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## THE CONFUSION OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Geoffrey Serle

BENZO JUNKIE

Beatrice Faust

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"Who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?" I was thinking along these lines, though the words are not my own. Sir Thomas Browne, dead some time now, wrote them, prophetically, as it turned out. He was to be buried more than once, himself.

I had the words lodged deeply in my mind, and they kept popping out of darkness into light at the most inappropriate times. "Who knows the fate of his bones?" I would say in my mind, as I stood to address the students where I work. "Or how often he is to be buried?" Those words to the plumber as he came to clear the drains. Though I did not say the words aloud.

I first heard the story of the Piltdown skull from Ian at a conference. Later the story appeared in the morning paper. The Sydney Morning Herald. Surprising, when you think of it. Someone talks about what happened in the gravel pits of Piltdown, England, back in 1912, and it hits the Australian papers in 1985.

I opened the paper, and there was the photograph of Ian. A lock of straight fair hair hung over his glasses. He was smiling, happy with the story, pleased at making it more widely known. In his hands he held a replica of the skull.

Ian's story was more a progress report on who did what back there and then, and what was in it for whoever did it, and whether revenge is as strong a motive for scientists as it is for other people. He wasn't really so interested in the 'who-dun-it' aspect of the story, but the 'why do it?' side of things. Why plant a fake fossil? What advantage did it bring whoever did it?

There is now no doubt the skull was a fraud. It wasn't the first man, it was something else. It was a modern skull, with the jaw bone of an orangutan. Though no one knew that, for certain, until the fraud was unmasked in 1959.

I've kept that newspaper cutting, all these years.

I came across it just last week, at work. In a file labelled "file sometime". I moved it across to the folder labelled "fraud". Fraud has a file to itself, in my system, now it is happening all the time.

Perhaps I should have a file labelled, "Ian". It will have one newspaper cutting, and one article. A special file, a thin one, with nothing more to follow.

Ian gave pleasure to people who heard him talk, because he told the story well, and it was a good yarn. The thing was, though, everytime we met, at conferences, I heard him give a different version. Once it was an Australian anatomist, Grafton Eliot Smith, to whom the finger of Ian's suspicion pointed. The second version of his story, it was someone entirely different.

It pleased Ian, I think, to make one of the perpetrators an Australian. National pride, putting one over the Poms, that's not a bad reason for fraud. Not a particularly good reason, either, and Ian soon dropped that line of investigation.

What happened there, back at the gravel pits of Piltdown, cold and foggy, ideal weather for the doing of dirty deeds, for creating the first man, making him an Englishman? England expected, back in 1912, when stories of the beginnings of human life took a new turn.

The central actor is the skull, how many times it was buried, how it was changed, how it became the object of so much wonder.

In a painting by John Cooke, 'A discussion on the Piltdown skull', eight men are grouped around a table. They contemplate pieces of the skull. Above them is a portrait within the portrait. Charles Darwin gazes out from the frame within the frame at the men who in turn direct their gaze at the skull.

"Man and the ape share a common ancestor." Darwin said it first. It's all his fault, the sequence of events that followed. If anyone is guilty, he is. Why look, otherwise, for Dawn Man, something

halfway between us and the ape? Why create the skull on the table?

*Eoanthropus Dawsonii*, named after Charles Dawson, the man who discovered two of its parts, and who stands in place of honour underneath the portrait of Darwin.

The faces in the portrait know more than they can tell. Some say Charles Dawson did it. He found it didn't he? Others say, yes, but . . . there must be more than one forger. The evidence points that way. There were several separate discoveries, and the techniques used were very different. Some forgeries, particularly the first, were very clever. Later the forgers grew careless, so as if they were saying to the world, "If you believe this, then you will believe anything and you thoroughly deserve to be deceived."

Some of the people in the portrait must have filed the jawbone, stained the skull, scraped the elephant bone implements, scratched at the tooth enamel.

The faces in the portrait are solemn, as befits the contemplation of mortality. Imagine, though, a photograph instead of a portrait, with the perpetrator unable to suppress a knowing smirk at the vital moment. Then there would be no mystery. We would know.

Ian had some of the answers, or so I'm beginning to believe. He spotted the problem with the portrait. He was on the way to knowing. What if it happened, and he caught them in the act? He caught the act of smirking, in his mind. He knew, as I now know.

Who will believe me, though? Believe us? Ian is dead, they can't ask him. His proof went with him, and I have only my suspicions.

Turn to the portrait and the men in it. They kept their secret to themselves, back at the beginning of it all. Later, though, as they grew older, they grew confiding, garrulous even. They told the story to their protégés. Each story was different, the cast of characters changing frequently, on the question of who did what to whom, and why.

These men will later find they had forgotten some of the details, what they placed and where they placed it, where the bricks sat in the intellectual edifice they set out to erect. They will forget who did what first. Old men will tell the tale, and get it wrong.

They will remember the skull.

One person is not there, in the portrait, though he was significant. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit and geologist, was absent in France in 1915, on war service. It may be, if anyone is smirking, it will be all the harder to detect, if the smirking is offstage. The cast may know, but the audience

will be totally in the dark.

The men in the portrait placed their faith in the skull, not asking the further questions, how much can a skull really tell, and how much they must make of what little it provides? Yet they meet, and argue and know the answers so surely.

"Nature", said Arthur Keith, distinguished anatomist, and Conservator of the Royal College of Surgeons, back in 1912, "Nature is capricious, and she does not preserve all her relics. Dawn Man lived and walked in England, of that I am perfectly sure. But he died in the most inconvenient places, on top of hills where his flesh was taken by birds, and his bones exposed to the powers of wind and sun and rain."

If Dawn Man did not leave his remnants, then it will prove necessary to invent him, to co-operate with the story of evolution, creating what once must have been there, but which was not preserved. Dawn Man must be a million years old, a relic of the Pliocene.

Arthur Keith bends and scrapes and stains and files, in the most expert fashion, for is he not after all the up and coming young man, whose fate it is to be surrounded by incompetent bumbling old men who hold their positions of power and influence because they were in the right place at the right time, and to whom he must kowtow in daily life, and aha, in his secret life, he files, polishes, and stains, and plots where to place the skull, how best to have it found (though not by him) but by an amateur digger, someone who will find things because he is always out there tramping the gravel pits.

Arthur Keith prefers the warmth of the hearth, crumpets and cups of China tea. Let Charles Dawson find it, someone who truly believes that the first man must be an Englishman. Someone who will find the evidence, because he has faith that it exists.

Smith Woodward, that's the man Keith wants to show for the fool he is. Expert in fossil fish, what would he know about Dawn Man? Yet he pronounced, so surely, that human history was short, a mere 300,000 years. He knew the answers though he knew nothing about the subject. This skull will tell him a thing or two. This skull will change his tune. This skull will make the difference, says Arthur Keith. Only, as it turned out, one skull was not enough.

"Take this skull", says Smith Woodward, holding it aloft to the assembled meeting. "This skull, which I, with Mr Dawson here - stand up Charles, take

a bow - which we have found, and I have pieced together, this skull is the skull of modern man - large brained, but apelike in its jaw. The brain has led the way. The divine light shone at Piltown, and breathed into our ape-like ancestors a soul and mind elevated above the rest, and in that place, that holy of holies, the first man stood erect, generous in his mental endowments, striking for the strength and nobility of his brow, and that man was, I am pleased to tell you, an Englishman through and through." Lily-white in skin colour, that goes without saying.

Arthur Keith leaps to his feet, a critic in for the kill. "What about this?" he asks, "The strength and nobility of the brow. Why reconstruct it this way, why not that?" Arthur Keith must know. He was, after all, the creator.

Smith Woodward looks down his nose, and is so certain in his replies, so sure, so sweeping in the picture he paints of Dawn Man walking the gravel beds of ancient rivers, so certain of the date, the Pleistocene . . ."



"Pliocene, surely", murmurs Arthur Keith bravely. "The river gravels, surely, the Pliocene."

"Quibbles, mere quibbles", says the great man, who has not risen to greatness through listening to the nonsense of minions.

"The tooth", says Keith, "the canine tooth is missing. What would it look like, do you think?"

The great man describes a canine tooth more human in form than the other teeth in the ape-like jaw, less like the great fighting teeth of a creature that lived by its brawn.

Arthur Keith sits down and seethes. Smith

Woodward rises serene above the fray, his dignity and his theory intact. Keith is the apoplectic young man, exceedingly ungracious in defeat. Smith Woodward towers above the melee. Evidence means nothing, one way or the other, once the mind has settled in its ways.

The portrait tells one story, the meetings another. There were other meetings, other stories. Ian told his versions, often, with evidence pulled in from here, from there. Sometimes the cold gaze of others turned on him, savagely. They muttered, those who sit in judgment, censors, judges, executioners. Critics in for the kill, with the question intended to show how clever the question, and how dim-witted the response. Ian had his share of that. He could not tower above the melee. He possessed humility before the evidence, the one sure path to truth though also to self-doubt. There may be nothing, nothing but air.

When Ian went north to work so far away in Sydney, someone said, "We must look after him, because he is there, alone, the only person caring for the subject that we teach. It will be tough for him, the isolation." Too much may have been expected. Wisdom. Fortitude. Endurance. Then there was the end.

Ian is dead, I can't ask him.

In the portrait, the first knowing smirk must come from Arthur Keith, though it will, in the end, be a smirk of fierce regret.

How to explain, though, the rest? There had to be more than one actor in the fraud. There was not one fraud, but several. Two skulls, one canine tooth, and twenty stone-age implements of various kinds, found over a period of some five or six years, and created by different hands. Some of the fakes are skilful, others clumsy. Some are stained with potassium bi-chromate, others with colours taken from an artist's paintbox. Vandyke Brown and Burnt Sienna,

The portrait provides clues, but now the going gets tougher. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was not there when the portrait was painted. He is the Jesuit in this story. "Let your words be few", words of some wisdom, though they are still words, and "let your actions speak", and this action spoke. It spoke to Arthur Keith, who certainly sat up and took notice. The tooth was just exactly as Smith Woodward had described it.

The canine tooth. The second forgery. Who did it? Why do it?

Gobi Desert, 1930. The American Central Asian Expedition.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit and geologist for God, looks out over the desert and meditates on discovering, undergoing, growing old, and waiting.

The Citroen has broken down again.

Teilhard's prayer.

"Here I have no outward symbols of your presence, nor have I need of them. Round me the sands of the desert stir with the life of brute matter, the dust on the surface of the world which each new dawn is granted some small part of the divine presence, infused with some small vestige of life. Before me rise the cliffs of Bazaklik with their Pleistocene caves and terraces, the dead cities of the Gobi Desert, relics of a civilisation which wisely embraced both the ideas of ancient Greece and the tenets of Buddhism.

"The city is dead, where once life flourished. Fertile land once lay where now the desert reigns. Waters cut into the land and tore away the rich earth, and sterile white mud filled the rich valleys. The glacial winds blew hard and the desert was established, once and for all.

"You have guided me here, to this place, and no other.

"Fire, from which the world has come, and to which it is in the process of returning, divine fire of life, fire of becoming, fire of discovery, fire of transition, accept this my prayer on the world.

"I seek your guidance on that small affair at Piltdown. It seems your enemies have won, and the Piltdown skull is everywhere taken as genuine. Now you and I know how much that is affecting our work in the Gobi desert, creating havoc with our new discoveries here in China. Peking Man, twelve specimens already, they are no fakes, yet they must live in the pale false shadow of Piltdown, unnecessarily, as you and I know is the case.

"As I see it, unnecessary confusion could be averted by one small act of your divine will, working through the agency of matter, which as the lowliest of rungs on the scale of created life still reflects its full share of the divine plan.

"The backwards flow of time, that surely is no problem. Divert the flow of time to 1913, and let the gravels of Piltdown move in mysterious ways, linking with the sands and the minerals in the soil, to create a canine tooth of such obvious agreement with Smith Woodward's predictions that everyone will instantly grow suspicious, and check the skull, too, and find it for the clever fake it is. They will know about the fraud, and all the subsequent nonsense will be avoided.

"Just to make sure this time, make it a not so clever fraud. Create the tooth as I have requested, but when it is done, take up your divine paint box, and paint the tooth in hues of Vandyke Brown and Burnt Sienna. Plant an obvious fake fake, then they should know.

"Not that I plan to be first with the first man, nor do I possess the desire for earthly glory. I do not want to show up Smith Woodward for the pompous ninny others believe him to be. I seek in knowledge of our bestial beginnings the intimations of our glorious future. Where have we come from? Where are we going, and why?

"Take this tooth and cast it down into the gravels of Piltdown. I shall find it, and thank you for having led me to its discovery.

"Nothing is chance, no discovery is accident. Through this act I shall become part of the unity of things, I shall be made one with the process of creation, forever working its way upwards and onwards to the realm of pure spirit. This small tooth possesses in its contours and its colours, and its disposition in space and time, an individuality which is animated still by one spirit, elevated by the Fire that moves through all things, Fire that burns yet does not consume.

"In this knowledge I desire to live, and in this knowledge I shall die. Be still, and know."

At Piltdown in 1913, Teilhard de Chardin bent down and shouted to his friends. He has found the missing canine tooth.

It didn't work out, though, the way it was meant to work. No one grew suspicious. The tooth was slotted into the story as glorious confirmation of an inspired guess. Smith Woodward sailed serenely on, unknowing.

It meant more to Arthur Keith. He grew thoughtful, and less pushy. He thought it meant that someone knew, someone who figured in the portrait. It was as if a message had been sent to him "Stop what you are doing. Stop your fraud, or I shall tell him, the great man, Smith Woodward". This is what Arthur Keith took it to mean. Though it didn't mean that, not at all.

And so the story goes. More implements of various kinds were made, and planted. Fraud within fraud, fraud upon fraud, but all failed their primary intention. Arthur Smith Woodward did not notice. The great man rose above the melee, his theory intact. He kept the faith in Piltdown, to the grave.

As for Sir Thomas Browne, whose words forever haunt me, he knew the fate of his own bones. They lay in peace for some two hundred years, before



his skull became a prized object for the new science of the mind. His grave was robbed, and his skull was taken by phenologists. Better to be the object of scientific curiosity than a drinking bowl for his enemies, he might once have said, had he thought of it. His skull was weighed and measured, and held up for the crowds to see.

"Here is the skull of the man who meditated on death, who accurately predicted the fate of his own bones. Look at the shape and size of its parts, sure signs of the mind that once dwelt therein. Bump of veneration - for religious feeling, very high. Bump of comparison, inductive reasoning on the fate of his bones, large, too. Bump of acquisitiveness, on the low side, and as for the size of brain, large, as befits a physician of a speculative and melancholy disposition."

On his open tomb a skeleton is carved, a skeleton holding a skull. Around it twines an inscription, "This is man". In knowing the skull the living know themselves, that is the message, know what they really are, though not quite. The living are warm and breathing, and alive, and know it, know that the skeleton is still beneath the skin, still comfortably clothed.

The skull is centre stage. The stories spin out of fossil skulls, but not from femurs, ribs, or ulna. The skull is the palace of the soul. The skull is what is truly there, once the veneer of culture, then

life, then flesh has been stripped back, to the bare bone.

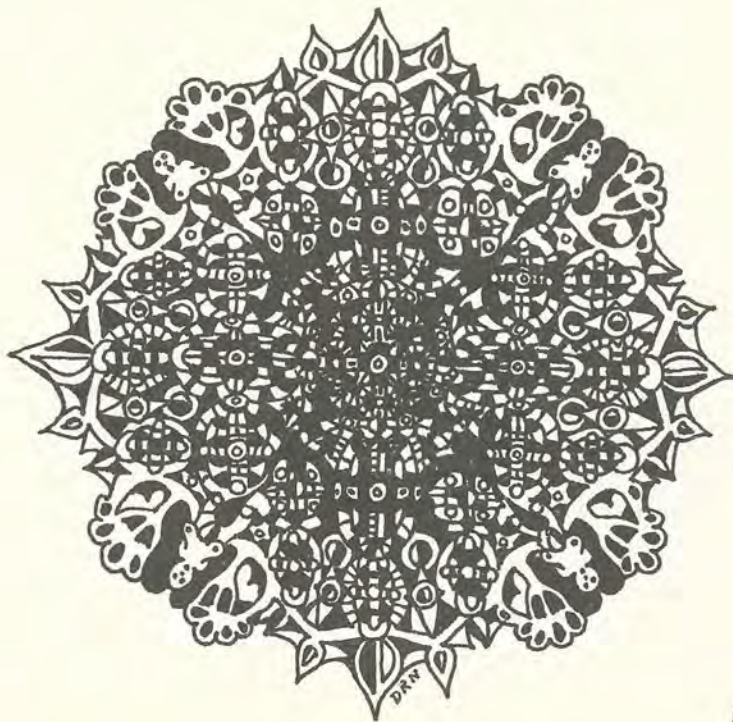
This is part of the story Ian told. This is the story I am hearing, so many years later.

I stand in front of a class of students. Some are, as usual, bored. Some are, as usual, interested. I place the portrait of the Piltdown men on the glass plate of the overhead projector. The portrait has been copied and recopied onto a transparent piece of film, so that the colour has changed to black and white, and light shines through the men and out onto the wall of the room.

I always see something, whenever I place the transparency on the projector. I see it as a holograph, hovering just above the glass plate.

I adjust the focus from the remote edge of fuzziness. Charles Darwin does it first. He winks at Arthur Keith, who looks up and out to me. Then Keith turns his head and winks at someone beyond my line of vision. However quickly I turn, I've never yet caught who it might be.

It's enough to make anyone nervous, and sometimes I take the picture too far out, blowing it up too much. Then I must backtrack, and as I bring it back into focus, slowly this time so as not to overshoot, I see the jawline on the skull straighten, and lift, and at that moment the winking ceases, and the skull smirks out at me, unblinking.



*Dennis Nicholson*

GEOFFREY SERLE

## The Confusion of Australian History

As one who has been blessedly fortunate in having spent a working life teaching and writing Australian history, I have unhappily to admit now to some sense of futility. For is there not general public confusion about Australian history in general and recent history in particular?

This despite the mass teaching for decades now at tertiary and secondary levels and outstanding achievements in historical scholarship during this period. For example, the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which bears comparison with any of its international peers, the *Australian National Dictionary* or the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. And there is the individual work not just of Clark and Blainey but of many others relatively unknown to the media, such as Bernard Smith, Hugh Stretton, Russel Ward, Margaret Kiddle, Ken Inglis, Allan Martin, Eric Rolls, Henry Reynolds, John Hirst – to name only a few, invidiously.

Over much the same period, following the development at last of a strong sense of nationality, popular interest in Australian history has grown phenomenally. There are now some 750 local historical societies and possibly as many local museums, while thousands of genealogists clutter and chatter in the libraries. The conservation and heritage movements mass their troops in the line. We are flooded with books on any and every aspect of Australiana; there is a collecting mania for anything from gumleaf-paintings to bottles. Historical parks display sanitized versions of the past, sometimes with electronic recreations of events. Bicentennial and sesquicentennial celebrations encouraged the growth of nostalgia. (Yet we know that history means nothing to a huge fraction of the population, who in blind ignorance are not aware of their lack of a long-term memory.)

A recent public opinion poll voted 50 to 17 in support of the proposition that life is less pleasant than it was. The myth of progress has been largely abandoned in favour of a notion of a golden past.

Nostalgia is the other side of future shock, a reaction to unprecedentedly rapid social change.

Professional historians and history teachers have reason for alarm, for a huge advance in knowledge seems to be little reflected in popular understanding. Perhaps it was ever thus. The particular reason, however, may be that the media, especially TV and film, are now by far the most important exponents of Australian history, and what they teach is commonly misleading, glib and superficial, with rare exceptions. What is taught in universities and schools pales into insignificance against mass pap. More important than popular misunderstanding is the limited grasp by educated Australians of their own historical context, and especially the recent context.

To take a couple of familiar distortions, conventional assumptions: that Australia has constantly fought overseas wars which were none of our business and that Australians are/have been unusually racist. Simply by pointing out obvious facts, both charges can easily be so modified as to be exposed as demonstrably false as generalisations, even, in the latter case, taking into account our deplorable history of relations with the Aborigines. And, of course, Australia's basic British heritage is frequently forgotten in these days of fashionable multiculturalism.

Amid all the ills which beset us (most of which are common to the Western world), and granted all our stupidities and failures, there seems to be little recognition of the many things we have done right over the last half-century. Such as taking our full share in saving the world from Nazism and Fascism; the decline almost to extinction of sectarian and religious bigotry; the reduction in class hatred; Australia becoming a far more tolerant society; infinitely greater educational opportunity; in the arts the growth of achievement at the highest level and of wide appreciation; abolition of the White Australia policy; the great success of our

migration program so that we are a haven for the oppressed as much as ever the United States was and, if only we are clever enough, almost in a position to display to the world a model of a people of the most diverse origins living in harmony; and, growing out of colonialism, from the 1960s behaving broadly like an adult nation and not a particularly nationalistic or jingoistic one. We historians seem largely to have failed to impress on educated Australians such marvellous changes for good.

