ryan would seem to illustrate the Sentient Woman/Rational Man dichotomy depress-

ingly neatly, with the foregoing provisos about Ryan's 'hard', unyielding language. There's also a 'fellowcentrism' about both collections. Though Ryan's recording sensibility is, obviously, female, the male Other occupies centre-stage in the emotional landscape of the poems, female others (where they generate any emotive heat) tending to be the Other Woman. Rose's poems being fellow-centric in that sense would be neither here nor there in itself, except that – via most of the assumed voices – an impression of distaste accrues with the accumulation of remarks about "that fecund frau with the henna rinse", or a lover pinned alongside "a termagant" in a bus, or the consequences of never having married "a bronchial woman with bad/ taste". The same impression with "Pasty-faced women snuck off behind a Blackboy/ To gossip about this one's ostentatious pav", and so on.

There's an absence of politics in both books. Gig Ryan engages with South Africa, Kampuchea, low-income housing and media issues, but I'm not so conscious of the pursuit of "political" . . . refractions of sex, or desire, of power" noted on the back-cover blurb.

For mine, Ryan's is incomparably more potent a poetry in terms of its temperature, its risk-taking and its stretching the limits of 'visceral' writing. This is poetry as biopsy. Peter Rose, highly-accomplished technician that he is, writes poetry as autopsy.

## Not Poetry, Railery

### Adrian Rawlins

Harry Hooton: *Collected Poems; Poet of the 21st Century*. Selected and introduced by Sasha Soldatow. (Angus & Robertson, \$16.95).

Sixteen when he came to Australia as an 'assisted' migrant, Harry Hooton was born in Yorkshire in 1908, son of a railway worker. He apparently educated himself in his father's seldom used but extensive library. His first poetic love was Omar Khayyam, and as a child he rejected Walt Whitman's work as "colorless". There is no evidence of the young Hooton travelling far from the place of his birth, so, effectively, his worldview was essentially innocent. On his arrival here he held a typically priggish view of this country and its "bush". Whatever "culture" he encountered amused him. Virtually nothing is known of his first decade here – save that he swaggered it – but during his wanderings he developed an appreciation, even



a love, of the work of Henry Lawson, and discovered a parallel "democratic spirit" in the writings of Walt Whitman. When I was introduced to Hooton's ideas and works in 1957 it was suggested (by no less an authority than Bob Cumming) that Hooton's artistic aim was to effect a marriage between the long lines of Lawson and Whitman, thus presenting an essentially twentieth century poetic idiom. The debt to those writers is obvious, the 'marriage' less so.

It should be remembered that Hooton's artistic pilgrimage began in 1936 when a general perception of "Australian" literature was non-existent, the very year when C. Hartley Grattan, on the invitation of "Doc" Evatt, identified the canon of Australian literature as we now know it. So Hooton's concerns with a democratic "temper", shall we say?, and his concern to link-up ideologically and culturally with other pockets of working-class and anti-fascist thinkers and arts workers was radical and valuable for the time. Simply because he had come from the northern hemisphere he knew it could be contacted. I suspect many of his native-born contemporaries secretly felt that "overseas" was - like history itself - both physically and morally beyond their ken.

Hooton's wanderings in the eastern States finished at Newcastle in 1936. Here he married, had twins, had his first pieces published and, initially by accident, later by design, began to mix in increasingly more mainstream literary circles. His correspondence with Marie Pitt led to a warm acquaintance with Miles Franklin. His first, self-published book *These Poets* (1941) drew favorable reviews, led him into literary circles and, distrusting as he did all establishments, radical political areas - the Wobblies, the Trotskyites and other now dissolved organisations. He was invited to contribute provocative social and political comment to the *Newcastle Morning Herald*.

In 1943 he moved to Sydney, where his political activity increased. Despite his acceptance by mainstream editors, plans for a book came to nothing and in 1943 he self-published a book called *Things You See When You Haven't Got a Gun*. This phrase alludes to a well-known story: in the 1880s the recently arrived cartoonist Livingston Hopkins ("Hop" of *The Bulletin*) greeted a friend with a blackface gag from the minstrel shows then touring the land: "What curious things we see when we come out without a gun!" No doubt Harry picked up this story at the grass roots level. Apparently the book consisted of previously published poems and a long essay *Problems are Flowers and Fade*, which seems matter of fact today but could have

been considered outrageous at the time. Max Harris dismissed the book with one line: "Our anarchist bull careers madly through his intellectual fog."