So many print journalists (with notable exceptions), so many prominent TV commentators and talkback radio gurus constantly display their ignorance of the general historical context. I am not laying down any standard interpretation and objecting to any divergence, but assuming an agreed range of interpretation from which only the ignorant (or the rare brilliant innovator) diverge. What we are up against is the common assumption that anyone can be a historian, with a minimum of work let alone training and practice.

The chief sinners are TV and film producers and directors. Thus recently we have had able journalists like Chris Masters and Geraldine Doogue whipping up shallow contributions to the 'Hindsight' series (the equivalent of B-grade student essays) on the basis of a few weeks' work, and being presented as authorities; *True Believers* which, interesting though it was in some ways, was appallingly superficial; in film the distinguished David Williamson reading a few books to produce his intelligent superficial version of Gallipoli, which was then subjected to Peter Weir's hunches. Even the most scrupulous, conscientious attempts are sometimes spoiled: *The Anzacs* series was the result of intense work on primary sources and was accurate and realistic in detail, but made some ludicrous errors of context. (There have been admirable exceptions such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *My Brilliant Career* (mostly), *Seven Little Australians*, and one or two popular series like *The Sullivans*.) Then there are the deliberate travesties of history such as the recent *The Paper Man* (which Bob Ellis so rightly savaged in last October's issue of the *Independent*). Features like this seriously *damage* historical understanding. If only TV authorities recognized any responsibility to contact reputable historians.

As we all know the Brits do TV documentaries and fiction so well, marvellously well, not just in period detail such as dress and furnishings but in the whole period context. Why are they so good and we so bad? (I insist that I am not cringing: I happen to believe that we now, with not one-third of the population, rival and sometimes outstrip

the British in some areas of the arts such as poetry, ballet, film, opera.) Possibly the answer largely lies in the quality British press, especially the weekly press, constantly presenting the best historians and other informed commentators, constantly reinforcing the common understanding, only by an élite no doubt, of their cultural and historical background; the capacity of the quality press to draw not just on academics but on nearly all the freelance writers and amateur experts, and to pay them decently. In this regard most of the features and literary/arts editors of our better papers seem to be quite out of touch with the talent on which they might draw. The same in general applies to book-reviewing where we are also conspicuously weak.

There does seem to be a fundamental problem here which is difficult to pinpoint. Perhaps the authority of recent historical scholarship needs more time to filter down. Few still of the supposed educated public have been exposed to it as part of their formal education. Many of them have been corrupted by fashionable ideology and further corrupted by the triviality of TV public affairs programs which almost invariably promote conflict of extremes rather than rational discussion. But there does seem to be an extraordinary gulf in this country between able journalists/media people and scholars (less so, perhaps, in the area of international relations) who rarely seem to meet socially. Huge prejudices remain against academics in journalistic circles - and they can hardly be blamed insofar as they deplore appalling jargons and inability to communicate. But there are still many academics who can write well.

But academic historians also have a fair bit to answer for. Few of them work in the near-contemporary period (as Geoffrey Bolton did, for example, in his recent 1942-88 volume of the *Oxford History of Australia*). They should recall such models as A.J.P. Taylor, Trevor-Roper and Schlesinger. Political scientists naturally do rather better, though few of them now have much interest in political history. Just as twenty-five to thirty years ago the journalists J. D. Pringle, Donald Horne and Craig McGregor wrote the vital books on contemporary Australia, so recently able journalists have produced most of the reputable contemporary or near-contemporary studies. Educational authorities and teachers of history also urgently need now to wake up to the numerous surveys of secondary students which reveal shocking basic historical and geographical ignorance. History teachers in their praiseworthy anxiety to introduce students to historical method and primary sources

have for long been assuming they can run before they can walk.

There is surely another basic level of ignorance of Australian history: the damnable policies of the Hawke governments and of their advisers through the 1980s on science, the ABC and the universities. This, despite the fact that these ministries may possibly be admitted to be the most highly qualified educationally, and individually in sum the most intelligent, of any of their predecessors. But, as Sir Frederic Eggleston said of R. G. Menzies, "Why are clever men so stupid?" That of course applies to academics as much as to politicians.

How may we otherwise explain what for years, until a recent latterday limited conversion, seemed a sheerly ignorant and crazy attitude by the government to CSIRO and scientific research in general? - sheerly crazy if only because the economic benefits of CSIRO's work over more than half a century are so obvious. Presumably they did not know that Australia's science record ranks very high in comparative world terms and were largely ignorant, like nearly everyone else, of the many great Australian scientists. Thus for long Barry Jones was regarded as a crank and a ratbag.

Similarly with regard to the ABC. In their contemptuous treatment of it, their determination to emasculate it, how many in the government have had any notion that the ABC was for long the chief civilising influence in this country, especially in its independent news service and commentaries, in music and drama and children's education? It still has the potential to make an enormous contribution as an essential counterweight to the shoddy commercialism and lowest-common-denominator values of commercial TV and radio.

Similarly with regard to universities. Have Dawkins & Co. the faintest realisation that, along with extraordinary development in the arts, there has been an equivalent development of Australian scholarship in scale and quality from primitive levels to world standards? We now have

innumerable scholars of world fame (along with, inevitably, much that is mediocre and some that is shoddy.) Thus the Hawke governments are distinguished for their drastic reductions in staff-student ratios, increases in teaching loads and consequent deterioration of standards; effective reduction in salaries so that many of the best depart; bizarre enforced amalgamations against the world trend; and overall grave reduction in real terms of the amount spent on education - and yet we are called on to become a more clever people. Australia continues, as always, to do education on the cheap.

Perhaps it is not only the government which is to blame. I sometimes wonder whether one of the things which has gone badly wrong with this country is the Commonwealth Public Service. Forty or fifty years ago it was superb at senior level - Shedden, Chippendall and the gnomes, Crawford, Coombs, Roland Wilson and others, and External Affairs was consistently strong - a tremendous national asset. No-one could make that kind of observation about its performance in recent years, with special mention of the Treasury and the Department of Finance. And it is all too true that Canberra is out of touch with real life. If we are to continue to be ruled by masters of business administration and plain economics graduates in both the public service and the private sector, should we not consider the limitations of their education and of their breadth of outlook on the world - largely unfamiliar as they seem to be with humane values and any historical context - and their doctrinaire attachment to what is increasingly being recognised as passing and disastrous ideological fashion?

Things are crook. For what small good it may do, historians and other scholars need to insist much more determinedly on saying through the media what they have to say.

*Geoffrey Serle, author of John Monash etc. was General Editor of Australian Dictionary of Biography 1975-1988.*

BEATRICE FAUST

## ***From Benzo Junkie: a Personal History of Iatrogenic Drug Addiction***

*In 1977, I was given aminophylline for asthma. I developed a condition that I called "the horrors" - a cycle of good days and bad days. On bad days I would wake with a sense of impending doom that required enormous self-control to overcome - when it could be overcome. In 1982, I was prescribed Ativan/lorazepam, possibly the most vicious of the highly addictive family of benzodiazepines (minor tranquillisers). I became addicted on one 2.5mg tablet daily and was extremely ill for about five years but unable to find a doctor to diagnose the illness. Eventually, without knowing that I was addicted, I cut my dose by half in preparation for stopping altogether. This induced flamboyant withdrawal symptoms. I describe this experience in 'Life on the Wrong Side of the Scrim: My Experience of Benzodiazepines', in HEALTHSHARING WOMEN: The Healthsharing Reader: Women Speak About Their Health (Unwin Hyman, Sydney, 1990, pp. 142-149).*

*The interviews described here occurred over six months after I had taken my last 1.25mg dose.*

A man has more chance of being a hero to his tailor than a doctor has of being a hero to his nurses. You have a good name among nurses: "He doesn't say much," said Bobbie, "nothing at all really. If you laugh at his awful socks, he shrivels right up. But he is kind. Very kind and very patient."

Your voice, when I hear it on the telephone, is low. And soft. And dry. And expressive. And competent. I cannot tell if I am listening to a young old man or an old young man. I might be listening to a Hobbit.

"Enter from the West," you say, "go across the car-park to the revolving door, take the lift to the eleventh floor and turn left."

There I sit among regimented, shabby, hospital chairs and read my diary.

"Mrs Kerfoops?" You were behind my left shoulder. "I am Dr Blank."

I never see your face, then - or ever. You are off down the corridor before I have time to look up.

"Surely," I think, "surely anyone so old-fashioned as to introduce himself as 'Dr Blank' will have an

old-fashioned respect for patients?" My sanguine heart leaps out of my chest and shusses away down the corridor on the tails of your stiff white coat.

Your little room is as ambiguous as your voice. Obviously this is not your main practice - it has the austere tidiness of a space rarely used. To the right of the door is a child-sized table and chairs with a few bright educational toys and a child's painting is stuck on that wall. The work of your own child or a juvenile patient? I want to look at it more closely but I don't know you well enough to browse. The main furniture is the same cheap, anonymous, plain stuff as the waiting-room but the odds and ends express personal care and adventurous preferences. Not the conventional doctor's room.

The black Nigerian masks were made before the tourist trade eroded local craftsmanship. There are only a dozen or so books, mostly hyper-expensive, anonymous medical texts but I recognise the two-volume edition on the end. I have it myself: the notebooks of Simone Weil. A terracotta aggie pipe filled with ruddy kangaroo paw gives a comically happy touch to this cupboard. The desk is clear except for a crazed millefiori paper weight, a foolscap pad and a Mont Blanc magnum that is the only luxury item in the room. For you, it is just a pen with a large capacity. The paper-weight must be a family treasure, it does not fit in with the other things and no one would buy an object in such bad condition.

Promising . . . instead of peering up at you across a polished barrier I am sitting at the side of your desk.

You read the envelope before you read the referral. I read your intelligence in the mobile creases between your eyebrows.

Across the top, my scribbled notes of your instructions: "Enter from West . . . across car-park . . . revolving door . . . turn left."

Across the bottom, my agenda for our

consultation: "aminophylline insomnia benzo symptoms cycles."

When you finish with the letter, you say quietly: "Well, Mrs Kerfoops, tell me about your benzo-diazepine abuse."

I have seen enough Hollywood movies to know that it is most unwise for a female patient to bite, slap, shake, thump, scratch, spit at, piss on the boot of or otherwise chastise a psychiatrist – especially when the consultation takes place in a hospital and he wears a white coat. I swallow the affront, drop my eyes and shake my head with the sanctimonious stubbornness of a child falsely accused.

"No! I am the abused, not the abuser."

Then I give you the usual outline: "1977, began taking Nuclin . . . Kafka called it 'the Horror', Virginia Woolf called it 'the Fin'."

I am not sure of you . . . do I need to say that Kafka was anxious? Woolf manic-depressive? You are imperturbable and I decide to fall on you with the full weight of my anguish . . . to speak as my intelligent self and not as a supplicant patient . . . "Amitryptilline and valium . . . came off . . . bio-feed-back . . . 1983 Ativan . . . stink . . ."

"Could other people smell it?"

My anger flickers. I cannot bear a repetition of Dr Blot. "It wasn't a hallucination! Dozens of people smelled it! And commented! It wasn't a hallucination!"

You waver slightly under my buffeting like a tethered blind. You really are very gentle.

"Could ordinary people smell it? or just benzo-diazepine users?"

I am immediately calmed. It is the first question from any of the many doctors that reveals any familiarity with intoxication. You know what you're doing. It whets my expectations.

"Falling over . . . stroke . . . Does 'ischaemic' take a hard or a soft 'c'?"

"Iskeemic," you breathe, without looking up from your pad. Your large, even, fluent, black handwriting is beginning to fill the first page.

"Joint pains . . . 1988 came off . . . horrors . . . more pain . . . spontaneous bruising . . . hallucinations . . . agoraphobia . . . claustrophobia . . . paranoia . . ."

"What do you mean by 'paranoia'?"

"The same thing that you mean." I say, laughing.

"Tell me."

I tell you.

"Cobwebs . . . chewing . . . wetness . . . blurred vision . . . tinitis . . . pain . . ."

By now I am snuffling with self-pity, and habit, and relief. I am in a safe place. I can expose my misery. I take my glasses off and put them back

on and fold them up and unfold them. I am pleased to see that you do not keep a box of tissues on your desk. You are not that kind of doctor – but just the same, it would be chivalrous to pass me the wastepaper basket.

Your questions are non-invasive. You must have gone to a workshop in communication skills but I sense from your slight startles and recoils that you're not confident that you've mastered this new way of consulting. Or perhaps you are apprehensive at being in a confined space with twelve years of accumulated pain and rage.

The contempt I feel for all the inept doctors spills over a little on you. Your willingness to learn a new skill makes them look villainous. You are a conscientious member of a villainous profession, Dr Blank!

*There is something the matter with you and there is something different the matter with me.*

I ask about aminophylline.

"It is common knowledge that it produces a wide range of very [blip] reactions; very [blip]."

I ask about insomnia. You have condemned megadoses of vitamins as "entirely unjustified" with the pudeur of a maiden lady speaking about excessive use of the sexual function among the proletariat. But then . . .

"Tryptophan is the treatment of choice. The practise here is to give up to fifteen grams in severe mania. They feel very [blip] very [blip]."

Fifteen grams is thirty tablets and not on the national health! If one is severely manic – seven dollars for a night's good sleep!

You stare blankly at me, a little perplexed by this mundane challenge.

"How do you know megadoses won't have side effects? Look at pyridoxine!"

Again you seem blank. I refer you to Oliver Sacks because I can't remember the journal details.

*There is something the matter with you and there is something different the matter with me.*

So long as you are communicating through me with your pad, you are painstaking and patient. You question me simply and methodically and answer my questions briefly, frankly and distantly, all in your soft young-old voice. But when you have to speak to me directly, especially to give advice – in other words, to play doctor to my patient – you become as pompous as a Stalinist agitator.

You use constructions that absolve you from personal responsibility . . . "It is common knowledge that . . ." "The practise here is to . . ."

You rarely say "I . . ."

Your voice becomes orotund. You use unnecessary Latinisms . . . develop a curious echolalia . . .

"an expert in affective disorder affective disorder."  
"Very [blip] reactions very [blip]."

You have been described to me as humorless but you are just pathologically shy. I wonder how anyone can be as shy as you and still practice medicine. The stiff white coat is more than a uniform, it is also your cuirasse.

I am terribly speeded up, as distressed now as you are calm. I cannot control the volume of my voice. I hear myself growling like an articulate animal. I can find no place between absolute control with an appearance of normalcy and inchoate grief. Every so often a piece drops out of your conversation, as neatly and totally as if it had been deleted from a computer screen. Mostly, I recognise the sense of what you say. It doesn't really matter whether aminophylline produces "bizarre," "peculiar" or "strange" side effects or whether tryptophan will make me "muzzy", "woozy" or "sleepy" - I understand that aminophylline is notorious and that large doses of tryptophan are hard to wake up from.

I don't tell you about the deletions because I am so habituated to feeling awful that I have come to notice my withdrawal symptoms without paying any special attention to them. If I want ultimate relief from the symptoms, I mustn't let them distract me now.

In any case, I cannot speak of trivia. There is no time. I feel as if I am caught up in a punishing game of squash. The ball must be kept moving, despite my fatigue. My head ricochets off your questions. I want desperately to slow down but it is impossible to ask for quarter. You are the doctor, I am the patient and we are working together for my good.

I am either too far away from you or too close. The room is either too dark or the light from the west-facing window is too dazzling. I am conscious that I am listening to you while looking away from you. I try strenuously to meet your eyes.

Looking into your face, I am appalled by your innocence and your glasses - such thick lenses for so young a man! I find myself hurtling towards them. I can't stop. I wonder what it will feel like. I hope you won't mind. It is an impertinence. I am inside your glasses and . . . there is nothing there . . . ! I am through Mach 1.01 and you don't notice.

You are subtly at home in your body and your body language forces the pace of the consultation. You have no small talk, but fine gestures speak for you. You frown delicately, purse your lips, briefly wrinkle one eyebrow, shrug rapidly, sigh and flex your shoulders at the end of an answer. Before you

ask the next questions, I already know when I have given you enough details . . .

"And what happened to that marriage?"

"It ended in divorce."

"Divorce! Oh - but divorce . . . ? Divorce . . ."  
This is no echolalia - it is genuine pain.

I am not sure whether you are trying to tell me that the Holy Father takes a dim view of women like me; or maybe you think that divorce is an extreme reaction to a bit of old drug addiction; perhaps you simply mean that it is an unfortunate business.

We stare sadly at each other for a moment, then we are off again. I fear to bruise your delicacy. I prefer not to expose your simplicity to my convoluted life. I do not want to hear your soft, pained voice saying "Two divorces! Oh but two . . . ?" "Three abortions! Oh but three . . . ?" "Ex-nuptial . . . ?" "Standing up in a hammock . . . !" "Seventy-nine . . . !" "With a paedophile! Oh . . . with a paedophile?"

I pelt you with five or six obvious explanations for my divorce. You demur when I say that benzos were a factor in the disintegration of my marriage. Glancing towards your pad and pointing nicely with your chin, you say "There's a lot of stuff there!"

You ask wonderfully productive questions.

"What is the most important thing you hope to achieve this year?"

I discard the tired answer, "Please, Dr Blank, sir, I want to get better."

"I am going to sue the psychiatrist!" The resolve in my voice surprises me. (It is a feature of my new condition, that I often don't know what I'm going to say until I've said it - although, having said it, I usually find that it is true.)

You are visibly buffeted but recover quickly. "Why?"

I snort with contempt, stare at you and say nothing. You know why . . . I know that you know why . . . You know that I know that you . . .

"You must tell me."

So the squash game continues. I give you a run-down on the suffering I have seen in the support group. On WHO statistics of addiction. Of the marketing procedures used by the drug companies. On the educational value of test cases. When you are satisfied that I have come clean about my motives for suing the doctor, you face me and say unctuously, "I do not say that you should or should not undertake this course of action but I would counsel you about the cost to you the cost to you. . . ."

Exhausted, even by your benign questioning, I dread the battering I will face from lawyers. I shall

need more sensitive support than my lawyer can give.

"I should like to pursue that proposition." I am beginning to imitate your Latinisms, like a hostess who blows her nose in her napkin so that her uncouth guest won't feel out of place.

You look at me with a little, childish, crooked, secret, melancholy and self-important smile. "You might sue me!"

When I asked about you, I was told "Competent. Highly competent. But humorless." Now, I have seen you smile and I know that was not quite right. You are shy and well defended but you have just let me peep at a genuine *galgen humor*.

Then you address your writing tablet once more. "Who is the most important person in your life?" You use the word "person" awkwardly but with such sincerity that it reveals a firm commitment to non-sexist language and a non-judgemental view of sexual preferences.

I am, so far as I can be, a considerate patient. At the end of the hour, not to discommode you, I begin to prepare for the street. I look at my watch and at your face. You put down your pen and swivel your chair to face me, ignoring my repeated signals, and engage me in desultory conversation about my childhood, my relationships and so on and so forth. I hear your third voice: audible but wooden and flat. You look at me with the solemn patience of a kelpie who has learnt that it is sometimes hard to tell sheep from goats. You are not absolutely sure that I won't rear up and menace you with the horns of an Angora billy. But what if I should be neither a sheep nor a goat? What if I were something quite else, a giraffe, for instance?

It takes me a while to realise you are doing something I have never seen a psychiatrist do. Psychiatrists usually impose labels. You, gentle Dr Blank, are making a diagnosis!

You keep me for a further half hour. Then I realise that I took the two-thirty slot because I have an appointment elsewhere at four. Just as I am gathering my initiative to interrupt the chit chat, you conclude that the transmogrification is not going to happen. You allow me to return to the flock.

"I take it you have [*blip*] literature?"

I risk a guess on your meaning. "I have read very little. Dr Bloop has promised to put some books and papers together for me." That reply seems satisfactory.

"[*blip*] help you." you say formally

This time my flickering rage is directed at you. I want to tell you that you haven't helped me at all! We haven't even got down to a remedy for

benzo symptoms! We haven't discussed the cycles or lithium and I'm never going to get a taxi on Friday afternoon!

But, as I admit to myself that I cannot sustain rage against a gentle soul, you ask one last casual question, glancing down with the memory of a smile at the corners of your mouth. (Kelpies often seem to smile). No other doctor has asked me this in all the twelve years of my malady:

"Is today a good day or a bad day?"

"A good day," I say, belied by shine on my nose and tearful heat in my cheeks, "but we have been discussing bad things!"