Undeterred, Hooton kept on talking, corresponding, writing, lecturing and maintaining his worldwide connections with anarchist groups. He abandoned the idea of producing books and turned out poetry booklets and magazines until his untimely death in 1961. The most surprising fact about his booklets is his collaboration with A. D. Hope. No explanation of this connection is given in the introduction. In the Fifties Bob Cumming suggested it was during a period (of about six months) when Hope felt himself to be anti-academic. *No. 1*, with poems by both men, appeared in 1943; *NUMBER TWO* a year later; *Number Three* - after the Ern Malley hoax - in 1948. This latter carried poems by Hooton alone.

Next came three issues of *MS* in 1950 and 1951, and some work in two issues of *Language*, produced at Sydney University, in 1952. Here appeared the first poems of Bob Cumming, a former child prodigy musician who became Hooton's closest disciple and who killed himself the night before his mentor's funeral. One of Bob's poems appeared in *21st Century* - so-called because the Catholic Church already produced a sociological magazine called *Twentieth Century* - along with poems by American anarchists. Although it is again not mentioned in the text, it should be stressed that Hooton was not appealing to America as the purveyor of materially desirable artefacts but was connecting with individuals in that country who felt as threatened by its establishment as he did by the very stuffy establishment of this country.

Lawrence Lipton pops up in *21st Century* three years before *The Holy Barbarians* became a world-wide best-seller and four before his *Jazz Canto* (still the best example of poetry and jazz on record) also made it into world-wide record counters. Lipton was a member of that L.A. - San Francisco coterie of artists, thinkers and visionaries which included Kenneth Rexroth, Mark Tobey and, for a while, Sam Francis: men who had been studying zen, Buddhism and Chinese art and culture for thirty years before Kerouac came on the scene. These precursors of the Beats were genuinely the forerunners of the 'flower people' and it is symptomatic of Mr Soldatow's introduction that it shows no close knowledge of the period. Like so many of his generation he sees the past not as a fully-developed present which has passed by but as a misty, ill-defined background for his own generational pre-occupations. Unhampered by even the sketchiest



background study of the era, he writes with a breathless and wide-eyed lack of understanding which is sometimes drily funny and often rather irritating.

His attempt to promote Hooton as a poet of the future is absurd. Far from being a – let alone *The* – poet of the 21st century, Hooton's aesthetic belongs to the Industrial Revolution (or London Science Museum) era of machines: *not* the complex technological universe of quarks, computers and fractals. His long, rambling essay *Anarcho-Technocracy* – despite its noble intentions – is less readable and infinitely less meaningful than its parent, Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*; in fact, it could almost be perceived as a lampoon, *The Sole of Man Under Slowcialism* by Heath Robinson.

Soldatow suggests it is a pity that the literary establishment ignored Hooton in his later years. But what could they do? The man had nothing to say but endless re-iterations of the one point. By the time of his death Hooton was known only to a staunch band of libertarians and girl friends. *It is Great to be Alive* lovingly compiled by Margaret Elliott and proof-read by the author weeks before his death in 1961, came out shortly after that sad event and finally sold out in 1976 when I bought the last six copies from Leon Fink. In 1970 two poets included by Tom Shapcott in *Australian Poetry Now* (1970) acknowledged Hooton as a guide and inspiration, and since about 1978 Hooton's work appears in anthologies.

A. & R. are to be congratulated for publishing this collection in such an attractive paperback, even if its appearance is twenty years too late. Eager as I was to see the scope of Hooton's legendary output, actually reading the book annoyed rather than delighted or challenged me. I could not escape the child-in-the-man: the work's relevance seemed less obvious now than it had appeared in 1961. In the Fifties it seemed daring and somehow 'right' to poke fun at T. S. Eliot's stylistic excesses. But as Eliot's star shines brighter now than it did then (so much dross has fallen away in the intervening years), Hooton's denigration of him, Joyce and Henry Miller is childish and unwarranted.

Finding it hard to choose a passage that does Hooton justice, I'm going to quote two, chosen completely at random, and let you be the judge:

Lynch any man, and it's you and me  
And every man's Gethsemane.  
It is ONE man on earth cries,  
In the crucifiers and crucified,  
Inside felon, the foolish and the wise.

Oh man, why hast thou mistaken me  
For this Earth which is our enemy? (p. 115)

We aren't such stuff as dreams are made of  
any longer,  
We are the dreamers of dreams.  
Shakespeare, Shaunnessy have said their  
piece . . .  
Man know thyself was right – when man was  
made by apeman,  
The proper study of mankind was man . . .  
Now man is a daffodil-moth too fragile to  
touch –  
He's not in our dreams, is enclosing dreams  
not included in dreams. (p. 129)

Is this poetry? No, it is not poetry, it is railery.

Ultimately, life itself has belittled Harry Hooton. He is not entirely to blame. When he started writing no-one was too sure what 'Australian' writing actually was. Hooton's attitudes were truly Australian and he was important as a gadfly and a stirrer. But as a poet I think the long view will reveal him as a small ripple fast receding into the stream's relentless, unruffled flow.

*Adrian Rawlins continues to present poetry in performance as he has done for many years and to write about popular music.*

## The Monster, Love

Barbara Giles

Jeri Kroll: *Monster Love* (Wakefield Press, \$10.95).

I like this book. Kroll is frank, warm and sharply observant. At last we have a poet who writes of pregnancy and motherhood post-Plath, with a similar verve and skill, but in no way does she echo Plath. Jeri Kroll's work is fresh, original, in her depiction of that mix of joy and terror which is parenthood. I say 'parenthood' advisedly, women are inclined to assume that their special role in creation makes it unique, impossible for a man to share or understand. Kroll does not make that mistake.

I'm reminded that Jon Weaving in one of his stories has the narrator surprised to find that his father is right in saying he'll find fear for his child, and fear of failing him, strong elements in his love. Kroll acknowledges this fear and its concomitant anger at being made so vulnerable by love, almost quailing before the monstrous demands of this third party in what had been a duality of love.

At twenty-six weeks of pregnancy the presence



that had been "as light as cat's whiskers, floating as scraps of dream," has learnt to "flip like a landed fish", its movements visible to its admiring father, who in joyful surprise gives vent to a delighted squawk.

Once free of the womb, the love monster needs more than admiration. "Sleep a few days, rest, little lightning rod", begs his exhausted father. "Yesterday I could have done you in . . . greedy vampire," says his mother.

"I hate you, I love you, becomes clear unambiguous truth," but on another occasion, superstitiously she feels "Some day I shall pay for this gift," at the same time wants him to grow up fast for fear they'll all burn out. But he's growing up, and fast, wanting to go to school, "making plans for a future two weeks ahead, measuring himself against keyholes."

This desperate, anxious love calms, becomes bearable, the child himself less demanding. Then suddenly we are catapulted into a new scenario, a lower key, emotions more confused, poems difficult to solve. Things have gone wrong somewhere, survival's threatened. There's jealousy, insomnia, unexplained stepchildren, the language is plainer, the meanings less so.

Until now the poems have been open, life-affirming, cunningly simple, real. Now shutters come down, for love has turned into a different monster, whose appetite is ferocious and far from innocent. The whys, the hows remain obscure, sometimes she seems to be speaking of a different person, perhaps a projection of the one the here-and-now persona will be.

"Had love made her forget to wind her heart?" she asks, in the new emptiness of life, contemplating "a choice that will stretch her like a voice to reach the note that shatters." Brooding, she thinks of fruit not ripe and sweet on the tongue, but of seeds between the teeth, a stomach churning from gluttony. She wants "all of humanity's help."

She must take control again. On a weekend alone they move at first "like androids, learning to be simply human/till they begin to forget . . ./By dusk they have full-blown amnesia/ are buoyant . . ./laughing, arguing, earnest, free." And, playing with her son, she sees herself "performing the old script/a harridan, pre-feminist,"

I'm not even sure what I have been losing,  
my control, my mind, my ideals?

The children smirk, regard her with pity, the house  
is a surreal mess, they

savour their freedom as if they were royals  
and I the peasant, gauche, unwashed.