To show that I have forgiven you for not helping me, I say that you have been very civilised before hurling myself into the street.

My file has arrived from the hospital under Freedom of Information but the photocopying is awful. If they were trying to hide something, they could hardly have done it more illegibly. Sitting once more in the regimented waiting-room with the aspidistra polished by nuns, nursing the heavy folder, I wonder if I will be able to recognise you from the fragments that I remember. I do - from your white coat and the way you speed along the corridor holding a briefcase with a broken clasp. Your wispy hair, carefully tidied, tells me that you are youthful old and not weary young.

Throughout my illness, I had developed best-case/worst-case scenarios to organise my life and to conserve the energy invested in waiting for future developments. This was part of the dichotomous way of living that I had perfected in early withdrawal. My best-case is: "you help me". The worst is: "you refer me on".

It is worst case.

Your pad and pen are neat on your desk but you slump in your chair. I shall not see your best self sheltering behind your writing pad. You peer at me through steeped fingers.

"You wanted to see me, Mrs Kerfoops?"

I am already feeling nauseous.

You ask me what I want. I steady my stomach. I am succinct.

"I have been thinking about everything and I want you to manage my withdrawal, give me lithium, counsel me during my court case and talk about various problems."

"I cannot help you, Mrs Kerfoops. I indicated this to you on the occasion of our previous consultation."

("You might sue me!" "[*blip*] help you.")

I hate the orotund you, calculate how rapidly I can stop this charade and ask for a referral.



Stoically, I tidy my file and pack it in my bag while we talk.

Considering its ominous beginning, our talk is amazingly rational and gentle, you are your kelpie self again, attending to your cure of sheep.

I experience, for the first time, the frustration and despair that I have heard about in the support group, but I know that I am being let down gently. You deny that I am suffering from withdrawal symptoms but you do not blame me.

"You are suffering," your voice is portentous, "from the disorder for which you were prescribed benzodiazepines."

This was, is, your carefully considered diagnosis!

You cannot help following the medical model, being adept in the brain, not its manifestations. Your discipline obliges you to think in disorders. Nevertheless, you know that my particular disorder was good days and bad days - it was written on a corner of my envelope. Now I am complaining about that - and more. I resent the fact that you are refusing to help me as much as I respect the modesty and sincerity with which you murmur "It is beyond my competence. I am not an analyst."

I feel pain when you speak respectfully of analysts because you have a better interviewing technique than any analyst I have ever met, better than most psychiatrists, better than most doctors. Your gentle rationality is restful and healing in itself. All you would have to do would be talk with me exactly as you did before. Be the benign presence in the safe place. I can do the analysis myself. But, more than analysis, I need information; you could share your special neurological knowledge with me. I am quite intelligent enough to carry it.

"Withdrawal only lasts a fortnight," you say apologetically, as if discharging the unfortunate duty of telling me that the dog-shit on my shoe is dirtying your carpet.

I am compelled to argue this one. Not a fortnight for me! Not for anyone else in the group! Not in the literature! The fortnight is an artefact of hospital funding. I refer to the conflicting reports, the changes in findings over a twenty-year period, the influence of drug-company funding on research and, mordantly, I suggest you use Occam's razor to decide the matter.

"I know something about Occam's razor," my own *galgen humor* stirs, "I've been sitting on it for five years!"

"Well," you murmur diffidently, "it's like choosing which football team to barrack for."

For a wonderful minute, my spine straightens. I feel six foot tall, robed in white, girdled in green, haloed in purple sparks. You are talking about our

lives! our pain! I don't know how people choose football teams - if, indeed, they are chosen. I do know that this is not a fair response to Occam. Then I fall into a torpor from the difficulty of containing my grief, disappointment and righteous rage.

But there is no point in arguing. Clever and lovable as kelpies are, they are not renowned for independent thought. In due course, the Royal College of Kelpies will succumb to the unanimity of recent findings (and the spectacular threat of the English legal proceedings, which, when it blows, will be somewhere between thalidomide and Krakatoa). The College will set up a sub-committee, draft a few guidelines and then, too late to succour the present season of sufferers, or prevent the next several seasons, you will acknowledge that benzo withdrawal is prolonged beyond anything observed in other drug problems, and uniquely painful, too.

I fixate on the shiny broken lock of your shiny black case. I slump, realizing that I am only seconds away from complete dissociation.

Strenuously, I swing my eyes anywhere, away from the shining. They fall on your right shoe. I force myself to examine it critically. Plain, nicely polished. You are not wearing your notorious socks, not on the right foot, anyway. Fletcher Jones strides. White coat. No gratuitous genital display: we are not here fighting the battle of the sexes. You are not punishing me because your wife gives head resentfully or not at all. Perhaps you don't even have a wife; perhaps you are queer as a coot and live in the country with a catamite. The great, bitter furrows at the corners of your mouth betray a long-standing tension but you don't pass it on to me. Your upbringing and religious beliefs and sex preference are irrelevant to your vocation for medicine. You are a doctor and I am a patient. I will leave here with my dignity intact.

I realise that I haven't seen your eyes yet. I've looked towards them often but still haven't looked into them. I have to raise my head to raise my eyes. Yours are not yellow, like a proper Kelpie's, but a decent dry sherry brown.

I have to get through this somehow. Since you are not going to help me, I have no reason to concentrate on what you say. I drift in and out of the conversation like a minnow flirting with a soft drink can. I am beginning to feel sorry for myself and I say irascibly "I suppose the people who most need benzos are the people who suffer most?" In all of your various voices, your diction has been beautifully clear and quietly modulated but so neutral that I cannot tell whether you are English or educated Australian. Suddenly I hear a startled

burst of dreadful flat vowels. "I wouldn't say that," you return. "I wouldn't say that." "South African?" I ask myself. But they have gone before I can decide.

Most of my life seems to have been spent at the end of an infinitely elastic tether. I was at the end of it when I made our first appointment. And I am at the end of it again. I ask you to refer me on "as a matter of urgency". Promising to send me a referral, you write an unequivocal note to yourself in your wonderful clear hand.

I maintain my self-control while I return the flagged file to my lawyer. Then my eyes float on tears. I haven't fully assimilated everything that happened with Dr Blank. I am enraged at his refusal

to distinguish between benzodiazepine symptoms and prior illness or to focus on the exact nature of the prior illness. I am resentful and disappointed in his belief that he can't help me. But these stresses are trivial. The trauma that makes me haemorrhage conflict and indecision is this: he is referring me to Professor Zero, the man penultimately responsible for my receiving Ativan instead of lithium!

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*Jiri Tibor*

DAVID MARTIN

## My Strange Friend

*Extracted from My Strange Friend, the autobiography of David Martin. (Pan Macmillan, \$18.95).*

Beechworth is home to about four thousand souls but that includes the prisoners in the jail and the sick in the mental hospital. In the first fold of the Australian Alps and in sight of the hump of Mount Buffalo, the town nestles in the ranges like a child in its mother's lap. It is as comfortable in its landscape as any Tuscan hill town. Beechworth began in the gold days and Ned Kelly is its hero and principal industry. His macabre dummy lies stretched on a cot, waiting for the tourists in a tiny cell at the rear of the town hall. We have lived in Beechworth for eighteen years, longer than anywhere else.

By Australian standards it has many old buildings and a well-polished dignity. Every day brings scores of visitors but Beechworth has not become a living museum. The homesick pioneers planted elms and liquidambars and oaks and beautifully-sited Lombardy poplars, so that it displays the colours proper to each season. Since it lies not in a valley but on an undulating plateau I have sixteen different possibilities for my morning walks. The great granite rocks and outcrops have names daubed on them with white paint, the handiwork and memorial of a man, dead many years, from the home for the aged. If you cannot tell an elephant from the head of the Buddha his inscriptions are there to assist.

This is a government town. Leaving out the prison and May Day Hills, the old lunatic asylum 'up top', which looks down as from a captain's bridge and is enclosed by a park said to be unexcelled in Australia, there are two schools, two hospitals and the office of the Department of Conservation, Forests and Land.

Patients from May Day Hills wander the streets, muttering abstractedly or talking animatedly to themselves. Shopkeepers treat them kindly. But when it was mooted to transfer some inmates to half-way houses in the town, hostile petitions were laid out for signature in stores and pubs. The local

newspaper published a prayer of mine. "Heavenly Father, keep and protect our poor brothers and sisters who are sick in mind, but do make sure the rateable value of our property is not affected thereby." The authorities kept their nerve, the half-way houses were opened and the adjacent properties went on selling for good prices.

On the whole Beechworth is a tolerant place. "There's a new bloke mooching round," a former shire president said to a drinking mate. "Says he's a writer. Seems to think he's Lord Muck. Looks straight through you and doesn't give you the time of day." I heard about it and went to him to explain how short-sighted I am. "Nobody worries about you," he said. "people don't care a button who or what you are."

My trouble is that I am a Jimmy Woodser. For the man who does not drink a barrier is fixed not only between him and Beechworth but between himself and Australia.

When I am flying home to Beechworth from overseas I know my spirit will not sink when I get there. Lake Sambell, once a muddy sluicing flat, is a dreamy sheet of water, glittering like glass in the sun, or lying cold and misty under a wintry sky. Where the tannery stood, the old chimney rears like the gnomon of a sundial over the Sheepstation Creek paddocks, sloping to the Woolshed Valley and to Ned Kelly's lookout, which only a few locals still know how to find. The gorge turns sharply eastward twenty minutes from my door, along the road from the Powder Magazine. A man can stop there on the stone bridge and think himself painted into a Chinese scroll.

I did not contribute a hand's turn to building the bridge or the tannery chimney or to making the lake. It was done for me by others. They had more faith in themselves and in their tomorrows than we have. Nothing they did was on a mean scale. They planted sequoias in the town hall gardens, which none of them would see grow to their full,

noble height. In a nest like this I should be feeling like a cuckoo, but I don't. I am too grateful.

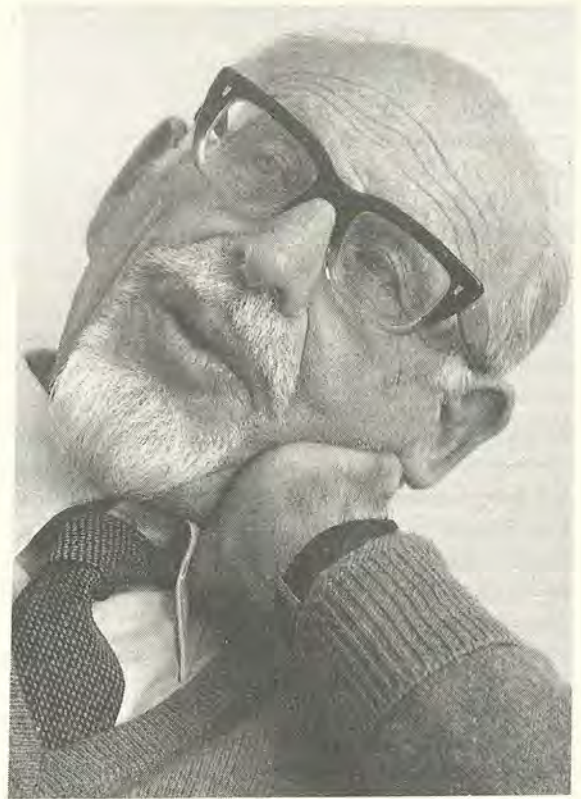
Having accomplished my morning walk I render my report. "Richenda, some coot has been at my secret mushroom spot on Red Hill." Or, "You know the old pub with the handmade bricks, the condemned building opposite the church hall? I saw somebody stalking round and measuring it. Hope we won't be settled with an eyesore." Or, "You remember that clever brown bitch from Kars Street? Today she went with me all the way to Ingram's Rock." Or "Do you know what I reckon is the real art of the people? Making gardens. It's often the only outlet for their sense of colour and design."

How good it is to have somebody to come home to and give your report!

When my work goes well Beechworth is a perfect spot, a funk hole sheltered from madness and storms. I need fine buildings to look at, good country to walk in; perhaps I need these more than I need people. But when my work goes badly I have only my own reserves to fall back on. It is myself, not the town I am bored with then. It is hard in another way too. You are not in the public eye. No invitations arrive in the mail to speak at seminars. Editors forget your telephone number. For a writer it can be a problem but I am willing to pay the price. It buys me freedom to get on with what I must get on with.

Bright or sad, I can put up with my own company. I will not listen to advice on how to mitigate loneliness. The artist's alienation, so long as it does not estrange him from himself, is not unhealthy. He is not cut off from work, the best thing in the world, like the people in offices and factories who are lobotomised so they may continue to circulate in their winding-sheets. The aloneness of writers, painful but productive, isolates them not from life but from its secondary manifestations.

It is no hardship for me to love most of my neighbours, but the one who lives next door stoutly refuses to be loved. His heart wears armour. I would lose no sleep over him were he not the captain of our fire brigade and this house full of highly combustible papers and manuscripts. A few doors up love starts again. An old pensioner couple's house. He is deaf and speaks haltingly, he may have been knocked about in the war. She is more in the world and handier with words. When they are not sitting on their verandah she is away in hospital in Wangaratta or Melbourne, being treated for leukaemia. She has diabetes as well, among a whole compendium of diseases. She had borne this for five years when, the other day, a surgeon told her that they had run out of therapies for her. Even the brave are human



and, although she must have expected it, it upset her. The husband, when he heard, took some money out of the bank and called a cab. We saw him that night. He was trembling. "I went into the ward, to her bed. She put her arm around me and said, 'I love you'." This is what people do, but to tell it to others, that is not so easy. Next morning I saw him step from our day-hospital's car. "Well, where have you been now?" "To get my toenails done." I could have flung my arms around him too. A man who accepts reality!

*(Post scriptum.* The lady died yesterday. She left instructions that she was to be buried in her wedding dress.)

On my way to the shops I must pass through one of the parks which Beechworth shows off with pride. It has a goldfish fountain, it has beautiful roses, it has a war memorial, swings and a rotunda; it has bunya bunya pines from which spiky cones can drop on you, as large and heavy as a ship's bell. People who wait for the gaol to admit visitors on Saturdays or Sundays picnic on the grass. One morning, coming by to post some letters, I saw on a bench in the rotunda a personage I did not expect to find there. Let us call him Benny. He was a

Jew, a little Jew - a good half head shorter than I - who was loved by the whole town. This, adumbrated, is his story.

Benny was a draper. His store was in the main street in a group of buildings where another Jew, a tailor, the father of Sir Isaac Isaacs, once had his shop. In his day, Sir Isaac's dad was not the only Beechworth Jew, but for many years little Benny was. His popularity had been earned when he was one of the first local men to join up against Hitler. He was an inveterate street-corner talker and button twister; even my twisting of *his* buttons could not break him of the habit. Benny had married a German woman who was not Jewish. It could be said that she was anything but Jewish, and Benny would embarrass me by insisting I step inside his shop, so he could show his wife that the world did contain some big and broad-shouldered Israelites.

"Benny, what makes you sit here in this park so bright and early?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Not if it's a great secret."

"My wife is expecting some relatives from Germany."

"*Masel tov!*"

"I don't need your congratulations. She's sent me to sit out here until she's spoken a few words to them. They don't know her husband is Jewish, you see. She thinks it's better if she tells them before they see me . . ."

Two bearded young men in gabardine coats alighted from a station wagon outside our house one day. They wore dangling sidelocks.

"You are David Martin? *Sholem Alechem!* You are a Jew, we are told. May we come in?"

They did not remove their hats. They were Talmud students, disciples of the Lubavitcher Rabbi, Menachem Schneerson of New York. They were on a sacred errand: to gather in, if they could find them, people like me, their lost tribesmen. They had come from far, they wanted to do me good, and it costs nothing to be friendly. Would I lay my *tefillim* and pray with them? I had no phylacteries, and if I had I would not know how to put them on. Then would I mind if they used theirs? Not at all. (The authentic unbeliever can take holy communion, kneel and bow in the direction of Mecca and, if female, take a ritual bath after every menstrual period; it's no skin off the atheistic nose.) They took a spare pair from a finely chased pouch and began winding them on. They were attaching them to my forehead when the telephone rang. I muttered an apology and, thongs streaming behind, ran to answer it. They said it was hurtful. I said I was expecting a call from my

agent. Sure, but couldn't one neglect such a paltry duty at least once in a lifetime?

They were very likeable. But a year later, when they came for a second time, they were not invited in. They were so strict that they had refused to drink water from our kitchen tap, though they could have used their own beakers.

Beechworth: on the road to civic happiness it has progressed farther than nine out of ten townships on the planet. It has a war memorial but no plaques to sons and daughters fallen in civil conflict. The police do not come bullying at midnight. The public library has a reasonable supply of books. Nobody dies of hunger; meals may arrive on wheels. Our people do not often behave violently to each other.

I believe, though I would be happier if I did not, that our town has moved nearly as far on this good road as humankind can aspire. To pass a long way beyond we would need to change ourselves so greatly that, in attaining new levels of social organisation, we would also attain a new social wisdom. On the available data this seems unlikely.

While we were growing older our beautiful Beechworth house was growing bigger. It was time for one more move before it accused us with its dowdy looks. Goodbye verandah strolls, goodbye vegetable garden, goodbye cellar and birdless aviary. The new house we had built for us was small but not too small. My study measures four paces by six, but from it I have a view to a rock as tall as a church. After rain it glistens like silver.

This book is at its last chapter, excuse enough to digress and speak about a cat who belonged to both houses. It was a tabby and our darling and we called him Mister Cat. He collided with a car, had a rod inserted in his hip and had been bitten by a poisonous snake. When we had bought the large house we were not told that he, a kitten, was living there. We tried to give him away but he came back, skeletal and half wild. Richenda vowed she would feed but not love him, but never was a creature more loved.

We took him to our new abode. Twice he ran away, back to the old. On his third return he made an honest attempt to settle down. We were grateful: our house-gods were not abandoning us.

Mister Cat developed cancer of the nose. For three years we fought to save him, our shy and gentle Mister, and when the pain became too great we decided to spare him more. We did not want him to end his life on the vet's table - he hated it - but in the room where he had spent many of his days. Mister Cat would be made drowsy, he would sit where he liked to sit, on Richenda's lap,

and the vet would come and a needle would puncture his skin and he would die.

As if he knew his fate, Mister Cat leapt onto Richenda's knees, turned twice, purred a little and stretched out. The vet rang the bell and I let him in. But the pill which was to make Mister Cat sleepy had not done its job, so that when the stranger touched him the poor, terrified creature sprang away, crawled under the couch and miaowed piteously. I dragged him out. Richenda could not hold him. I had him in my grip when the vet, as if it still mattered and Mister Cat must be guarded from infection, parted the fur and dabbed on antiseptic. The needle went in and suddenly there was no life.

The man stowed his implements, was paid and went his way. Richenda laid the body down by the gas heater. She sat down beside it, beat the floor with her palm and cried out, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry Mister Cat!" Whereupon I, much too precipitously, picked him up (but it was no longer him), carried him outside and placed him in the earth. I ought to have left more time for Richenda's tears, and perhaps for mine.

One moment there is life, the next there is not. I understand it: animate to inanimate – it is not difficult. But it is hard to accept, hard to penetrate, this change from knowing to annihilation in the blink of an eye, from a being to a thing.

I try to feel it. There is, vast beyond grasping and describing, the weight, the substance, the mass of matter: air, water, rock, clouds: layer upon layer of what fills and what is the cosmos. Covering it like the thinnest membrane is the organic, that which has the power of renewal. Over or under this again, so infinitesimally unsubstantial and narrow that by comparison all of organic matter is itself no more than the breath of a breath, is consciousness, awareness: in animals and humans. Life produces life from love and desire and the dividing cell.

A candle goes out. The point of light has vanished into the other, encircling reality. Lichen on a stone, but the stone it blooms on is larger than all the suns, and the lichen not gossamer, not even spindrift. The womb ejects me. My eyes, open and close, and back into the womb-grave of nature. To *Atman*, if you like, or by whichever name you pay your respects to It or Him. Mister Cat into rock and sand. To me, who has no gift for metaphysics and philosophy, it seems that the pagans' adoration of objects and phenomena, of plants and planets, is pure and noble, profounder than the worshipping of an idea, or of the Idea become flesh. To bow down before a bush or mountain is a high form

of piety. It worships the Idea in its source, it does not refine but essentialises it.

Mister Cat, who liked ox-hearts and licked his suppurating nose, lives only in ephemeral memory. How delightful it would be to look to a resurrection outside as well as inside the ever-expanding ring of evolution! But bliss does not make truth and anguish does not make lies. Feeling good is not salvation. And meanwhile what are called coffin nails have begun sprouting under the grey and russet hairs on the back of my hand. Of people I know or have known, the list of the surviving is shorter than the other list.