Weighing in the balance all this, along with her own faults, she knows that the heart, though bewildered, outweighs all this. The long poem that ends the book has an epigraph from Yeats:

All things fall and are built again  
and those that build them again are gay.

Kroll takes this as immortalising the joy of creation, but develops her poem into a survey of what history has done to writers who are women, and the current renaissance of women's writings - the opening graves, the opening gates - is dwelt on at some length. Cutting back rather abruptly to her son, she sees him as in part architect of her future and imagines the literary explorer finding at the centre of her maze, the Monster, Love. The connection is somewhat laboured, perhaps it would have been better to have made of one poem, two, with all stops out.

These points apart, I'll remember this book with affection and delight for its lively metaphor, its honest and moving depiction of the splendid and awesome aspects of that Monster, Love.

The cover is brilliant and appropriate.

*Barbara Giles' most recent book of poems was The Hag in the Mirror. She is also a prolific writer of books for children.*

## A Great Australian

### Frank Kellaway

Lyndsay Gardiner: *E. V. Keogh, Soldier, Scientist and Administrator* (Hyland House, \$25).

My friend Bill Keogh was an addicted reader of biographies. He seemed to gain strength and certainly derived pleasure from reading about great men - Shakespeare, Samuel Butler, Proust, Auden and dozens of others - who, like him, had had to battle with or duck or evade social condemnation of the homosexual proclivities which they found natural. Obviously any biography of Bill which shuffled over this aspect of his personality would have been false and Gail Brennan's "man absolutely without hypocrisy" as she described Bill would have hated it. Considering his complete avoidance of kudos, regarding those who craved it as a danger to important works in hand, he might have hated any biography of himself. However his works are



no longer in his hand. He was a great Australian and I believe the people who benefited from his life work have a right to know about the man who served them and future generations with no desire for recognition, with cunning, wit and stealth seeking only the best possible solution to medical problems for his people, for all people. I was delighted when Lyndsay Gardiner, a fine writer with an historical bent, was asked to do the biography.

E. V. Keogh D.C.M., M.M., a hero of World War I, hated everything to do with war and was a great admirer of the poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon and, though he served in World War II as a Colonel in charge of preventive medicine in the army from 1942 onwards, he was even more distinguished as an intellectual and man of peace. He was one of the young men who, between the wars, fostered enthusiasm for modernism in the arts and literature. He was a fine medical researcher and a statistician of flair and originality. Esmond Keogh (Bill to friends and acquaintances) was a very Australian man who hated pretension, snobbery and pompousness of all kinds. He was a keen punter and had many racing friends. A self-effacing man with no ambition for fame or even personal recognition he was nevertheless the most remarkable power in public medicine in Eastern Australia in the second half of his life span. He moulded and welded committees to get the results he believed were necessary in such campaigns as those against T.B. and cancer. His skill in picking the right man for any important job in public medicine or research and seeing that his man was appointed, became legendary. It is very pleasing indeed that Lyndsay Gardiner has written a well-informed biography about one of the most fascinating and many-sided Australians of the 20th Century.

I hadn't fully realised the difficulties involved in writing it even though I'd had a lot of discussions with Lyndsay. The fact that Bill was so thorough in destroying statements about his personal life and feelings made it a hard job. All the time his biographer was reading between the lines, intuiting, trying to work out what it would have felt like to be Bill at this or that stage, in this or that crisis. From that point of view I believe the book is a triumph. We *do* get a feel of the way this great human being's mind worked and we *do* get a sense of a youthful idealism that, in spite of some cynicism and a lot of foxy cunning, was never tarnished until his death in his seventies.

Another strength is the precise historical focus. The account of the country schools where Bill was educated before getting a scholarship to Melbourne

Grammar, and of the Grammar itself, give a vivid impression of the period. The evocation of Gallipoli and Egypt in World War I are another example, brief but convincing. However, Melbourne itself in those decades is somewhat neglected.

It seems to me the book is far too short. The account of Keogh's years as an administrator, which after all are perhaps the most important, though not necessarily the most exciting, do have more documentation and I found them much too brief. They tend to be reduced to a string of names and of letters designating organisations, so that as a reader I had very little sense of the dramas involved. On page 88 it is suggested that Keogh, Ward and Burnett were often in conflict with Wright over the John Curtin School of Medical Research. A brief account of the clash of arguments and personalities might have brought the situation to life. A refusal to get inside situations and dramatise them is the greatest weakness of this biography. Allan Ferris in his *Medical Appreciation* (page 163) says "It is probable that Keogh's major contribution to medical research in Australia came from his prowess at the conference table . . ." This is an opinion which seems to be borne out by the biography and yet at no point are we taken into the conference room or given an inkling of the particular wheeling and dealing that was necessary for Keogh to insure the best possible outcome for Australian research.

However Lyndsay Gardiner's method of piling up telling details is very effective in giving a lively picture of Bill Keogh at play as a punter and diner out with friends, as a surrogate uncle and father and as an extraordinarily positive influence in the lives of individuals; the man to whom everyone who knew him turned in moments of crisis, the 'enabler' who found the right man for any important job.

This is a book which all general public libraries should have on their shelves. The many readers who scorn fiction and get their accounts of real life from biography, will read this book with great interest. For those who want to know about the Australian medical world it is a must. For anyone who loves a war hero who hates war and an administrator who will not stoop to bullying or ordering people about, this book, in its context, is a major work.

*The poet and novelist Frank Kelloway lives in Koroit, Victoria.*



## The New Poetry

### Catherine Kenneally

Livio Dobrez: *Parnassus Mad Ward; Michael Dransfield and the New Australian Poetry* (University of Queensland Press, \$29.95).

Michael Dransfield died, aged twenty-four, in 1973. In 1987, UQP published his *Collected Poems*, edited by Rodney Hall. In this book, Livio Dobrez instals him as tutelary genius, presiding over the avant-garde in poetry in Australia for the past twenty years or so.

Dobrez's climactic final chapter elaborates a neo-Romantic aesthetic, evolved by Dransfield in tempo with and in response to his increasingly tormented life-experiences: "a tantalizing no-man's-land between poetry and life, poetry tending out of itself."

In terms of the thesis of *Parnassus Mad Ward*, it makes good sense to use Dransfield as a kind of precursor figure (in fact, Dobrez is inclined to see him as more of a John of the Cross, passing through a *noche oscura* into the cold, brilliant snowscape of poverty of spirit.) Dobrez sets out to demonstrate that it is possible to talk about a neo-Romantic "contemporary or near-contemporary poetics" practised and propounded by a moderately cohesive group of whom it could be said that Dransfield was its Prophet. His being fixed in time and having been prolific are handy features, and he has certainly seemed to signify a High-Romantic Something for his contemporaries who have gone on – like Adamson – to adopt and discard all sorts of poses. For all the ambivalence of Adamson's elegy for Dransfield, Dobrez feels he sees his friend as representing a capacity for "unequivocal feeling".

Dobrez's interest is, broadly speaking, in the '68ers' who are represented in Tranter's *New Australian Poetry*. They embody the move from the "measured cadences" and "hesitant sensibility" of the postwar group to the strident voices of Roberts, Hemensley, Forbes and the rest for whom obliquity, inhibition and decorum are laughable in most contexts and certainly in the New Poetry that wants the world and wants it now.

"Unsympathetic contemporaries" are identified with reference to Hall and Shapcott's *New Impulses* anthology. The editors employ (broadly speaking) the terminology and values of a 1950's poetics, and their own work is seen as having the ambivalence towards feeling, the agnosticisms which seem miraculously to disappear in the new dispensation.

Dobrez is not aiming to produce a survey of the New Poetry so much as to lay the ground, to set the context, for a critique. In this endeavor, nothing human is alien to him. The other important focus of the book is the "visual equivalents" of the poetics being discussed. Dransfield and Brett Whiteley are gathered into Dobrez's net as "visionary impressionists": artists whose essential Romanticism is caged, aware of the "banana peel in its path", "pacing out its small space like a cheetah from Whiteley's zoo series." Their "dialectic of amplitude and containment" forces them into virtuoso performance, "a concept of art as a flourish, in Renaissance Mannerist fashion."