It is too late for me to become sociable. I enjoy walking into Beechworth but not through thickets of small-talk. On Saturdays, when our ladies open up the stall opposite the post office to sell their cakes and jellies, I sneak into town by byways known to old inhabitants. I defend my privacy, my freedom, the right not to be side-tracked. But side-tracked from what, I do not know. I want to be free to go on looking for answers to questions which I believe do not have any.

There is a sure way to being free which is a secret to no one. Freedom is perfection. *If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor.* To do that you must be brave and wise. My whole courage and wisdom is that at each year's end I send a few hundred dollars to selected charities. I carefully file the receipts in case the tax office wants to see them. Is that what Christ meant when He spoke to the young man who went away sorrowing? I don't think so. *And thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.*

As far as I can cast my mind back I have never wanted for a loaf, a train fare or a stamp. Or for the instinct that we must love people and give ourselves to them. The instinct?

Am I still a socialist?

Not if it implies the certainty that some day the great majority of men and women will band together to build a free, just and peaceful order. People cannot be induced to organise collectively and to plan forward for very long. Their individual reflexes war with their social reflexes. They do not want their progress diagrammed. In complex societies it is much more comfortable to delegate power than to wield it. Lenin said that the cook will learn to govern the state. But the cook does not want to govern, he wants to cook.

Marxism? No, as a guide to action; yes, as a means of understanding and interpreting the main drives of history. The mode of production helps to determine social organisation, aesthetics and law:

the material has its dialectic. It is concerned with how classes rise, group themselves and decline. But their interplay and conflicts are not predictable, nor what manifold moral or spiritual effects will follow.

I hate bullying, oppression and exploitation as much as I always did. But I hate too, with more ferocity than in the beginning, vulgar stupidity, crude self-indulgence and the shameless greed which threatens the continuation of life on our planet. Insomuch as these vices make capitalism vicious I want to see it overthrown. But my hatred for oppressors is still not matched by love for the oppressed; it is not so warm and nourishing.

I have become more sceptical and a little more hopeful. The New Man we shall never have, whether reborn in a closer likeness of God, or made anew in a noble and happy society: not if by man we mean mankind. So we must hold to the third alternative. There is a terrible lot wrong with the Old Adam and the Old Eve, but they are all we are left with and shall be left with for ever. We must do the best we can with the familiar, crabby, indestructible pair.

Not for me a belief in the will of the Father whose eternal law delivers the lawless herd from pitching into the crater. But I would so conduct myself as if that law applied to me. Without faith in a last judgement I would live as if I expected to be judged, which would not be so desperately difficult if I were more consistent. But it is only in novels that writers meet consistent characters. This is one reason why they like writing novels. Since I put down the opening sentence of this book Europe has been transformed as it has not been transformed since the fall of the Habsburgs, and with it the face and faith of politics. Therefore I am not now the person I was then. The problem is to refrain from projecting the now into the then, to avoid writing about my ideals, and how they handled me and I them, as if they and I had changed before we actually had.

The cry is, 'Be yourself!' I stop my ears against it. If we truly were ourselves there would not be enough asylums for the criminally insane to house the influx. It is safer to disregard this commandment.

Brother Sun and Sister Moon, but not Brother Pol Pot and Sister Ilse Koch. I have lost my faith in the brotherhood of man. I have still some hope for man's cousinhood.

In 1988, when I received the Order of Australia, Beechworth matrons came up to me in the street and hugged me and said they were pleased, both

for me and the town. Men shook my hand and one, a farmer, nearly broke it.

The announcement of my honour coincided with our annual Easter float parade. Great crowds were about. I could modestly have stayed at home but I went out and mingled. Beechworth festivals do not put Rio to shame, but we have a few things which Brazil has not. We have, for example, an old lady who marches along Ford Street in the costume of a century ago, from the black bonnet on top to the black shawl, and down to the black button-up boots. She waves her antique broly like a stick and has a dignified space all to herself. Some visitors think she is supposed to be Ned Kelly's mother and give her a big clap.

One year, a little before my time, the chemist entered a float with a bold slogan. "Buy the Pill from . . ." followed by his name. If it had read, "Buy your pills" all would have been well, but singular and with a capital P! He was preached against from a certain pulpit and it is said that his trade was hurt.

The shire decided that my award should be civically acknowledged. Would we two let ourselves be taken out for lunch? We would be proud, thank you very much! At noon on the day a car arrived and we were taken 'up top' to the mental hospital where councillors had been in conference with the administration. A pleasant meal was pleasantly served and some pleasant speeches made in the pleasant staff dining room of the institution.

Europe is Europe. Australia is Australia. If you can kill two birds with one stone and save the rate-payers' money . . . To each his own style.

I count my blessings one by one. But the blessings which are not mine I seem to count more often.

I would like to have more courage. Bodily courage I am talking about, which does not fear pain too much and does not count carefully the price of one's life. If you have that, moral courage will be bred from it, together with other virtues and graces. But that's how it is: I am not game enough.

I have not loved enough women and have not had the love of enough women. Their love gentles the flesh, the old counter-revolutionary. But far beyond my deserts I have the love of one. Is not that sufficient? Yes, almost.

I have not seen enough of the world. I have not seen the northern Saint Laurence, or Dublin, or the Inland Sea. Not even the Kimberleys, and it is getting late.

I have not done the work I meant to do, not achieved what I hoped I would, though more than

I should have expected. My hunger for fame is unappeased. If I had returned to Germany after the last war, would I have had more? I imagine so. In my own land and language my growth would have been more of one piece. I still hush the room and turn up the volume when, in Haydn's symphony, I hear the surge of the Austrian anthem, which is also the anthem of my German childhood.

My childhood? *The giant Schlagetot who killed my people and stays close to me wherever I may sleep*: he is terribly alive. *Tief in dem Walde* he still waits for me. I have not thrown off my fear of the Nazis, or of their silent diaspora - Primo Levi's phase - which teaches torture to soldiers and politicians in countries where they don't speak German. I cannot forgive them. I cannot forgive myself for being so afraid. It has made me unquiet and unforbearing. Perfect fear casteth out love.

But the account balances. I do not deify my native compost. I am not roped to one culture, one tradition. I do not accept unquestioned my place and heredity. As much as I can I want to elect it. That is not given away free, but look what you get: life richly speckled and stippled if not more abundant, an outward-pushed consciousness, a finer scale with more, and more interesting gradations.

My days, filled with work, are reasonably content. My nights are not. I thrash about in my sleep and when I stay with friends my groans may wake them. A psychiatrist, when I told him that the holocaust does not enter my dreams, laughed. "If that is true, where does all this dying come from?"

Like Beechworth the town, Beechworth's

cemetery is neither too scruffy nor too tidy. The ashes of Dame Jean Macnamara, who introduced myxomatosis to Australia, are buried there; the rabbits strew their droppings all round the small rock which bears her plaque. The grave of John Watt, an immigrant Scot whom bushrangers shot dead, is not far. The tombstones of the Chinese goldminers are simple and democratically uniform. Beechworth kids would come and snaffle the rice which, with bundles of make-believe money, was burned in the two towers which still stand. Tourists may follow a marked trail from one interesting grave to the next. Whether it will wind past the oak under which Richenda and I hope to end up - who knows?

The grave nearest our spot belongs to a Punjabi hawker, Dalale Singh, who died in February 1934, aged sixty-nine years. His headstone, of Beechworth granite, is flecked with lichen. Behind him, only a little farther, is laid another Sikh, Sunda Singh, of whom something went into the hero of my young novel, *The Man in the Red Turban*.

It's a good neighbourhood. The bones of Dalale and Sunda are in the strangers' section, and ours will be at the edge of it.

*David Martin (1915- ) born in Hungary, educated in Germany, lived in Holland, Palestine, Britain, India, began writing in English in the 1940s and established a reputation as a writer before his arrival in Australia in 1949. Novelist, playwright and poet, he is also well-known as a writer for children. Some of his many books have reached wide audiences through overseas editions and from film and television.*

### COMING IN OVERLAND 124 SPRING 1991

Stories by Michael Wilding, Fiona Place and others

John Hirst on What Grandma Taught Albert Facey

Patsy Poppenbeek on Black Women in Australian Writing  
Anne Gunter on the books of Kate Llewellyn

Poems by Robert Adamson, Bruce Dawe, Kate Llewellyn, Mike Ladd and much more



As the bishop hugged Mark, he found the silver earring right before his eyes and at the same time registered the tang of the lad's sweat. He had never thought he would see a Madden male wearing ear jewellery. The bishop pushed Mark away but still gripped his shoulders. Did it slip on the ear or had the lobe been pierced? At least it was small; he recalled Mark dressed as a pirate for a school play, a kerchief about his head making him as pretty as a girl.

And prettier, unfortunately, than his tomboy twin sisters who had not given the bishop a moment's peace since his arrival. When Gwen had rung to invite him, she complained Mark had only boy-friends as if fearful he was camp. The bishop suspected Mark simply sought respite from female domesticity. He was confident he could rediscover Mark's wavelength but lunch was not the occasion for a man-to-man talk. Mark wolfed his food and barely participated in the conversation as the bishop sought news of local contemporaries who were mostly sick or dead. Not even sport talk interested Mark.

"These days you have to be up on rock bands Theo" Gwen explained, "to catch Mark's attention".

"If I let my assistant have his way," the bishop waved his cigarette as if shooing a fly, "we'd have introduced a rock Mass. I couldn't think of anything less appropriate".

Mark did not rise to the bait. And Gwen reported the twins' school results which suggested they had recovered from their father's abrupt death.

The bishop would like to have talked with Mark after lunch but tiredness overtook him and he napped in the covered-in verandah. It was a habit he had acquired as a seminarian in Rome along with gently buffeting cheeks, embracing shoulders and other give-me-some-skin-my-friend gestures. He awoke sweating, rosary beads twisted between his fingers, and watched motes wheel in the sun shafting beneath the blind.

As he summoned the energy to rise, the bishop thought back on the two stops he had made en route. The first at the hotel run by the archbishop's sister who had insisted that he play 500s - the Doyles always played 500s even when they became cardinals. The second at the church where he had served as an altar boy. There he had recalled a phrase from the liturgy which, as a boy, used to thrill him "The Lord who bringeth joy to my youth". And who would bring it to old age?

The bishop rose on an elbow to survey objects on the crowded bedside table: a toy elephant covered with tiny mirrors, an alabaster egg, photos of Gwen with Harry, the twins on ponies, Mark wearing various sporting outfits and boxing gloves. At second glance, the bishop saw the boxer was himself.

As if pushing against a blanket of heat, the bishop finally forced himself to rise. Head dull, he shuffled to the bathroom. An expression he sometimes used years ago with fellow priests insinuated itself as he passed water: "shaking hands with the unemployed". All was silent but for an occasional tapping from the garage. Wondering where Gwen and the children had gone, the bishop showered.

Refreshed after the shower, he wiped steam from the mirror: the young boxer in the photo, could go the knuckle with the toughest but now he was looking at a parrot-faced, overweight man who had to exercise gently. He flexed his knees a dozen times, touching the washbasin with the tips of his fingers. Still limber, although a little breathy. He had frequented a gymnasium to reduce weight until he found he had a ticker which was not expected to tick much longer. It had been a pleasure to be with young men who made him recall his prime. Some of them could have posed for Michelangelo. He would like to see the Sistine Chapel again: beautiful figures and, in the Last Judgement, a bereft older man contemplating one-eyed the ruin about him. He recalled a senior priest who, as he died with

humiliating muscular dystrophy, said the silence of God was deafening.

He donned a bath robe which hung behind the door. It made him look a boxer again. He took a can of beer from the fridge and held it against his temples before drinking, then wiped his brow and thrust his hand in the bathrobe's pocket; his fingers froze as they touched a syringe. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, was Mark into drugs?

Unsure whether he was sweating again or still wet, he descended the wooden stairs to the back garden. Mark, his cheeks grease-stained, bent over a motorbike. The bishop suspected that Gwen had left him a clear field for a talk but it was not easy. He sat on a tree stump and arranged the bath robe to cover his crotch, then offered Mark a cigarette.

"Not for me, worse than dope."

The bishop's cigarette-holding hand bent away as if to hide it.

"I've seen drugs destroy some of our best young men. They frighten the wits out of me."

Of course Harry had died from lung cancer which could explain Mark's hostility. The lad's hair had darkened, the bishops noted, and his chin had become as prominent as Harry's; more a Hartnett than a Madden.

The bishop recalled excursions he had made with young Mark, fishing trips on local lakes and the boy's first visit to a zoo. Mark said he still had the yellow cap he had been given on that occasion. He even recalled the parrot they had always talked with on walks to a nearby headland. Mark was only a little chap then, would he have been five? "You'll walk the legs off him" Harry warned but the bishop had been toughening Mark as if he were his own. Mark even remembered a snake that had frightened them both as they sat on the headland watching surfers.

For over an hour, as they reminisced, they were mates. By the garage, the jacaranda was a touchable heaven.

The bishop, confessing that engines were an abiding mystery, said he was amazed to see Mark was a mechanic.

"Just learning . . ."

He no longer added "Uncle Theo".

" . . . My mates are good at it. We're going camping together."

Had Mark said "we're going camp together"? The bishop was uncertain but there was no time to check as two motorbikes roared into the driveway. They were driven by Mark's friends, one powerfully-built with a mop of krinkly hair, leather jacket and wristband, the other a slight blond wearing a T-shirt emblazoned PUSH IT REAL

GOOD. The bishop, punching Mark's biceps as mates did, left to dress. It was nearly departure time.

Gwen returned keen to hear his comments on Mark but the bishop, preoccupied by the syringe now in his trouser pocket, deferred judgement. He simply advised Gwen to abandon her erratic combination of indulgence and bossiness. He suspected she was exaggerating family traits he shared. He asked if Mark's two motorcycling friends were also St Jude's boys.

"It's donkeys' years since their school supplied all their friends."

The bishop promised he would return soon to talk again with Mark.

"Do, Theo, you used to be good at it. He's shut me out but you might still get through."

What if he's into drugs though, the bishop asked himself as he headed for the coastal road, or is going camp? But that could never happen to a Madden male. He remembered his confusion when Newhaven had asked him to address a Catholic homosexual group. A taunt, you could see it in Newhaven's pert face. He called pastoral care for homosexuals the new frontier; well the bishop did not feel like exposing himself on the border.

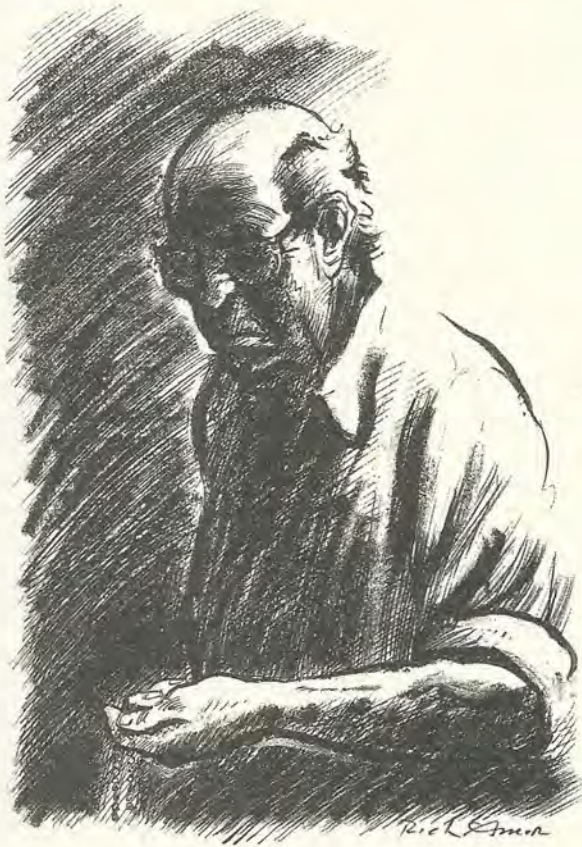
Born that way or bent by dominant mother? Whichever, the important thing was not to practise. If you're born left-handed, Newhaven said, there's damage if you're forced to use your right but that line of argument could lead you up queer street. Didn't Newhaven realise these unfortunates needed help rather than justification of their errors? All things to all men that one, and even to halfmen. Given a free hand, Newhaven was capable of marrying them; a new haven and a new earth.

The bishop, tagging behind a slow tourist bus, told himself he should concentrate on Mark rather than Newhaven otherwise Mark would be his final failure and the first culpable one. Previously, look at it as you would, hadn't he been more sinned against than sinning? He replayed his pratfalls, no longer confined to his noisy car but once more on an inaugural flight to Rome: it was Friday and all the Mick journalists, even those lapsed, because he was on board had ordered fish which proved to be like stringy plastic, while he had hoed into a juicy steak. Afterwards he relished praising it to their faces and, in answer to their surprise, told them that the fish-on-Friday rule did not apply to travellers. It spoiled their freebie.

But the journalists laughed last. Early in the Vatican Council, one of them had interviewed him. Referring to an ecumenically-minded fellow bishop, he had forecast that such enthusiasts would not be

satisfied until they swapped chalices with Anglicans. It was the sort of thing you said to cut a figure with friends but it looked different in the headlines.

That, however, was nothing compared to his next pratfall: because the headline won him a reputation as an outspoken young traditionalist, B.B.C. television requested an interview as part of a documentary on the Vatican. It went well: he was prompt, caustic, favourable to reform but strong on preserving what was of value. A confident, intelligent conservative who would be the apple in the eye of Vatican authorities. When it was all over, putting his arm around the interviewer's shoulders, he had said smiling "in Rome you'll never have



a bad meal nor hear the truth", then laughed heartily to show it was merely a pleasantry, one of the man-of-the-world remarks which won him journalistic friends. But those journalists were more interested in getting a story than becoming friends; although the bishop had not realised it, the telecameras were still rolling. Indeed that throwaway remark was all that was used of his interview. It became part of the opening and closing sequence: St Peter's dome,

the cross, gesturing saints' statutes, a quote about papal infallibility, then a face plump with good eating, a knowing smile and the famous last words "in Rome you'll never have a bad meal nor hear the truth". A gastronome, a Catholic baiter? No, young Bishop Muldoon who had seemed a goer. His hearty laugh had been cut and without it the smile said "I've sized up this place and I'm working it my way" – first-hand evidence that not even conservatives trusted the Vatican.

The bishop would never forget that, still less, he feared, would Rome. He was convinced that Vatican officials ran the documentary every time his name came up. Although he had been the brightest and the best, the obvious choice to succeed the cardinal-archbishop, preference had gone instead to Vince Doyle, a reliable plodder with sealed lips. Talk of the devil! There, lights just coming on, was the Doyle family hotel, a goldmine for over fifty years. No thanks, he would not be stopping for another game of 500s; Madge Doyle was certainly more likeable than her brother but you could hardly ask her about drugs and syringes.

It was hard to like winners, especially as after his appointment Vince had let fall his one pithy remark: "Looking back's O.K., Theo, but you postively stare". After years, it stuck to the bishop like a burr. He left the lights of Doyle's pub behind. When the archdiocese had been divided into zones, Madden had been assigned one but he felt it was only done reluctantly. After a few years, he had resigned but continued as a parish priest. He had wanted to concentrate on pastoral rather than administrative work but failing health had made him concentrate on himself.

The shallow lakes flanking the road were nacreous with the last light. That's how we should reflect God at the end, mused the bishop, but felt he was a mudbank. The waft from the lake brought back others further north where he had taken young Mark: the fish, mostly tiddlers, they caught; lights seeping into the brackish water as night fell; the salty tiredness; the content.

He had not even known then, he reflected, that he was accident-prone. He continued to finger his rosary of pratfalls, lingering on the one which he was sure caused glee in hundreds of presbyteries and was known even to Gwen. When it was recounted, he too laughed but hollowly. He had been celebrating a broadcast Mass, something he did particularly well, but when he said "peace be with you", the microphone had gone dead and the congregation's response did not come. He tapped the microphone, complaining "something's wrong with this". His taps must have brought it to life,

his complaint blurted forth indistinctly and the congregation's usual response surged back "and also with you".

Perhaps there was, he allowed as he reached the end of his car-borne sorrowful mysteries, something terribly wrong with him, perhaps he was too trusting, too confident, too presumptuous, too . . . Red motorbikes cut in almost forcing him off the road; two bucks with limpet-like girls whose shorts could not be shorter. Despite his fright, the bishop noted that the girls were without ear rings.

A chemist's in a small shopping centre caught his eye. He entered but waited guiltily until there were no other customers. If Mark were on drugs, should he go to live with Gwen? Desperate situations, extreme remedies. His wrinkled, sagging face was reflected from several mirrors, which he felt was unfair, but he asked why he dressed as government clerks used to: black trousers and white, long-sleeved, open-necked shirt. The chemist was staring at the bishop staring at himself. The bishop requested a toothpaste and then, casually, extracting the syringe, asking if it had traces of drugs. The chemist said it was not the type druggies used. Bouyant again, the bishop offered the chemist a cigarette which was brusquely refused.

"Shows how out of date I've become" he said, feeling now a need to chat. "Men wearing ear rings, don't you find that . . ."

"It's the hippies who come up this way. But these days, it doesn't mean anything much. What does?"

Usually the bishop drove grasping the steering wheel like a drowning man clasping a lifebuoy but, as he resumed his journey, he held it with one hand and overtook many cars. The syringe was innocuous, the ear ring still jarred but what did it matter? There was still time. He would invite Mark to stay with him - mates again and a breather for Gwen. But Newhaven would be a bad influence. It was a wonder he did not wear an earring; and the bishop suspected that he played nasty tricks. He was all but sure Newhaven had prompted one of his network to embarrass him during Benediction which the older parishioners still wanted. The bishop had descended the altar steps, swinging the incense burner, when from the front row a sallow, ginger-haired fellow he had never seen in the parish before or since said loudly "I love your drag, dear, but your handbag's on fire". Newhaven was capable of arranging it as a jape when, in fact, it was sacrilege.

It must have been revenge because he had dared recall from the pulpit the church's teaching on homosexuality. He had nothing against homosexuals: love the sinner, hate the sin, a distinction

Newhaven overlooked. Give him an inch and he'd be organising a Poofster's Pence collection but that was the kind of limp-wristed priest the seminaries were turning out. The bishop contrasted them with his seminary contemporaries who had not been goody-goodies or namby-pambies; and certainly not pansies. The vocations director's approach has been: "You think you're tough - well, try the priesthood."

The bishop noted lights like low stars on the horizon: fishing boats or a coastal freighter? The money he had set aside for an overseas trip, he decided, would be better invested in Mark. See his relatives in Ireland for the first time, visit Rome. On return, Newhaven would have been forced to find a new berth and Mark could stay in the presbytery; he had said he would like to spend time in the city. It would add up to a salutary break from his motorcycle mates.

As the bishop approached the last bridge, the engine coughed. He had not even steered the car to the side of the road when it stopped. Holy Mother of God! It would take hours to walk to the presbytery, he could not count on a taxi passing, he did not want to hitch a ride. Tiredness dragged on him; the trip was too much to do now in a day, especially when it was still humid after nightfall. He raised the car's bonnet but the wires, cylinders and plugs all looked in order.

A car which had passed the bishop stopped. He felt a surge of gratitude as the driver walked towards him.

"Do your big end?" He was a sandy-haired, stout fellow in his forties wearing shorts, thongs and a mauve Lacoste tennis shirt.

"Frankly I wouldn't know" the bishop said slapping the good man's shoulder, "that's why I'm so grateful. You're a real Samaritan".

The bishop grasped the helper's elbow as if he had to be guided to the car.

"What seems to be the problem?" The accent had changed to mock-sophisticated. Was he an actor? The switch was unnerving.

"I was pushing her along and she started to cough at that bend."

The Samaritan bent over the engine. When he requested a rag, the bishop gave him his silk handkerchief. The fellow tinkered confidently.

"Feel I'm in good hands" said the bishop, surprised to find he had patted the bent fellow's bottom. "Have to admit I'm clueless."

"Never too late to learn, sport." The Samaritan's cheeks, like Mark's, were now grease-stained. "Not too serious, I'd say. Give her the gun will you?"

The bishop did but the engine remained

asthmatic. The clogged carburator could be readily fixed in the morning, the Samaritan explained, then offered the bishop a lift home. The bishop said he would not want the good man to go out of his way but, when the offer was repeated, gave his address as a hotel near the presbytery.

The Samaritan introduced himself as D'Arcy, the bishop simply as Theo. He offered D'Arcy a cigarette, then waved his own regally as if he were being chauffeured to his palace.

"A friend in need" he said, patting D'Arcy's knee, "not many of them these days."

"I saw you clearly enough." D'Arcy lightly brushed the bishop's forearm, disquieting him, "knew you were in a bad way".

As they approached the hotel the bishop had given as his address, he thanked D'Arcy.

"It's my pleasure to take you right home, bishop . . ."

Bishop! Jesus, Mary and Joseph! If D'Arcy were not setting him up for embarrassment, surely he would have addressed him as 'bishop' from the start. He saw himself being carried away, giving the ambiguous fellow the entirely wrong impression and heard a ghostly "And also with you".

". . . I wouldn't have picked up just anyone. It wouldn't be me."

My Lord and my God, the bishop prayed, ensure that Newhaven is out or too heavily asleep to hear me arrive. The car swung into the presbytery's circular driveway and stopped at the front door. The bishop descended, limber no longer. Solicitous

Newhaven, shirt open to the navel, with copper bracelet but without ear ring, was at the door.

"Thought you'd ring at least. I was so worried. A smash?"

"Broke down."

"There you are, you should've let me drive you."

"Nothing to worry about" offered D'Arcy from inside the car, "I took good care".

"Fancy seeing you D'Arcy!" Newhaven was pumping D'Arcy's hand, patting his biceps. He invited D'Arcy for a drink but he declined. The bishop wanted only to see the last of them both but, as he turned away, D'Arcy called "Bishop you forgot your handkerchief".

Reluctantly the bishop took it.

"Sorry about the smears." D'Arcy waved and his car purred off into the night.

The bishop went immediately to his bedroom. Picked up by one of Newhaven's network! Now Newhaven would be more unbearable than ever as he pranced around the presbytery. The bishop began the rosary hoping it would calm him. Then he saw it clear: he needed Mark more than Mark needed him. Had Gwen guessed it? For Mark, his pratfalls were ancient history, they meant less than nothing; he felt he still had some credit there. If Mark came to the city, he might be able to learn from the lad who certainly would be more congenial company than Newhaven. And could be his chaperone: for he recognised, in the seconds before sleep, that when he ventured into the wide world he needed a guardian.

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STEPHEN KNIGHT

## Meanjin's Golden Years

Jenny Lee, Philip Mead and Gerald Murnane, eds.: *The Temperament of Generations: Fifty Years of Writing in Meanjin* (Meanjin/Melbourne University Press, \$29.95).

War can be credited with various literary developments, from the rise of romance to the march of modernism. The 1939-45 unpleasantness is best known for canonising Penguin Books, but in Australia a different shell was cracked. *Meanjin* started in Brisbane in early 1940 as a small journal of fairly avant garde literature, but after the fall of Singapore its creative self-concern focussed on a newly separate national identity.

That remained a self-aware theme of the magazine for fifty years, though it has never been simplistic. Early on Xavier Herbert wrote vigorously against chauvinism of the old jingoistic kind: recently the bounds of a multi-cultural Australia have been subtly beaten by Sneja Gunew.

Sometimes by accumulation of variant materials, sometimes by deliberately taking stock – as in the set of 1960s essays which give this anthology its title – the *Meanjin* editors have consistently worked around, across and towards the elements of Australian cultural and social consciousness.

When the young, quirky, dedicated Clem Christesen began his magazine, then called *Meanjin Papers*, he had a clear idea of the value of the nation's "mental life, its intellectual and aesthetic activities". Few young hopefuls have had the toughness to maintain their own passion for over thirty years, as did Christesen; fewer yet have had the perhaps ambiguous pleasure of seeing their own conception continued by others for nearly twenty more.

To a very large degree this jubilee anthology must be a testament to the quality of Christesen's dedication and the quantity of his endurance, and also to the fairly small and changing group who helped him in his work – Nina Christesen first among them, but others too, academic supporters from Tom Inglis Moore to Bernard Smith and Geoffrey Serle, loyal contributors such as A. D. Hope and Ian Turner and dedicated workers on

the *Meanjin* front line like Pat Excell and Judith Wright (even major poets have taken messages in their time).

But *The Temperament of Generations* is not a mere festschrift: both the writing and the celebration are much more than elegiac. Selection comes from the editorial team who have produced the magazine over the last three years, Jenny Lee as lead editor, with her creative rhythm section of Mead and Murnane.

Providing a linking narrative to connect the text to events, unpublished letters and editorial statements, they have condensed the *Meanjin* materials into a consciously narrow frame. With so much to omit, choice requires a focus, and this anthology leaves out nearly all of the overseas material, both political and cultural, that so much marked *Meanjin* through its first decades. Christesen clearly harassed his correspondents for material on their travels, and through the forties and fifties the magazine was a major eye on the distant world.

It also consistently dealt with the visual arts, covering exhibitions here and developments overseas, and this area too has been left out of this selection. Some might regret that, especially since a unified sense of the arts has been a powerful feature of Melbourne cultural life, but it is a reasonable editorial decision.

Especially as it has a positive side, which is to shape in this collection the magazine's development of those first instincts, by which Christesen and his small circle realised local intellectual and creative life primarily through verbal art and argument. That narrowing of choice provides a strong effect of concentration, and shapes this anthology as an extraordinarily valuable resource for access to and comprehension of the currents of Australian public intellectual life over decades which are in some way obscure yet still potently effective.

Whatever Australian Studies is to mean, in the schools and the universities, it will need this book to help create the self-consciousness of a subject that has been not so much recorded as created in the pages of *Meanjin*.

Here appear A. A. Phillips' famous essay on 'The Cultural Cringe'; Marjorie Barnard's authoritative survey of Patrick White's importance. But extending such major cultural events are MacMahon Ball on Australia's foreign policy and young Jim Cairns on the problems of the Labor Party - partly the right wing as you would expect from him, but also, something to recall, the religious instincts of most Labor people.

Ripe plums dangle in these early sections: Kylie Tennant unloading Social realist spleen onto Furphy; Xavier Herbert bringing out the stiffer side of Christesen; the editor's own guerilla practices invoking even more starch from a university press mandarin.

But some things surprise by their very familiarity. Vance Palmer on the Australian identity, male and leathery, is one to leave in the past perhaps, as

is Peter Elkin's ethnocentric quest for a white dreaming. But Nettie Palmer's supple appreciation of migrant potential and Brian Fitzpatrick's tough account of Aboriginal maltreatment seem to leap the decades. And then in 1945 Judith Wright was writing poetry on the ecology and the self, both recognised as such.

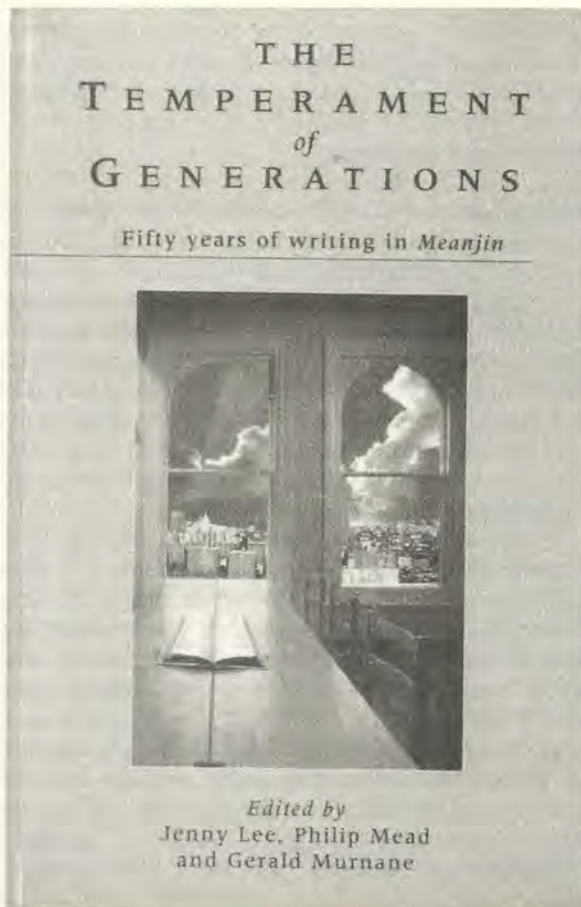
Disturbing continuities of a more mechanical kind also appear. Christesen is consistently struggling for funds and worrying about the support of those in power. After he moved to Melbourne, at the University's invitation in 1945, he had even more elusive masters to pursue for funds and favour, and his own expense of time, money and energy seems about the same as the modern machinations, though antagonists seem to change. What Australia Post has been for Jenny Lee is, for the Fifties, the old Commonwealth Literary Fund.

*Meanjin* was a fairly radical magazine, and the question of its Communist sympathies was quite often raised, especially in the mid to late Fifties, when *Quadrant* came into being. That radicalism was largely political; the poetry in particular remained quite conventional, apart from Wright, largely because the Ern Malley hoax (here covered in some detail) crippled the spirit of modernism across the country. It was not until Kris Hemensley began to influence the poetry editing around 1970 that a radical line came to mean something in verse - though the magazine has since made up for that slow start in poetic estrangement.

Fiction also remained strongly conventional through the early decades, and is still not widely regarded as one of the magazine's major features, though the last few years are changing that too. For many years it seemed to fictioneers that the criticism came first: "*Meanjin* is the Aboriginal for rejected by the *New Yorker*" quipped Frank Moorhouse, one of those Sydney wags whose tales dogged the magazine for years.

What comes across strongly when you read the old copies, but cannot be so well represented in an anthology, was that *Meanjin* was the house journal of a cultural polity, at least of the southern and eastern states. The squabbles and the warmth were both familial, and there existed that monistic aspect that has been lost in Australian culture for twenty years now. When poets and painters did their drinking together, journals like *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Nation*, even perhaps *Quadrant*, could represent that coherence.

But it succumbed to specialisation, across pubs and professions alike. *Meanjin's* spread of offerings has become fragmented. *Scriptsi* undertakes the role of cultural importer for the Melbourne gentry; *Arena*



and *Thesis 11* now mediate the latest in international dialectics.

This places the modern *Meanjin* in a quite different position, and the anthology marks clearly enough that structural change. Though it would be a lot clearer if more time were devoted to the middle period, when the change actually occurred. It's rather striking that while the founding years up to 1950 fill about ten pages to a year, and the post-Christesen period does just as well, the Menzies years, the middle ages of *Meanjin*, slim down to but five sides per annum.

Naturally intrigued with Christesen's establishment of the journal and their own re-creation of its standards, the editors have, like renaissance scholars groping for classic origins, medievalised the Menzies-days *Meanjin* by more condensation than it deserves, and then again contained it by relying largely on creative texts from that time.

It's not that the critical material was uninteresting in itself. The changing formats of those years alone showed how the journal was lively, and this was when figures like Dorothy Green, Bob Brissenden and Ian Turner were laying tracks across Australian culture, when the Melbourne historians were at their most innovative, and tertiary expansion had a benignly productive phase, unlike today.

A disengaged editor of this anthology might have done more with the middle period and pruned more sharply the more languorous pieces from the present. But that would also remove the dynamic self-involvement of this anthology – and might not make so much difference to the overall shape anyway. Not only editorial introversion constricts the Fifties and Sixties.

That period also suffers from the nature of its conclusion. One of the features of western thought these days is 1968-ism, the notion that the late '60s and early '70s were alive with intellectual ferment. In this selection the enduring essence of that time appears more accurately in Craig McGregor's essay in stylised indecision, rather generously reprinted here. But there was self-exaltation too, as is clear in a finely written piece by Catherine Duncan which breaches the no-overseas material rule partly because of its topic, the Paris events of '68, but perhaps most of all by virtue of its title, "Rendezvous with the End of an Age".

After Christesen retired in 1973, the real rendezvous of *Meanjin* in the Seventies was with new editors, the spirited and innovative Jim Davidson, the clear-minded, socially attuned Judith Brett and the highly energetic and issue-oriented Jenny Lee. They renovated the mode of the magazine in the

spirit of its opening. But their context and their contest were not the same as those Christesen had handled.

As with the people of '68, their determining constriction was that they had no convenient Other against which to construct a position. In the '40s and '50s, the conservative forces of the establishment both were and knew themselves to be a unitary force, and Christesen could infiltrate, enfilade, fusillade and return to his intellectual hideouts. War on one front is a lucid and self-defining procedure.

But in a mass consumer society, where ruling class regulators of life are replaced by the market, people find targets and self-production equally elusive. Liberty, equality, sensitivity, for the early Christesen think-tankers were ethical siege towers to be wheeled up to the establishment fortress in a popular front assault. By the Seventies they were platforms without inter-connection, often contradicting each other. There were no more motherhood issues, especially not motherhood itself.

In the Seventies and Eighties *Meanjin* became less political in a strong sense, and more cultural – and not always in the strongly social sense of culture either. Poetry and prose waxed, critical theory intensified, but overseas politics and local social analysis become more personal and psychological. In the absence of a single oppositive Other, the role of the self and its social gestures are not easy to discern.

Each of the post-Christesen editors have sensed this fragmentation of the magazine's role and have not sought a factitious coherence. In different ways they have kept mobile, especially by being theme editors: Davidson with his New Guinea issue and his conference-related work, for example; Brett enforcing the awareness of social issues, especially feminism; Lee supervised coherent argumentation, like the important issue from 1988 on cities, overmodestly omitted from *The Temperament of Generations*.

Glancing across the recent years, you see both a striking continuity with the early issues, and a difference of mode. The style is now less simple – but so is the audience. In general the writers are more junior than they once were, and, being against the grain of an ageing academy, that is a positive sign for the future. Some of *les jeunes* will surely become sages. After looking backward to village Hampdens like Judith Wright and Jim Cairns, you wonder who, fifty years on, will appear as our own chrysaloid stars. Names so far mute and inglorious perhaps, not here appearing... though the editors have chosen well with Tim



Rowse and Cassandra Pybus, and they might be worth a few dollars for the centenary stakes.

What will also appear evident from the future is, in part, that those who followed Christesen matched well his dedication and skill – though not his endurance, no-one could be expected to do that. But it will also seem that, in spite of fragmentations and even through them, the magazine focussed more and more precisely on that original wartime question of what being Australian meant, both in terms of comprehension and in terms of consequent action.

Whereas that was studied in almost entirely moral terms in the early days, fifty years on it has increasingly become a matter of theory, and recent issues suggest a slow convergence between nascent Australian Studies and the formidable analysis of international PostColonialism.

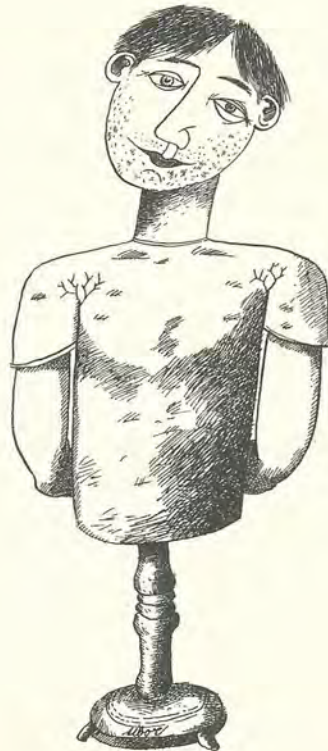
To fulfil its destiny in that direction, the magazine will need to maintain its commitment to theoretical power and also to writing lucid enough to communicate these issues. By tradition and by capacity it is the organ most likely to give a sharp

edge to its mission in Australian Studies, enfoldng its past as an archive into its future as a chart.

*Meanjin* takes its name from a spit of land in the Brisbane River. Most Australian journals have topographic names, unlike those of most other countries. They are both sites and maps: they discover and enact a culture which is, like an abraded wound, both raw and whole at once. The archeology of *Meanjin*, so skilfully prepared in this collection, is itself a remapping that also can direct the next years, the years of the next editors. The Queensland sand-spit has been transmogrified, displaced to remain in place, as the cover of this collection reveals. On a background of Carlton-restaurant salmon-pink is inset a painted heavy-clouded city from a window that could be in Melbourne but is international.

It is not clear, now as then, whether the storm is coming or going.

*Stephen Knight is Professor of English at the University of Melbourne, occasional Meanjin contributor and, most recently, author of The Selling of the Australian Mind (Heinemann, \$19.95).*



*Jiri Tibor*

## THE TENOR HEARS APPLAUSE

I have watched the fat tenor in concerts  
but I forget: when it's time for encores  
the crowds always hook on their blood-lift  
and applaud. And applaud and applaud.  
It's the heat-storm such singing needs,  
a pain smacking up from them, the sound  
flooding like light, their hands hurting out  
pleasure. The tenor is one, pumped vein,  
he and they have worked all night, the high-  
-streaking silk of his B flats and Cs  
heady and like a dream of perfect sex.  
It raises the back-hair, the breath, licks  
the body like a lush envelope, and sings  
a wave especially on a woman, Lanza said,  
until he or she will come! But Pavarotti cries,  
his hankie is spent, he rubs the nail (fresh  
and bent) he keeps against his skin, cries  
as if for Mama. Like Caruso prayed to her photo  
before each night of sublimated howling, like  
Gigli's leaky portamento sobbing. Addio is now  
*chi mi amore*. And just for now they're swapping  
the pain. The crowd that won't stop clapping,  
their hands smarting as if from caning.