Thirty pages into the book, you have a strong sense of Dobrez's virtuosity: a breadth and ease of allusion, a (very un-Australian) lack of self-consciousness about tossing in instructive parallels and analogies from other disciplines and other periods, in a spirit of highly infectious enthusiasm for the subject. A couple of paragraphs on Wallace-Crabbe yield the following: "... reaps the harvest of a Keatsian time or at any rate of fading summer... with the occasional chill of premonition... materialising like the ghost in *Don Giovanni*... (in) a Thoreau-esque house of one's own body... in the face of what Heidegger termed 'finitude'."

It's a breezy and at times impressionistic scholarship that informs *Parnassus Mad Ward*, and it makes exhilarating reading. There's hardly a dry patch in the book, and "one can more easily overlook the excesses, even occasional absurdities, of those engaged in a positive exercise" (as Dobrez remarks of the Tranter anthology). Even at his most excitable, in any case, Dobrez will always get down to straight talking. One of the most sustained and tightly-argued chapters is the midway chapter: 'Battle of the Books'. Considering the relative claims to representative status of the Lehmann-Gray *Younger Australian Poets* anthology and *The New Australian Poetry*, Dobrez separates Les Murray off as a Vitalist in the Lindsay tradition, his Vitalism racing him "toward the Imminent Days with prophetic whoosh", his poetry celebratory and mostly uncritical. Warming up for the tussle with Murray, he elaborates the poetics of praxis versus the Reflective Mode, again using the work of the editors of the also-ran anthology to demonstrate his argument (citing Lehmann's reflectiveness as the index of a "profound nostalgia, and Robert Gray thinking his feelings into being). A couple of neat examples of poems that do rather than say, or where statement "breaks out of its poetic frame, or comes out at you", and you know Les will be a walkover.



Neither the Dransfield nor the Tipping nor the Hemensley nor the Forbes nor the Tranter poem operates in such a way as to draw attention to its content as somehow *separate, dressed up* in words, *evoked* by words, *simulated* by words. Mimesis is not the guiding principle: instead of representing the world you activate it, you get it moving.

Hardly a page in the book is unbroken discursive prose. Longish verse excerpts pepper the text, and analytical paragraphs all have at least a couple of quoted verses here to illustrate the position. It's a sort of prose equivalent of the tactics ascribed to the '68ers': "direct, aiming at acceleration of the pulse."

In a 1982 article on 'Australia and the Legend of the Forties', Dobrez gathered the painters and poets who came before Whiteley, Dransfield and the rest under the label "soft expressionism". It was American models in both writing and the visual arts which did more than anything else to free the '68ers' of the dead weight of the previous thirty years.

Dobrez is shrewd about what was and wasn't importable. According to him, new Australian poets wanted the immediacy but not the "prophetic rush"; they had lots of enthusiasm for the Beats' poetic urgency, the New Yorkers' lack of inhibition and the possibilities for fun and games in the "quasi-abstract, elliptical" style of someone like Ashbery. Though no-one here could "expect to match" O'Hara, we tried; and there was a guarded 'yes' to the Black Mountaineers' 'Grand Collage'. All of it generated a "free flow of rhetoric", a belief that "poetry could open up new spaces" and that we'd better get on with it: "there was no time to lose."

(Not everyone was impressed. Martin Johnston dismisses "the groovier modern Americans" who "seem to be the context/I'm supposed to work in, though mostly I haven't read them"; but even he comes up with the working definition of a poem as a "kinetic object within a static set of parameters" – hardly free of some of the influences outlined above.)

Still, wild eclecticism marked the 'new' Australian poetry, as it did the American – and what Dobrez chooses (sensibly, I think) as the cipher of unity in diversity is the matter of *subjectivity* in the poem. Although subjectivity, in his view, is hardly entire and of itself: he chalks out three versions (Subjectivity I, II and III).

In Dobrez's view, the pre-'68ers' like Buckley,

McAuley and Wallace-Crabbe focused attention on the "fiction of personality" in their poems by the very gesture of disowning the "posturing Romantic 'I'". The new poets, in their neo-Romantic fashion, place a de-problematized 'I' in the midst of the subject's environment, with which it characteristically merges. The perceiving subject is unashamedly *there* in Dransfield and Co., the result being rather to de-emphasize the personal. Dransfield goes with Duggan goes with Tipping goes with Buckmaster in this respect (not all to the same extent). Dransfield's subject is "*both* one thing among others *and* the cohesive force behind everything."