## VACUUMING THE POOL

She wears the water's face,  
like water wears the mutability of ripples,  
and ripples wear the face of chaos.

She seems to stir and twist,  
as the rod stirs through the shining water,  
she seems to wear alternate faces

like Hollywood's "gamut of emotions"  
without a script, or like a slow-motion film  
of runners in a marathon.

One face alone survives  
all this exertion, as if she wears the sexual  
ripples and the wavering

of lovers close to orgasm,  
and returns through light and the milliseconds  
to the source of her person.

## THREE POEMS BY PHILIP SALOM

### BODY

The body is like an ocean. It never  
hears the Berlin wall is falling down, or  
that Humpty Dumpty Stalin ever clambered up  
but now at last lies broken.

The body has no concern at all  
with chess, or computers, but aches to music  
with its own infinity of drums and tides  
like a prodigy resisting chaos.

The body likes other bodies. Wants  
to be inside them, in color-falls and depths  
it never understood the first time round.  
Lacking words, it knows by food and sex.

And movement, but not heroics overmuch  
that hurt. Yet bodies sometimes run in brothels  
and marathons, where tricks of pain will come,  
and yes the body does like drugs:

some are natural and close-enough  
heroics: the danger-art of cornering too fast,  
the abseiling metaphysic, the poetry trapeze.  
And not so natural drugs.

But not their double\*. The body is a coward  
which is the way it might survive the death-filled  
body of the world, the tribe, and the King's men.  
\*The *doppelganger* of addiction.

Bodies increase, then age, they  
shrink down like cellos to their strings, until  
they are unplayable, the ghost who played them  
left inside the memory of music.

Bodies can't pronounce death, but die.  
The pains they never wanted, seek their ends,  
want to close at last these metaphors of being  
and not being. The body is not an ocean.

## BRIAN HENDERSON SAW US MAKE LOVE

there was talk of an early election  
as she took my hand  
a bus crashed as I touched her knee  
she kissed me  
and all of Eastern Europe shivered  
my fingers traced a mole on her back  
they celebrated in Berlin  
she placed a pillow  
under my head  
as the victims were carried out  
their names were like ours  
the drowned Mother of 6 almost made us stop  
they broke for a commercial  
we changed position  
her breast brushed my shoulder  
the walls came down  
everyone cheered  
we were sweating  
but confident of victory  
tornadoes lashed the coast  
the earth quaked  
there was a solar eclipse  
Halley's Comet came again  
the space shuttle landed  
Australia won the cricket  
the innocent went free  
people had the right to choose  
the night we made love  
on the shag-pile  
in front of the evening News.

STEVEN HERRICK

## THE DAILY NEWS

what sort of news do we really want to hear?  
that the sky has fallen,  
that everything about us is motorised;  
that your hair falls upon the pillow  
in cascade,  
that busts of lenin are being remaindered  
and while the berlin wall's torn down  
others more subtle are being raised;  
that in iraq there's a giant gun of god  
half assembled  
that your hair is red, burnished like a raphael,  
and beirut has fallen to its knees.  
clouds frog march across the sky.

you lie like a question mark upon the sheets.  
as smooth as stone.  
the tea steams lazily.  
you sip dreams.  
at wodonga a thick fog has covered the hume  
and you are an ocean,  
rolling waves in my head  
that has tossed you naked  
washed up on my bed.

SHELTON LEA

## BIRTHING

On the dark side I slip  
silky through night.  
Wind splinters my hair -

air wraps me, fills my pores.  
Waking, I am lifted lightly  
into the day, past

the shift of voices,  
my voice - a stranger  
naming milestones.

Wind settling my feet  
within the rip  
and slant of gravity.

KATHERINE GALLAGHER

## TWO POEMS BY ROBERT CLARK

### HEART ATTACK

I have a guilty secret –  
a girl sleeps with me now,  
a dark-eyed beauty, Death,  
who loves me well, though how

is hard to grasp: an oldie  
seems to suit her taste.  
She's not a one for sunrise  
but for the fading west.

She kisses and she cuddles,  
runs off, then comes for more.  
She sets the pace, not I.  
It won't be long before

she's ready for the climax,  
I know, when that occurs,  
mine will be the pain,  
the rapture will be hers.

### MANDARINS IN WAIKERIE

*after Lope De Vega Carpio  
from a translation by K. F. Pearson*

One winter's eve in Waikerie  
she saw me from her balcony  
and threw me mandarins in twos.  
I tossed them back and all at once  
they turned to blossoms coming to rest  
where they fell on those two fruits  
pressing so firmly against her dress.

Returning from the masquerade  
with the sun about to rise  
I paused beneath her window  
and saw a new sun in her eyes.  
She threw me mandarins again –  
so passionately. But I was wrong:  
nothing had she learned of love,  
it all was just for sport and song.  
I threw them back to her; they fell  
as blooms once more, and then I knew  
what she did not, she loved me well.

That winter time in Waikerie  
she teased me from her balcony  
and so the blossoms fell on her  
from mandarins she threw to me.

### COCKROACH

Blackly armoured as a dictator's funeral,  
arch-survivor so easily crushed with my foot,  
you die as you lived, without expression,  
soft body, fine carapace, fusing or sundering.

I know a further million of you wait –  
the underground sea on which this house floats.  
While I was gone, you tracked each plate, pot,  
cup,  
dining on the very ghost of past meals, exploring  
sealed crates of books, a ghostlier sustenance.

Moving with the illusion of slowness  
then cannily absent, you often subvert, outwit.  
Sometimes, I find you in dreams, or odd pockets  
of the self – just there, as if to say:  
*I cannot be transformed, kill me or endure me.  
Remember, nothing describes me but what I  
am.  
And don't write poems about me.*

DIANE FAHEY

## FROM: MACDONALD AVENUE POEMS

One night, twenty years ago,  
she came home from work  
and stayed.  
Stopped.  
Never again seen  
but still á terrible presence  
squatting in our minds.

Across the road,  
outside our tasks and pleasures,  
we were conscious  
of moving in space and light  
when we looked at her house  
with its drawn blinds.  
It was like staring  
at the shut eyes  
of a coma patient,  
wondering.

Word spreads, myth grows,  
we know what she does in there:  
changes her clothes often  
fusses with make-up  
watches television in her room  
speaks sometimes to her mother  
but never to her father –  
leaves shopping lists for him  
on the kitchen table.  
Once we were amused by  
these absurdities,  
these silent transactions.

No-one speaks of her now,  
she is our shared unnamed horror.  
To the street's new generation  
she is not real,  
mere history or fiction.

Imagining today that remembered girl  
we think of things found  
in gardens, under rocks  
or old wood-piles  
fungus  
albino slaters  
the creamy shoots of grass  
beneath the soil  
spreading in darkness.

BEV ROBERTS

## WORKING OUT

Through glass I watch leotard-women  
working out at the dockside gym.

Nine in the morning and chrome glints  
on the workout machines as twenty women

push, pull and lift at each circuit station  
tightening buttocks, stomach and thighs

seeking shoulder strength and definition.  
Some chat, those with more serious intent

wear headbands dampening with sweat.  
Elsewhere my friend lugs hay to feed

hundreds of winter-starved sheep.  
Each day she lifts disoriented ewes

down after lambing, the ground flattened  
by their exhausted attempts to rise.

She primes and tugs the temperamental  
water pump into action, the hose feeds

newly planted wind-break trees. Tomorrow  
the truck's tyre will need changing

loaded with five hundred bales after  
the neighbour's farm clearance sale.

SUE MOSS

## GRIEF

it's  
the cockroach  
in the microwave  
that won't die

the exercises  
to heal an injury  
that won't mend

the shooting  
and shooting  
and it still lives

the Huck Finn raft  
loaded with problems  
that keeps returning

the pointing the bone  
and it gets up  
and walks away

the continuous film  
with the end  
that never begins

it never goes  
if the hero lives.

FRANCES ROUSE

## TWO POEMS BY MARTIN HARRISON

### RED MARINE

The meaning of that movement must be found,  
In the collapsing schema of red sails,  
Though it happened out there, in dwindling light,  
Upon the edge, half-seen, a mere detail. -

More total, more for the body than the eye,  
It turned dusk's wind into a flapping hinge,  
While the gulls, alarmed, skimmed up across the  
bay,  
Suddenly caught in white again, wheeling

Seawards, changing places in a relay,  
Until their veering made a dream of depth:  
Blind memory rising in a flickering wave.  
(Its house is death. Its window is a hearth.)

It was as if, just then, a river shone,  
As if, behind that wave, lost voices spoke -  
Voices heard after they had gone away.  
The burden left is trivial, instant, black.

And yet you see that movement as it is,  
Crossing, like tide itself, through mobile space -  
On the sea-edge a sail topples, a red  
Tulip-flame twists in wind. The bright sea's

Glitter, with people bobbing in it, swallows it up,  
Like interference blizzarding a screen.  
There was a moment of cloud-shadow, more  
Nostalgic than squint-eyed, orange sun,

Where fixed, half-noticed things remained as  
glints,  
Leaving behind them latency in time -  
A spectral body stretched from shore to shore,  
Gulls in perspective, spindriffs of white sperm.

Nothing can be held beyond this trace,  
The meaning of the movement's always lost  
(Whether a down-plunging throw, or baffling  
wind)  
In trying to imagine how the thing was:

A sailboard's red sail folds into the sea,  
No substitute for fictions of a mind  
Which searches an exacter entity  
In blind, green light over the harbor's tomb.

### TOTEMIC MOMENT AGAINST DECAY

This brief and brilliant point,  
Pink light falling on a brass plate.

Dusk-light ends everywhere . . . Cold beer,  
Bare wood. The fridge-door gleams

Icy, like a snow-field without edge,  
Shining in the mind. So, call it

A day: let things be. It's enough  
For the crow to drift along outside,

Mocking the cloud-frilled line  
Of land, and the trees still shimmering

On their silver lid of water.  
*Car-cawr*, goes its prolix voice -

A rusty hinge transmitted down  
To vacant hummocks, in fading blue.

Shadow gathers in a bush of wind,  
Water smears into a sheet of pearl -

There's a wire strung between two posts,  
A trodden space, a kind of gate.

*Car-cawr*, the crow says,  
Sweeping back, like a fighter jet,

Out of a just-formed band of white.  
Fleck of dark, it swims along the hill.

Close-up, clumped grasses swarm in paddocks,  
Now that it's news-time at the wallaby-hour.

And a sort of collision happens here:  
Between the crow and the humped-up ground,

Between the bronze-leaved, flickering dam,  
And this house, glancing, on its slope.

As if a line is stretched between these things,  
A voice starts telling every mark -

Or a path is tracked from bush to shade,  
From water-glow to absent bird,

Measuring the time each movement takes,  
Where the mind follows and anticipates. -

Again, it's taking place, this time  
In the kitchen, the backdoor open:

Fistlike, an orange scoop on duller trees  
Dissolves behind the light-fleshed cows -

The crow hangs in grey-pink air,  
Plateglass sun starts glimmering in a lake

Which floods, furnace-white, beyond the ridge.  
Yet it leaves its blood-star on the wall's brass  
tray,

Momentarily as night's crickets coming through.  
In mind, sound's afterthought is like a rippling  
fish.

## RHAPSODY IN RESERVOIR

*(The Case for Kitsch)*

See me  
Out of work in Wogsville  
Jockstrapped up where bitumen bites brick  
To echoes prosthetic of the glory that was Rome

Studio  
Landscape hugs me to its  
Home and garden shadows that day sorts  
Into tramontane street boxes whorled from  
roundabouts

Saint Jo's  
Aspires tangentially  
To Ramsay Street, hosting under  
Vaulted skirts modern miracles in migrant  
manners

If this  
Is poverty having  
Run 12,000 Kay to seed anew  
Who says cabbages can't be kings in their patch  
of blue?

RICHARD MURPHY

## THE HARD WORD

Though savoring the sweetness of the hour,  
I knew the time had come to make the kill.  
I chose a moment when her head was still,  
and raised the fatal rifle of desire.

"It's getting late," I said. "Why don't you stay?"  
The question struck her on the left cheek-  
bone.  
Nice shot! Between the fireplace and the  
phone  
my dear, delightful friend was blown away,

and in her place there stood a sort of foe,  
a woman with the power to send me mad,  
with beauty no real woman ever had  
and gifts of joy no woman could bestow.

Smiling, she raised the pistol of dismay.  
"Not now," she said. "Another time maybe."  
Her answer shot the knee-cap from my  
knee.  
That's why I walk in this peculiar way.

GUY MORRISON

# on the line

How alive to us Henry Lawson still is, both the art and the man. Every few years the stories, the legend, some of the poems, particularly those quoted by Manning Clark whose death on 23 May at the age of 76 we mourn, come back again and again to haunt us, to delight us and to capture new readers. In the last few weeks, quite coincidentally, I've been reading Anne Brooksbank's novel *All My Love* (Heinemann), a new collection *The Picador Henry Lawson*, selected with an introduction by Geoffrey Dutton (Picador, \$25), the long-awaited and monumental biography by Colin Roderick *Henry Lawson; a Life* (Angus & Robertson, \$39.95), and Lawson's story "Brighten's Sister-in-Law" in Mary Lord's new anthology *The Best Australian Short Stories* (Penguin, \$14.95).

Anne Brooksbank's *All My Love*, finely crafted and highly readable, is a delight. Founded both on fact and what may be fact or long-established legend, it tells of a love affair between the young Henry Lawson and Mary Gilmore and brings to life the sites (and the sounds) of that radical Sydney of the 1890s. Lawson the man comes to life more vividly, perhaps, than in any other account. But is it a true portrait? Certainly one gets a sense of a living man much more vividly in this novel than in Professor Roderick's essential and important work. But is it the 'real'

Henry Lawson? At least in this biography we have been given, for the first time, all the facts that can possibly be established.

An example of the problem: did Louisa Lawson destroy the "love" between Mary and Henry? Did she, in the tradition of Victorian melodrama, purloin the letters? That she did is crucial to Anne Brooksbank's fiction. Dr. Roderick is properly very careful. He traces the allegation to a memoir Mary Gilmore gave to George Robertson in 1924.

"The memoir went on to tell how Mary stayed with Louisa for six weeks [in 1890 while Henry was in Western Australia] and how Louisa intercepted Lawson's replies to the letters she wrote him during that time, so that, getting no answers, she 'wrote and broke off everything before leaving his mother.'" (p. 60)

It depends on whether you believe Mary. The novelist chooses to and Louisa, yet again, gets the rough end. But readers of the great *Letters of Mary Gilmore* (1980) have been taught by W. H. Wilde to be careful of Mary's romancing. Remember her distinct memory of witnessing the murder of the Chinese at Lambing Flat when she was young when, in fact, it happened some years before she was born!

Perhaps Brian Matthews might tell us did Louisa steal the letters.

I got his *Louisa* off my shelves, a biography I, and so many others, much enjoyed. But it has no index! Did Louisa steal the letters, Brian? I'd really like to know. In the meantime I note Professor Roderick's tactfully phrased comment on Mary: "Time and place did not always adhere in her recollections. . . ." (p. 106).

Whatever happened between Mary and Henry one thing is certain: it could only have been a sad story. If they had married it would have been a disaster. Geoffrey Dutton in his illuminating introduction to *The Picador Henry Lawson* quite rightly corrects the legends by emphasising Lawson's humour and his artistry. He also gives us some valuable illuminations about Lawson's sources. For example Lawson told J. Le Gay Brereton, who lent him a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "I can't make anything out of that". Dutton points out that Whitman's phrase "red marauder" occurs in the first line of Lawson's poem "Andy's Gone with Cattle."

Dutton's collection gives primacy to the short stories and has a carefully restrained brief selection of the poems though all the best known and loved are here except for the "The Water Lily" with its odd fading rhyme at the end of each stanza (which may not have been intended). But one of the chief pleasures of the book is that it contains Lawson's best journal-



ism and selected letters and "A Fragment of Autobiography". I note, wryly in tune with my theme, that Dutton warns "a lot of it is closer to fiction than fact." The letters include the unforgettable one to the *Bulletin* re drinking (p. 382). If you have never read this you have missed one of the small gems of our literature.

What is fact? What is fiction? These questions press upon us when we consider some of the best recent writing, questions Brian Matthews and his alternative narrator 'Owen Stevens' raise repeatedly in *Louisa*. Mostly we do not have to come to a fixed, and therefore unsatisfactory, conclusion. But sometimes a line has to be drawn even if arbitrary. At present I am reading 72 novels as one of three judges for an award. With keen interest I wondered if Drusilla Modjeska's splendid biography of her mother, *Poppy*, in part an imagined biography, would be among the novels I had to judge. No, in fact. The author or her publishers have made a choice. My colleague John McLaren who is one of the non-fiction judges tells me *Poppy* has been entered for the non-fiction award.

Silly season. My mate over the road, who serves with me on our local anti-progress committee, is a keen reader of accounts, purportedly "non-fiction", of the

shadowy world of espionage. So are many others if the stamps in our local library books are a guide. Many's the time, especially since *Spycatcher*, I've had to say: "Now hang on a minute, Wal". One James Rusbridger, an Englishman, is currently a popular favourite in this genre. The blurb on one of his books says he was a commodity broker who, "during frequent visits to Eastern Europe was involved in British intelligence operations." To research his recent book *The Intelligence Game; the Illusions and Delusions of International Espionage* Mr. Rusbridger tells us he visited Australia. He thanks Brigadier Sir Charles Spry, former Director-General, Australian Security Service, for his help. Perhaps Sir Charles did not help enough for, if my mate Wal persists in reading past the conclusion and rummages among the notes he will find this gem (p. 223):

ASIO, the equivalent of MI5, has come under continuous attack from left-wing governments and organizations in recent years even to the point of having its offices raided on 16 March 1973 by the Australian Attorney General Keith [sic] Murphy, who was looking for his own ASIO file as he was suspected of being a KGB agent. At the moment ASIO hardly dares keep track of anyone for fear of upsetting

politicians and cannot veto a person's appointment to a sensitive defence area with the result that Australia's government is heavily penetrated by the KGB.

This was published in 1989. Fact or fiction? Perhaps Sir Charles can help us. Has the present Attorney-General responded? If he does maybe he could also comment on other favourite legends of the espionage buffs, the CIA sponsored Australian trade union officials who later went into politics and the CIA "agent of influence" who went from legal to greater eminence. Mr. Rusbridger's notes do not mention these. Ah fact, ah fiction.

The Jessie Litchfield Award for 1990, administered by the Northern Territory University, has been awarded to Tony Scanlon for his first book of poems *Rain at Gunn Point* (Kardoorair Press, Armidale, NSW).

It is a pleasure to note that the Miles Franklin Award for 1991 has been significantly increased to \$20,000. The first of these annual awards "for a novel or play portraying any phase of Australian life" was made in 1957 to Patrick White for *Voss*. In 1989 Peter Carey took the award for *Oscar and Lucinda* and in 1990 Tom Flood for *Oceana Fine*.

Barrett Reid



*Fay Zwicky*



*Nigel Roberts*



*Dorothy Porter*



*John Forbes*

*Shelton Lea*



*Photographs by  
Emmanuel Santos*

JOHN JENKINS

## Montsalvat Poetry Festival, 1991

Frankly, before the event, I was dreading my role as *Overland's* official scribe at Montsalvat 1991. Say anything 'nasty' about another poet in print, and they'll hate you for life. Yet if there were any brawls, beheadings, punches or putches, I was duty bound to report. But would you accuse me of pussy-footing if I told you there were none? The age of miracles is not past! No blood was shed (well, only a little - someone, it seems, was scratched on the arm) and the festival, an unqualified success, was conducted in such a mood of sweetness and light that, at its close, I could barely restrain myself from linking arms with other poets and singing "We are the world, We are the children."

This year's outing, held last March over a long weekend, had been preceded by a decade of others, most notable for their raffish style and contempt for timetables: colorful events, in which more than one wild 'romantic' persona was on display and sublime transcendence signified by verbal punch-ups or drunken belly-whackers into the swimming pool.

This time around, however, the audience was not alienated. An array of generous funders and sponsors ensured all the poets were paid, and a paid poet has no cause to feel, however subliminally, a put-upon toiler in the vineyard who may as well get silly and have some fun, 'cause what the hell? Also, the daunting task of organising all these wild egos rattling around Montsalvat's buttresses fell to several hands and not, as in the past, just to one. Whatever the panacea, it worked: the paying punters, who generally care more for poetry than the antics of poets, could simply sit back and follow the form.

But, before my summary, a little *topos* (thank you Kevin Hart): Montsalvat began as an artists' colony in 1935, before Eltham's bushland - in those days, legend has it, dotted with colorful *pisé-de-terre* dwellings - was swallowed by the shire's modern suburban fabric. An architectural pastiche, in which the French chateau style and mud-brick medievalism fall under the same gargoyles' glance, it stands about fifteen kilometres north-east of Melbourne, and is now a venue for concerts and a sort of 'ye olde curiosity stop' for day-tripping tourists. The painter and patriarch Sebastian Jorgensen (1893-1975), whose central *oeuvre* consists of 1000 self-portraits in the style of Rembrandt, was Montsalvat's original genius. Some say his wraith still lingers above its draughty staircases. Jorgensen and his acolytes cobbled their Shangri-la out of local materials and bric-a-brac scrounged from wreckers' yards.

This Courland Penders, also freely ranged by real peacocks, is obviously the place for an Annual National Poetry Festival. But I am not going to take the *pisé* out of it. Let the facts speak for themselves: over the four days, fifteen sessions of readings involving more than 130 poets were held; in addition, there were three workshops, two panel discussions, one poets' dinner, two book-launchings and an exhibition of concrete poetry. Around 1000 people came (or slipped) through the gates, 539 of them paying customers who parted with takings of \$4086. Around \$1500 worth of poetry books were sold, most events were well-attended, the scheduling of readers ticked along nicely, the quality of the poetry was fairly high throughout,

with many poets skilled readers and performers. The atmosphere (on both sides of the microphone) was warm and generous, and the diversity of poetry enormous. Next year's festival is already being planned, with talk of it going international and names like Octavio Paz being mentioned. And festival directors Mal Morgan, Catherine Bateson and Myron Lysenko, plan to launch, in 1992, an anthology of the poems read this year.

The brief sketch that follows is simply an incomplete quick photo scrapbook of what intrigued, impressed or amused me.

*Day one, Friday.* It's a terribly hot afternoon in 'The Great Hall' as Robert Harris launches the Paper Bark Press book, *Red Dirt* by Tim Thorne, which he says it is marked by an "adamantine intelligence" and grows out of a "tradition of trade unionism and left thinking that remains unfinished and overlooked within our poetry." We need, he adds, a national poetry magazine, and poetry needs "ten years of exegetical analysis." As I discover much later, Harris the last poet of the night, and gives one of the truly inspired readings of the festival. (Bob, you now owe me dinner!) Then MC Mal Morgan announces no smoking in the hall. "You've got smoking on the brain," someone quips. (Our festival sponsors are the Victorian Health Foundations!) "Good sponsors," a nearby Robert Kenny whispers, "for poets with pickled onion brains . . ." "Poetry is a healthy brainwave", he intones the festival motto, dubiously.

Meanwhile, Tim Thorne is reading some of his penetrating, terse and well-crafted poems. After I buy his book, he inscribes it with this advice:

"What sticks in the throat creates the texture of language." Then, Robert Adamson launches *Surviving the Shadow* and its author, Terry Gillmore, wearing all-whites, reads from its poems about a desperate search for love and spirituality. As it pans out, Gillmore's are the most genuinely emotional readings of the festival - with no holding back, all stops out, his voice choking on emotion, the poet trembling and audience slightly stunned by his open, public catharsis.

The mood shifts when Sebastian Jorgensen recalls past festivals. Then Rhonda Gallbally, our sponsors' representative, speaks of the "arts/health paradox", and of "reality and feelings coming together" in poetry. "Arts sit with sport" she concludes, and both can be exported. I would like to be exported to a poetry festival in Rio. Could my reality and feelings come together, I wonder? She is followed by the Hon. J. H. Kennan's opening speech. Is there large-scale "shift from sport to culture" he asks? Something called "Megatrends 2000" has the answer. As regards Montsalvat, there are "special endeavours to encourage parents and children." But I am listening more to his voice than to what he says. Its intonation seems suddenly familiar; it's like Alan Wearne's! Did Mr Kennan grow up in Blackburn too? Did both he and Alan want to be train drivers, but Alan was shunted into poetry and the Hon. into politics? What if their tracks had been reversed? All the while, I notice Shelton Lea is on the edge of his chair. To date, he's commented on everything read and said, like a Greek chorus of one. (Shelton, you win the *poeticus interruptus* prize, hands down.) "Literature has not been afforded its share of state arts funding," says Mr Kennan. "Yes!" Shelton choruses, exhorting him to do something about it.

By this time the heat has gone out of the day, and it's a lovely cool evening. I go outside for a stroll and some fresh air, hoping to catch sight of Emmanuel Santos, who took the pictures on these pages. He arrives laden with cameras. Emmanuel has photographed war zones, but I warn him to be careful of poets. "Don't worry," he says, "I won't use a flash. Besides, I've brought my tin hat."

Inside again, Ania Walwicz steps

up to read, and people listen carefully as she moves into top gear, belting out a sort of expressive sound poetry full of terrific aural textures and relentless rhythms. Do Brain Foundation people smile when she shouts, at the finale, "Bells ringing in my head tell me what to do." Well, it's my fault I don't tune into the next reader, Fay Zwicky, as I'm mesmerised - by Sebastian Jorgensen, behind a door at the end of the hall. He's rocking backwards and forwards on his toes, eyes shut, Alfred Hitchcock-like, in silhouette. I can see him through a crack in the door, but because of my sight-line, I'm the only person who can. What's behind that door, I wonder? A secret passageway lined with family musketry and death masks? Later, I will explore.

My attention returns when Geoff Goodfellow fronts up in his navy navvy's singlet and deftly grabs the microphone from its holder: which signifies both polished act and "C'arn the workers!" He cheekily rhymes "slag" with "flag" in a poem about being knocked out by bricks. You Middle Class out there, feel guilty! A poet whose name I don't catch appears in his wake. Oddly, as she reads the lines "come down as you / look at the ceiling", someone walks overhead, making the ceiling squeak. She says she was writing in residence at EZ Industries, a zinc producer in the Furneaux Islands, and her poems contain words like "ravelling" and "flash roasters". They are interesting, different. She has a tough young daughter, and when they killed a pet chicken her kid just said, "Didn't Rosie cook up well."

When it's his turn, Myron Lysenko has the punters laughing like drains at a poem that begins: "I am a full-time poet now / but for 10 years I was a clerk for Telecom Australia . . ." At first he hated it, then had a nervous breakdown, then depended on it for his social life: ". . . I went to work to relax. / When I walked off the job I became my usual introverted boring self." He jumps around frenetically, while the audience cackles and huffs. Next, Catherine Bateson reminds me that there is a fairly even-handed mix of men and women reading. Post applause, Billy-Marshall Stoneking reads his entrancing "Singing the Snake", then another winner: a paean

to and lament of all things American, a street-wise recitative full of terrific, ripped jazz rhythms.

There's a short break, in which I have this chat with Alison Croggon. She: "How are you?" Me: "Good." She: "I feel quite drunk." Me: "Oh?" Her: "You look quite healthy." Me: "That must be the effect of your drink." To my amazement, she begins her reading with a song, and has a nice, bluesy voice. Afterwards, Dorothy Porter tackles a long poem, her re-telling of the fated romance between Carmen and Don José, with the pair locked into a sort of deadly love-hate duel in which the stakes of passion are raised ever higher, unto death. The poem transposes emotion into a sort of metaphysical realm, and argues for the raw irrationality of human conduct. She vacates the mike for Robert Adamson, who reads about the Hawkesbury River and its people, and another full of insinuating menace, while perched precariously on the edge of a table. Afterwards, he introduces me to his wife, Juno, and proudly shows me a picture of himself in the magazine *Fishing News*. "This," he states with great conviction, "is my Bible!"

The night ends when I give John Forbes, Tim Thorne and Robert Harris a lift back to Melbourne in a car I have bought that day. As we leave, Forbes shouts "Hippie Scum, Hippie scum", in an amused/serious way, over his shoulder at some Montsalvat habitues eating an *alfresco* dinner, by candlelight, on the grass. Halfway back to the city, I realise I am lost. Worse still, I hardly know how to drive this car. We have some near misses, but the three National Treasures in my care, all talking their heads off, don't notice. We get back to Melbourne alive. Phew! I drop them in the city and go to Fitzroy for a late beer.

*Day two, Saturday.* A gentle rain falls onto the concrete swimming pool, watched by some genteel people in tearooms alongside. I shuffle into the top hall, where Tim Thorne - his face an ever-smiling beacon - is still enjoying himself. "Those books on how to improve yourself / They stay on the shelf / I'm just a middle-aged man / Making a fool of myself" he chants his mock blues in front of a rain-scribbled window. In the same session, a young performance poet (I miss his name)

begins by saying: "I never liked Gertrude Stein. Yet, out of perversity, I wrote this in her style." As his mouth opens to speak, there is a terrific thunder crash. "She heard you!" shouts Tim.

Rain spits and dances on a food-stall hotplate, with various poets clustered around, waiting for sausages to cook. They go to read or talk to someone, then dart back again, asking "Is my sausage cooked?" It usually isn't. Cooking's slow. Everyone has a special 'reserved' sausage they keep an eye on: Eric Beach, Graham Rowlands, Jenny Boulton, Shelton Lea . . . Then Lyndon Walker walks over and points at Eric Beach's sausage. I reserved *that* one," he says. It's cooked! And he swaggers off, munching. Then, on Sunday, Lyndon reads to a capacity house, blasting the audience with his harmonica in a display of shameless hamming, before milking for laughs and applause, which he also gets!

Later, Shelton spots Lauren Williams and they waltz across the flagstones, whirling amidst the bride, groom and bridesmaids of a wedding party hunting there for photo-opportunities. I wander off to chat with Selwyn Prichard about Montsalvat. He agrees it's a "kitsch castle", but we like it for the same reasons. At least it's different, a dream realised, and relieves the suburban overkill. He tells me a story about his stay in an Orkneys' castle that had a leak, which he fixed with a long bit of plastic tracking from his son's slot-car set, curving it down from the ceiling and conveying each dribble out of the windows.

Later, Philip Hodgins gives a low-key, yet very effective reading, in which he expresses sympathy for vermin, for rabbits in traps, for daggy sheep and birds caught in machinery, expressing the sensitive rural person's bad conscience. He is sincere, unshowy and precise, and the audience like him. Afterwards, five people search for his books at the bookstall, all leaning forward in *precisely* the same attitude and angle! Then, as if on cue, they suddenly break out of the pattern.

Much clatter in the tearooms. The crowd is swelling. Sitting at a table, I hear someone discuss the poems read in terms of "sedatives and stimulants". Eavesdropping, I hear

the words "madness . . . acceleration", and sip my coffee. After lunch, two day-trippers who obviously don't know about the readers, wander into the 'Great Hall', pointing out architectural details as Grant Caldwell is introduced: "Formerly a junk experimenter and now a macrobiotic." The couple sit, their expressions curdling with distaste when a Caldwell poem ends "and fuck you too!" The woman squirms, takes off her glasses, squints at the poet, puts her glasses back on. Who is this madman? "I gave up trying to be normal ages ago / it only makes you stick out in a crowd," the poet jokes. Then he reads 'seriously': "I read somewhere / arc lights in a sawmill / make the blades stand still", and another full of "fucks" and "cuts", yelling. The woman looks incredibly pained, leaning forward as if straining to hear. She can't believe it. "Open the fucking door you cunt," bellows Caldwell, quoting some yobbo in his poem. She looks at the door, terrified. No, no, her companion is explaining, it's just a poem or something - then a poetry fan says "shush", and glares at *them*. Caldwell finishes off with one he describes as "endless", a list of small "found poems" which garner great applause.

On Saturday night, I want to attend the poets' dinner, but first have to do some 'chores' at a friend's place in St Andrews. But can't remember the right driveway. I stop at the St Andrews pub to ring for directions. The phone has a customer glued to it and, while I wait, the barman sells me a chook raffle ticket and I hang about until it's drawn. I don't win, but do get directions, and my chores begin well after dark: put ointment in the cat's eyes, feed it and two hungry horses, then mix up dinner for a vegetarian dog. By this time, it's too late to go anywhere.

*Day three, Sunday.* The morning is fine and sunny, and I chat with Nigel Roberts. Have any poets impressed? "Doris Leadbetter," he says, "read poems that were wry, urbane and entertaining." Later, during the first reading of the day (for me), the psychologist Doris Brett delivers interesting poems, some with striking images. She has one of the most beautiful voices I have ever heard. She should be on radio, I decide. I too would become loony just

to hear that voice. Then, I realise, I am thinking of 'psychiatrist'.

"This is like a Redex trial rally," complains Robert Adamson, at the rostrum. "I drive 700 miles, just to read for five minutes." And he reads a poem in which Christopher Brennan's girlfriend is nearly stung by "an insect". Strangely, as he speaks, a large wasp circles him, landing on his chest. He is oblivious, eyes half shut. But it doesn't sting him, and flies off. His time has run out, so he asks, "Will I read another?" "Yes," I prompt, "read another." We have agreed to do this - a little bit of theatre - and he reads a powerful and very moving poem about Aboriginal deaths in custody, the audience intent on every word. (Another dinner, please!)

Then I learn Terry Gillmore is leaving, driving his motorbike all the way back to Canberra to be at work on Monday. "Born to be wild," I quote the old Steppenwolf song. "Fire all your guns at once / and explode into space." But Terry assures me he will drive carefully, walking to his 'hog' past a photographer and several models, all unconnected with the poetry festival, doing a fashion shoot on nearby lawns.

Back in the reading room, Fay Zwicky begins, and a group of women explode into whistles and cheers. "We are the Fay Zwicky fan club," they chant. (Dinners!) Afterwards, I chat to a posse of poets, if that's the right collective; hours later fetching some Throaties from my car. The little old lady at the gate is ecstatic: "What a lovely day. We have two beautiful wedding parties, some fashion people and a lot of nice poets here. Everyone is staying, no-one is leaving, and the parking lots are full!" When I return, men in formal suits, and a group of giggling bridesmaids attend to wedding shots as Nigel Roberts contends, in public forum, that performance poetry needs to be heard, discussed and documented. Back in the hall, Heather Cam is reading. She says she works as an editor, and I feel for her. I like her poem about how she stole a leather jacket from a thief trying to steal from *her*. As she reads, two fat kids whisper into hand-held, two-way radios at the back of the hall.

It's Sunday night, people are tired at the end of a long day, the air a lot cooler. Quiet sounds of evening,

with crickets singing. Alan Wearne reads a two-page poem. ("For me, that was like a *haiku*," he says.) Then a *long* extract - from his verse novel in progress - about wife-swapping in Sydney. "Of course," he tells me later, "all based on imagination." He's followed by Jennifer Strauss, whose last poem affirms that most women like to be close to *someone*, but without pressure; intimacy, but without compulsion. Evan Jones is followed by Jenny Boulton, who emerges as quite a trooper, giving a spirited reading even though she has lost her handbag, plus all her money, and ticket back to Adelaide. For some reason, though, I'm very tired and find it difficult to tune into some of the very good poems being read: Chris Mann's machine-gun delivery, that draws your attention to sound and texture, with *sense* remaining largely subliminal; Laurie Duggan's excellent new poems and translations, and his riotous "poetry square dance"; Jeri Kroll in fine form; John Forbes sparkling, as always, and Billy Marshall-Stoneking in a repeat performance of Friday night. But I'm hanging to the night by a single neuron, poetry-ied out. On the drive back home - I swear it's not a lie - just after Panton Hill pub I see, in my headlights, a fox carrying a pack of Kentucky Fried chicken.

*Day four, Monday.* The first poet I catch is Bev Roberts, taking the piss out of that tired old stereotype "the charismatic drunken male poet", and other glorified windbags "with single word names like dog barks." Maurice Strandgard, trembling with nerves and emotion, gives a heart-felt reading, and Cheryl Paul is followed by Lauren Williams, who's in an incredibly 'up' mood - brightly cheerful, almost ecstatic - to the point that I have to pull down my sunglasses to dim some of the goodwill she's radiating. The audience just love her,

lavish her with applause. Heather Cam reads again before Mal Morgan announces lunchtime with the exhortation, "eat, drink, transcend" - a misty whisper of irony in his voice?

Suddenly, it's my turn to read, the last in my session, in the chapel. Great! That means enduring a hour of stark, nervous terror before I'm 'on'. As I wait, the poems of Walter Adamson, Jeltje, Cornelis Vleeskens, Jordie Albiston, Peter Murphy and Josie McDonald, all whirl and rush together in my mind, borne on a wave of panic and adrenalin - so I'm unable to report on them here. Yet, once on stage, I'm strangely calm. Three poems work well, one bombs, and the last just scrapes in after a terrific struggle with audience attention. I give myself six out of ten.

For the rest of the day, I wander around the nearby parklands and cemetery until the evening readings, arriving for Alex Skovron. His poems are pleasantly low-key, understated, but intelligent and urbane. They suit my mood. MC Myron Lysenko's mood is playful, and he asks Skovron, "Why do you write poetry?" Alex answers, "Because it's there?" As Jan Owen reads, Mal Morgan, seated with others at a long wooden table, assumes the bodily attitude of Christ in Leonardo's Last Supper painting. This reminds me of Bunuel's film, "Viridiana". This is Mal's little private joke, but I notice it. Meanwhile, Jan Owen says, "This is about men and fossils and other silly old things." (Giggles.) Grant Caldwell steps up for a repeat reading, and Myron sets up the microphone for him - barely a metre above floor level! "He's not a featured reader," he says. "I'm just waiting for God," says Grant. "He's not a featured reader, either!" Outside, there's the slow drip, drip of rain, falling hard and wet onto flagstones. Steven J. Williams reads about a friend dying

of AIDS, and people listen carefully, sober once more. There is nothing, Williams reminds them, lyrical or pretty about disease. Our MC introduces Dorothy Porter again, ticking off a long list of her books, hobbies, biosnippets. . . "And my star sign is Aries," she interrupts. She reads about an ancient Egyptian god who had a horse-like head, big breasts and huge hips. "Either he had hormonal problems, or is making some sort of symbolic mythological statement," she says. Then Eric Beach reads, deadpan, about 'The Australian Sense Of Humor' - which gets sick, and he has to shoot it. A very funny poem, beautifully understated. Sue Moss reads one about ageing: you know you're in your forties "when you've got a neck like an iguana." Is this a poetry or comedy festival, as levity gallops to the finishing line after four long days? *Poetry*, Gig Ryan assures, with one of her intense displays of stylised poetic anger, in which the terrible futility of human existence rides shotgun over the seamy side of life. Last up is Nigel Roberts, performing an extract from a recent 'poetry as theatre' event he'd helped mastermind in Sydney: a setting for his excellent poem, 'The Quote From Auden'. I'm surprised - he's a natural Thespian!

After thankyou's from the organisers, and drinks all round, it's over! "If 130 anarchic, bloody-minded poets can get together for four days, have fun, put together a successful festival and still like each other," says Mal, "there's hope for the world, yet." He just might be right. See you there next year.

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ANDREW MOORE

## On Ferroequinology and D. H. Lawrence: A Reply to Joseph Davis

When Ray Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein's most recent biographer, published a short article in the *Independent* about the debate over Wittgenstein's sexual preferences, he received a number of letters. One was from a Mr Orchard of Reading. A transport enthusiast and member of the Merseyside Transport Preservation Society, Mr Orchard wrote about a photograph that accompanied Monk's article. This depicted the philosopher and a young man dressed in a black raincoat, apparently walking down a London street. The photograph had traditionally been used to support the view that Wittgenstein indulged freely in London's 'rough trade'. The transport enthusiast from Reading, however, was puzzled. In the background of the oft-cited photograph was a bus. Mr Orchard informed Monk that the type of bus could never have been seen in a London street. An AEC Regent with Wyman bodywork built exclusively for the Liverpool Corporation, the bus was only ever used in Liverpool between 1947 and 1958. Further investigation established that the photograph was by no means proof positive of Wittgenstein's promiscuity within London's gay circles, as earlier biographers had believed.

I cite this story because I am not proud of participating in a literary debate that focusses on railway timetables. But I suppose it establishes that all detail matters, and certainly Mr Orchard's revelations about the photograph set Ray Monk off on some fresh lines of inquiry about Wittgenstein's movements and activities.

I am less sure that the great Illawarra railway timetable controversy is quite as illuminating in terms of understanding D. H. Lawrence's

movements in New South Wales. Yet among other things my review article of *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul* in *Overland* No. 120 criticised author Joseph Davis for devoting so many words to supporting a trivial detail. This was whether or not Lawrence and Frieda caught a train to Thirroul on Sunday 28 May 1922. Relying upon an article in the *Australian Railway Historical Society Bulletin* of March 1986 written by Don Estell, an antipodean version of Ray Monk's Mr Orchard, I argued that there were no Sunday afternoon trains from Sydney to Thirroul in May 1922. In *Overland* No. 121 Davis rebukes me for not seeking out the relevant primary sources. He does, visits the Railway Archives Office at Wynyard and, rather anti-climactically, discovers that there are no timetables extant from that period.