This self/world dialectic is essentially Romantic, and so is the Self/Other question. Nigel Roberts, for Dobrez, isn't really a tough guy but someone who is "*honest* about his sense of responsibility to others", and Rae Desmond Jones, seeking his other half, "isn't a Gemini but he ought to be."

Vicki Viidikas goes for passionate rather than cool subjectivity; so does Jan Harry ("the 'you' . . . structures her rhetoric"); Robyn Ravlich: "extreme subjectivity". The women, it appears, work rather from self-deprecation to self-assertion, unlike the more macho of the above males. The diminution of the subject Dobrez sees in Jennifer Maiden's poetry appears to him to be part of a feminist strategy. ("Agony and desire combine with deflating matter-of-factness about the toybox torture chamber that is female being-in-the-world.")

Towards the objective pole, Dobrez characterises the diminishers of the subject: Tranter (a "Delvaux-with-corpses" landscape); Forbes's "breezy, de-centred voice" and "shadow-to-the-world" Kris Hemensley, the "subjective as spread out across an area of interaction".

Dobrez sees visual artists like Whiteley setting inner spaces against objective correlatives (he doesn't use that term): Whiteley painting Baudelaire and Rimbaud "transit(ing) over from their likenesses to the swarming details of the rest of the picture."

I can't go into the intricacies of centrifugal and centripetal kinetics in the praxis of the latter-day Parnassians, but they're instructive concepts. One extreme is the "Logic of the Uncensored Continuum" in the visual and performing arts (viz. the work of Lyndall Jones and Jill Orr: "real *and* gestural"), while the Centripedallers are exemplified (say) by the painters who participated in the 1968 'The Field' exhibition in Melbourne – Olitski, Stella ("only what can be seen there is there. (My painting) really is an object.") The Tranter poem-as-object is seen as formally akin to the latter.



The field, originally coterminous with the *process* of the painting, now signifies the 'objectification of the process (as it does in Tranter's 'The Poem in Love'). Strictly speaking, it is not a poem at all, but . . . a surface.

The final chapters re-focus on Dransfield, this time by means of comparison with Kenneth Slessor, who has some strong poetic affinities with Dransfield, but points out the ways in which Dransfield's voice and practice are new, his perceptions and strategies unavailable to an earlier generation. Both temperamentally inclined to aestheticism, using art as the register of sense-experience, of "the instant of vivid consciousness", both see the solipsism implied in the approach.

When Dransfield interpreted perception as painting with one's eyes he was already postulating sight as the author of its objects.

But where Slessor plays disgusted voyeur to his own posturings, flirting with *le neant* in a straight rather than 'neo' Romantic way, Dransfield leaves him behind, writing out the death of the author before the fact and calmly surveying the post-factum scene. His image of decaying Courland Penders speaks volumes to Dobrez: "an entire history of aesthetic Europe, its collapse and quasi-existence in Australia."

Dobrez sees Dransfield as heading for sanctity, of a turned-on-its-head Genetian variety. In the last chapter he assists at the beatification, Dransfield

promoted to the ranks of the mystics ("piece it together/ world in a grain of snow"); able to see "the noumenal beneath the aesthetic phenomenal." If Dransfield is a new John of the Cross, Dobrez's reverent account of the late "transparent, skeletal poems", dispatches from the Life/Art border, has something of the learned ecstasy of Catherine of Siena's *Dialogues*.

What I responded to in this book, apart from its neat categories and fearless eclecticism, was the sustained tenor of intellectual excitement. These are ideas Dobrez lives and breathes, and is able to communicate with passion. The groaning frame of reference seems what's needed to explicate individual talents since the 1950s, and this author is literature and pop-culture-wise enough to attempt an ambitious family history. A whole chapter goes to Adamson, shrewd again; but in context with these, and some of his unmentioned, contemporaries, his poetic vehicles seem less built for speed and endurance. Tranter, his rival in stature, emerges as lighter on his feet.

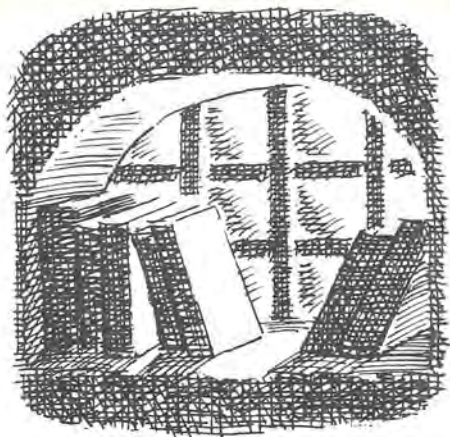
My gripe is that Dobrez could have 'done' the girls better. They suffer from erratic attention complicated by a little special pleading - a hint of misplaced deference which only complicates the complex picture. And UQP might have invoked editorial policy, if they have one, on the cavalier generic 'his'.

*Catherine Kenneally hosts the Writers' Show on radio 5UV, Adelaide, and is a freelance reviewer and journalist.*

## floating fund

BARRETT REID writes: The splendid amount of \$1069 was donated from 15 November to 25 February. Thanks for the New Year greetings and so many encouraging letters. Specific thanks to: \$125, R.A.; \$110, R.C.; \$100, B.J., D.M.; \$50, D.C.; \$30, L.H.; \$26, C.G., H.S., A.M., E.M., L.F., I.M., D.B., M.R., T.C., S. & M.P.; \$25, T.M.; \$16, A.W., E.C., J. McD., M. M.; \$11, P.D., M. & I.H.; \$10, B.J., S.T., R.P., R.C., F.W.; \$8, G.R.; \$6, M.T., A.S., L.C., P.R., E.C., J.B., C.C., B.G., D.R., B.N.-S., B.A., H.W.S., B.R., P.N., M.B., V.B., M.S., M.C.P.; \$5, C.R., R.S.; \$2, J.S., W.B., S.M.; \$1, D.O'S.





WEI JINGSHENG

## Writers in Prison, 7 P.E.N. Report

Thomas von Vegesack, Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee of International P.E.N., has reported that P.E.N. currently has on its hands some 350 cases of writers, journalists and publishers in 52 countries who are imprisoned, have disappeared, been kidnapped, detained, are in hiding or awaiting trial. Among the worst offending countries are Turkey, The People's Republic of China and Myanmar.

One of the most important demands that the Chinese students made during the demonstrations was the release of writers arrested during the democracy movement in the late 1970s. For instance, there was the writer Wei Jingsheng who was sentenced to fifteen years in prison on charges of espionage, in spite of the fact that the information he was accused of divulging was freely and widely available in Beijing.

Instead of releasing Wei Jingsheng and his colleagues, the Chinese authorities arrested at least 38 other writers following the June 4, 1989 massacre in Beijing. Among those arrested were some of China's most distinguished writers and journalists, such as Liu Xiaobo, Wang Peigong, Ye Wenfu and Dai Qing. Little is known about their present circumstances and there has been no response to requests for clarification of the reasons for their arrest. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it can only be concluded that their imprisonment is the result of the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

Wei Jingsheng (b. 1950) was editor of *Tansuo*

(Exploration) and is author of *The Fifth Modernisation, Democracy or a New Dictatorship* and an autobiography interrupted by his arrest. Charged with revealing information to an Australian correspondent which was in wide circulation anyway and with organising counter-revolutionary propaganda he was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. The trial was not formally closed to the public but the courtroom was packed with officials. A transcript was made afterwards by other democracy activists. It was reported in late 1987 that he had died in prison but this was contradicted by the Ministry of Justice in Beijing and by the then Acting Prime Minister on being questioned by the Norwegian Prime Minister. His health is reportedly poor. In November 1988 a Reuters report said that an unidentified source had seen Wei in Beijing Prison Number one; that he had lost his teeth and that he was being kept in solitary confinement. However, the prison governor Xing Zhonghe allegedly denied that he was there. Newspapers in Guangzhou have reported that Wei was in good condition just before the 1989 democracy movement. Wei has been given the award of merit by the China Democratic Education Foundation in the United States and he has been adopted by the Los Angeles and American centres of International P.E.N. as well as by Amnesty International.

Write to: Mr Jiang Zemin, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing, People's Republic of China.