It is untrue that I made no attempt to locate the 1922 Illawarra railway timetables. I looked in the Mitchell Library, knowing full well that the last place that one would expect to find anything remotely related to trains or railway timetables was amidst the disarray of the State Rail Archives, currently being transferred to the Archives Office of New South Wales. Yet the Mitchell was equally silent.

More recently, however, I sought out a more likely source. This is the Archives of the Australian Railway Historical Society in the Sydney suburb of Croydon. I am thus in a position to settle this pedestrian matter.

It transpires that Estell apparently did not realise that there were *two* timetables apposite to 1922. One, the Winter timetable was as he [and thus I] described it. That is, between 11.50 p.m. on a Saturday night and 8.30

p.m. on a Sunday night the platforms of Central Station were conspicuously silent, at least as far as steam trains bound for the New South Wales South Coast were concerned. There was, however, another timetable that related to the summer months. It was this timetable which is relevant to Lawrence's movements, for it spanned the period from 16 October 1921 to 11 June 1922.

On Sunday 28 May 1922 Lawrence and Frieda in fact had a choice of three trains which departed Sydney's Central Railway Station for the south coast. The first was at 8.30 a.m., arriving Thirroul 10.47 a.m. The second departed at 8.50 a.m., arriving at Thirroul 10.58 a.m. Finally, there was the 8.30 p.m. train, arriving at Thirroul at the distinctly inhospitable 10.47 p.m. There were *no* other services to the South Coast on a Sunday.

In other words I was wrong. Yet this evidence shoots Davis down in flames also. He has Lawrence and Frieda pottering around Sydney's northern beaches prior to catching an afternoon train. This is difficult to imagine, given the time it would have taken to visit places as far north as Collaroy. It is *impossible* if we are talking about a departure time before 9.00 a.m. And the 2.00 p.m. service he refers to at p. 35 of *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul* is a phantom.

Both Davis and his publisher who wrote me a distinctly improper letter implied that I had some ulterior motive in criticising *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul*. I did not. I simply thought it was a poor book on a number of grounds more substantial than railway timetables, and said so. I extract no pleasure from the discomfort my review article has apparently caused

Davis. Yet I would have thought that most authors were able to accept criticism philosophically, just as they bask in praise. As I pointed out, *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul* enjoyed its fair share of the latter, and from far more august quarters than this reviewer.

## 'Aborigines' A Proper Name

Nancy Cato in our last 'Comment' (*Overland* 122, p. 29) asked why Eve Fesl objected to the use of 'Aborigine' and 'Aborigines' pointing out that the term 'Koorie' is limited to indigenous people south of the Murray.

*Eve Fesl responds:* Having your own name is important - it can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

One of the first processes in British colonization and slavery throughout the world was to de-identify the intended victims by labelling them, 'blacks', 'aborigines', 'natives' or 'niggers' - less concern over murder and oppression is likely to be shown for those who are unidentified. Remember the chook you bought to fatten up for Christmas? If you gave it a name, it was never slaughtered but eventually died of old age.

It is interesting that a number of non-Koorie writers, as well as self-appointed experts on our culture, are the first to object to our defining ourselves in our own terms. They invariably (as Cato has done) attempt to rationalize the objection by stating that some of *our* people may not understand. Interesting isn't it?

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## Racism?

*Nancy Keesing writes:* In your issue 122, pages 30-31, you published a fairly long poem by Glen Tomasetti—On a Prisoner of War's Damaged Face/January 1991. The eighteenth and nineteenth verses read:

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.

These generalisations, and especially the phrase "That nation now grown racist/on its memories of genocide" seem to lump together for disparagement all members of a group—in this case Jews—a technique which has been used over the centuries for arousing hatred and persecution.

I cannot believe this was Glen Tomasetti's intention, and would be interested in her comment.

[*Letters of complaint about the passages quoted above, especially the last two lines, from Nita Murray-Smith, Helen and David Rosenman and from Bernard Rechter were received as this issue was being printed—Ed.*]

*Glen Tomasetti replies:* The lines about Caucasians refer, not to Jews, but to Gentile conquerors including all European imperial powers and, more lately, the USA. Lines singled out as specially disparaging are not about all Jews, nor about all Jews in Israel. Jews both visiting and resident in Israel observe racism there, and describe it as a consequence of the Nazi atrocity.

One human response to unjust punishment is to internalise and re-inflict it, often unaware of the connection. In the poem, I lament rather than criticise this response and acknowledge the trauma lying behind it.



JENNIFER STRAUSS

## Essayists Not At All Anonymous

*David Brooks: The Necessary Jungle: Literature and Excess (McPhee Gribble-Penguin, \$14.99); Les Murray: Blocks and Tackles: Articles and Essays 1982-1990 (Angus & Robertson, \$19.90); Thomas Shapcott: Biting the Bullet: A Literary Memoir (Simon & Schuster, \$16.95); Chris Wallace-Crabbe: Falling into Language (Oxford University Press, \$19.95).*

This first paragraph is addressed to those for whom the reading of literary essays is already an addiction. (Don't sniff, dear sceptic, the category may be wider than you think, and besides I will adopt for your admonition Wallace-Crabbe's "Intellectuals like to pretend they believe less than they do: there is something macho about scepticism".) Essay addicts probably only need to be made aware of this outbreak of new collections. They may not even need assurance that there is likely to be something to give them pleasure in each one; in which case they have my blessing to depart forthwith to their reading.

There are, however, those who feel that literary essays are all very well *inter alia*, but that a whole collection is likely to induce *ennui*. The common-sense response is to advise skimming and dipping. To do so will allay anxieties about monotony, since each offers considerable diversity of topic and genre (reviews, academic papers, biographical and autobiographical sketches, general reflections on literature, analyses of particular texts). With Brooks as something of an exception, these collections also offer a good deal of variety in what used to be called levels of diction and may now be referred to as discursive strategies.

That rather ponderous phrase is nonetheless useful in reminding us that it is by no means necessarily through inadvertence that these writers present themselves to us sometimes in their dressing-gowns and sometimes capped and gowned – or perhaps I should add robed, as a simultaneous concession to Murray's resistance to academia and an indication of what I see as his tendency to pontificate. Murray's dogmatism clash so spectacularly with my own—notably with regard to the savagery of feminists; the domination of the

academies by an élitist cabal of the highbrow, the *avant garde* and the Enlightenment; and the general moral inferiority of the urban – that I can only justify my consenting to review his very characteristically-titled collection, by adding that his opinions never seem simply negligible, and that I consider him to have written some of the best of contemporary Australian poems.

Certainly each of these collections can be approached on the bower-bird principle of carrying off to your mental dwelling the first eye-catching item in the list of contents. Consider Murray. If you are already an enthusiast for his work and like directness, go with him 'In a Working Forest' and you will find what you were promised: a wealth of detailed naming and recording; a labour of love tempered by refusal-of-sentimentality that declares itself in the first sentence "Only strangers, the very poor and the dead walk in the bush"; some snippy dismissal of "metropolitan usages, urban as gelato or orienteering"; and an eloquent conclusion on the quality of the bush as known to insiders:

It is a quality not so much alien and indifferent, as too many literary authors by now have parroted, but rather sober, subtle and uncorrupt, with a curious remote decency about it. As you move and work there, or as you die there, you do so in an intense spare abundance which sheds its perfumes and its high riddled light on you equally. This is what often misleads outsiders into thinking it necessarily ancient: away from the marks of human incursion, it is always the first day. One in which you are as much at home as a hovering native bee, or the wind, or death, or shaded trickling water.

If, however, you seek the unpredictable and like

opaque titles, 'AND, AND' will lead you to a review of the *Australian National Dictionary*, its chattiness about detail sitting lightly with scholarly linguistic knowledge and with the emergence of one of his pre-occupations, a conviction quite as deep as that of T. S. Eliot that language is both symptomatic and formative of social direction and health. Via that comparison, you might move to 'The Suspect Captivity of the Fisher King', which has worked into forceful generalizations the material about his experience (and judgements) of the academy that sounds merely petulant when recorded as personal history in his Introduction.

By proceeding through sixty numbered and sometimes gnomic utterances, he evades any obligation to be strictly sequential, leaving this reader alternating between indignant splutters at magisterially unquantifiable and unqualified generalizations; approving chuckles (who could resist "Those who say the author is dead usually have it in mind to rifle his wardrobe"?); and the occasional wince. I wondered whether I ought to take out those remarks some paragraphs back when confronted by Number 59: "The truest praise is conceded praise, spoken through gritted teeth – but to speak it, the utterer must possess integrity, and politics now exist to silence that."

Yet it could justly be claimed that his procedure is not evasion of argument but an embodiment of poetic principles of connection superior to those of rational logic: "You cannot argue against yellow or indigo. But you can place them side by side"? No, that is indeed not Murray. Entertainingly, it is the urbanely academic Chris Wallace-Crabbe, coming in with a more extreme version of the same manoeuvre in 'Hiccups', although, as the title promises, the touch is lighter (epigrammatic rather than gnomic), the mental movements more gymnastically erratic, and the demeanour more self-conscious. The essay that follows 'Hiccups' is actually called 'Self-consciousness'.

For all their different positions on the cultural map, these two share many literary positions: poets, essayists, anthologizers, editors, associates of major publishing houses. But there is a very great difference in their attitudes to contemporary literary theory. Although Murray can be comically effective in taking the mickey out of its pretensions, he often stomps away with such vigour from what he designates as "yet another attempt to triumph poetry and replace it with a principle amenable to Enlightenment values" that the reverberations seems to deafen him to the pattering feet of theory in his own writing. One suspects he would be not amused by a passage such as this one from 'Hiccups':

Je est un autre.

Je est un auteur.

Je est un hauteur.

The suasive plausibility of print. A comparison: *print, prince*. Authority is what's at issue. Compare the stamping of coins, which in fact wear a prince's or a president's face. You think that if you really put your mind to it you might get everything written, then one glance around you shows that you can never write down more than a few salient epiphanies, however hard you try. The world is many, but words are few. Again, isn't it vain to want to turn all those phenomena into *your* words. How we all like to cover paper with black marks. No, some people deeply fear blank sheets of paper.

The different attitudes towards theory may be connected with the fact that, whereas Murray is greatly interested in words, Wallace-Crabbe is fascinated by syntax, by linguistic process. A little further on from the passage quoted above he is writing "Verbs come easy: anyone can lay claim to action. Adverbs are languidly sly." And further still: "Language is limited and inexhaustible. I simultaneously want to break the moulds and be saved by the forms: to have my cake and eat it too."

It is not surprising that such interests, quite apart from academic obligations, should lead him to engage with such modern critical theories as deconstruction. However Wallace-Crabbe engages with theory like a skilful and often joyful dancer who remembers both that the dancing has to stop and that there can be other steps to other tunes. "In the last gasp, in the run home" he writes in 'The Textual Self', "I find that theory, however bracing, collapses. For what I want in and from literature is mystery."

That is one tune: yet another is the signifying self which, he says, "keeps coming back". It is not only that the academic has been working on biography, an interest aired in several essays; nor that the ironist is struck by the resurgence of biography and autobiography as genres just at the stage when psychoanalytic theory has de-centred and de-stabilized selfhood and (some) literary theory has exiled the person from the poem. The poet is watching all this. It is not a disinterested eye that turns in 'Vincent Buckley and the Poetry of Presence' to his dead friend as one of those resistant "to post-Modernist scepticism about significance"; nor is it a disinterested eye that looks with a curious mixture of admiration and distrust at what he perceives as the complete *Homo Ludens*, the consistently self-dissolving John Forbes, who is a point of reference in several of these essays.

For it seems to me that of these writers, the one whose prose most closely approximates to his poetry is Wallace-Crabbe, who argues that style is what "finally discloses the characters of self-consciousness [and] is also the root of readerly joy". If you have liked his poetry, especially that of *The Amorous Cannibal*, *I'm Deadly Serious*, and the very-recent *For Crying Out Loud*, you will probably enjoy the play of dextrous intelligence here, while agreeing that, if he is right that "Faith tends to be manifested through vivacity" this is the work of a believer in literature. If some intellectual effort is required, the rewards are considerable.

The intellect is going to be called on again with the youngest of these essayists. Theoretical (even in his interrogation of theory), post-modern David Brooks is a post-World War II child. The other three, born in the 1930s, are my own generation, and I feel a congeniality with their language, even when in disagreement with their opinions. While I agree with Brooks that such "at-homeness" is a product of cultural history, not of essential nature, I do suspect that some readers for whom this is a positive *credo* will nonetheless not notice that they perceive Brooks as moving through an entirely familiar (i.e. normal, natural?) terrain when he talks of marginalization, metafiction, excess, alienation, structuralism, negotiation. For me, the interest and the stressfulness of these essays is that I perceive him much more as recording his discovery and mapping of new territory.

The result can occasionally be some pretty dogged footslogging. 'The Bean Factor' is a lively title for an expository exercise on structuralism that has passages of classically inert pedagogic prose. Perhaps churlishly, I find his excursions into feminist theory strenuous rather than animated, although they are obviously relevant to a dominant interest in cultural illusions, especially their inclusions and exclusions. It is unfortunate that the sense I sometimes have when listening to theorists that this is simultaneously alien and *déjà vu* is intensified here by particular circumstances. I was present at the conference sessions when the first versions of 'The Male Practice of Feminist Criticism' and 'Poetry and Sexual Difference' were delivered, and have followed the latter through *Meanjin* into *Poetry and Gender*, the collection of essays edited by Brooks and Brenda Walker. The essay could very properly claim its place there as virtually the generative text of an interesting development in Australian literary criticism, but I do wonder whether its re-cycling here is not a negative example of excess.

It is a question of where to draw the line, since

one of the functions of essay collections is that they should, like anthologies, provide a more permanent and coherent habitat than ephemeral journals, conference abstracts, lecture notes. All these collections contain material previously published in one or other of these forms, and judgements as to what should or should not have been included are bound to differ.

The feminist theory essays do serve Brooks' overall process of challenging existing cultural (especially literary) assumptions about what is decorous, natural, or indeed even present. The idea of decorum is basic to the categorizations of styles and genres with which we are familiar. Contemporary theories of language and culture have challenged not only genres, but even the very category of literature as something distinct from "writing".

In a very broad sense, this blurring of rigid boundaries may be seen as distinguishing these collections from their forerunners in an honourable, if not necessarily prolific, tradition of collected literary essays by practising Australian writers. Even such recent predecessors as Andrew Taylor's *Reading Australian Poetry* (1988) or Fay Zwicky's *The Lyre in the Pawnshop* (1986), seem in their manner more like the voices we have been accustomed to hear in "literary criticism."

However, it is Brooks, in 'On Risk' and 'Cigarettes, Advertising and Religion' who confronts most directly the implications of this for that drawing of literary boundaries which underpins the "canon" and the curriculum. And it is Brooks who, welcoming the "transgressions" of categories invited by such ideas, finds that he is restless with the need of "readers, critics, publishers," for categorizing words:

the writer need no longer feel obliged to listen to the categories . . . one can mix 'poetry' and 'prose', 'narrative' and 'argument', 'story and essay' at will, enjoying all the time . . . the process of writing as writing, the text itself as landscape, as story . . .

This comes from 'The Blood of José Alcarde', an account of the part played by South American writing in his literary genesis. It belongs to the group of essays that are not only most lively in themselves but are most likely to interest readers who reacted strongly (whether with admiration, puzzlement or rejection) to his two striking collections of "stories", *The Book of Sei* and *Sheep and the Diva*. They open up the experiences and the cogitations which form the conceptual matrix of

Brooks's writing, and they reveal some of the tensions that nourish it.

The opening essay, 'The Fantastic as a Language of the Real', is central to Brooks' art. And it starts with as strong an apparent appetite for presence as could be imagined. Speaking of his time as a sixteen-year-old in a foreign city identified as M., he says that everything

had a hyper-reality that . . . I have found harder and harder to find anywhere other than in exotic fictions. And yet my own world, too, I know, could be as fresh and as wonderful, as frightening and as vivid as this, if only I could see it so as often as I wish, if only I could find the language to display it.

However the final essay 'Nostromo's Trousers' (wonderful title) coincides with Chris Wallace-Crabbe's acknowledgment of the unattainability of the desire to put a whole world into words. The image of the "blank space, textual vacancy" which we would necessarily find if we could get inside *Nostromo* and unbutton the trousers of its central character is both arresting and argumentatively persuasive. Nonetheless, Brooks too makes, in the end, his act of faith in the real, bidding us take heart in the new-found freedom of choice we may grasp if we concede that "the ceiling of reality is a thin one, and far lower than we have often thought it . . . To cling to fixed notions of truth or reality is, paradoxically, to condemn ourselves to live within fiction."

It may now be apparent that I'm suggesting that these collections have a kind of coherence to which dipping and skimming may be a possible entry, but an insufficient residence. The same is true of what looks perhaps the least concerted, the most relaxed, Thomas Shapcott's *Biting the Bullet: A Literary Memoir*. In some ways this reads like a good gossip session, hosted by someone whose years as Literature Board Director have given him a special access to our literary culture and our writers. Gossip should not be taken pejoratively, it is the salt of communal living, and a clear commitment to the literary community is demonstrated by this "miscellaneous writing (essays, interviews, speeches, reviews) that has been the by-product of living at

various points around the orbit of literary activity in Australia." Those points include being himself both poet and novelist, and these pieces weave their way between his own growth and experience as a writer, his readings of other writers' work, his personal acquaintanceship with writers, and his view of what literary bureaucracy can and should do in the protection of the national writing that this addict of 'Travel Pieces' calls 'A Precious Currency'.

Authors are definitely alive in this context. Strategically placed throughout the volume are four specially-written portrait/memoirs of David Malouf, Gwen Harwood, Bruce Beaver and Michael Dransfield. They give a very nice sense of what writers mean to each other, and this is more important than the fact that he incorrectly gives the date of Harwood's *Poems Volume Two* as that of her first collection. Given the life of authors, one may dare to mention the word intention, and Shapcott's declaration of it, especially as it is a declaration that makes me think he would not object to the word "gossip". He says that, by mixing pieces on writer friends with the "highlights and clashes of a professional literary career" he was trying:

to flesh out what is one of my most passionate personal beliefs; that from the small, the immediate, the personal and the anecdotal, it is possible to move, through a sort of resonance, to the larger implications and perspectives. My aim . . . would be that these various pieces of mirror and glass . . . form at least the beginnings of a perspective in a literary culture which, in my lifetime, has blossomed so abundantly it's like a salt-swamp full of Christmas Bells at midsummer.

"Perspectives on the salt-swamp" may not be a universally gratifying metaphor, so I will simply assert that it is indeed their varying perspectives on our literary scene that make these collections a welcome addition to the bookshelf.

*Jennifer Strauss is a poet, her most recent book being Labour Ward, and a critic, Stop Laughing! I'm Being Serious. She teaches English at Monash University.*

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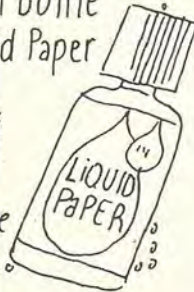
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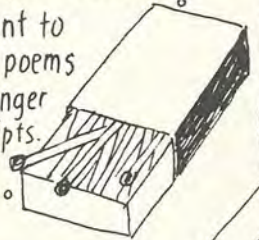
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DO YOU HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT YOU HAVE...

... deeper insights  
into the mysteries  
of life than your  
next-door-neighbour?



... a better command of  
the English language  
than even your  
editor?



... stronger passions  
and intuitions than  
the herd of your  
fellow men?



... more realistic  
solutions to the  
world's woes than, say,  
Mrs. Munro of Dubbo?



IF SO, RE-ASSESS YOURSELF, OH PRIDEFUL ONE!

PRIZES GIVEN IN GUARANTEED ABSENCE OF GOVERNORS OR OTHER DIGNITARIES. WINNERS WILL NOT BE PUBLICISED. JUDGEMENT IS FINAL.

## TWO POEMS BY KEN BOLTON

### POEM

I live it seems in a complex web of . . .  
my 'idea' . . . of my relationships  
with other people, all becoming nicer  
- the people - as I become a more

terrible person. Now why is that?  
But for example Jyanni sleeps, sweetly,  
on the couch before the television  
which attempts to tell her

of some school board's decision -  
in a state of middle America,  
but her eyelids barely flicker.  
She actually sleeps with her head rested

on both her hands. She will laugh,  
or cough, or say, "Oh. Are  
you going to bed? See you tomorrow"  
or she will not wake at all. Or John,

before whom I am a worm, an  
ignorant person, with terrible manners  
no idea of politeness, out of control  
horrible. "Awful, right? *Awful*."

*AWFUL!*" - in the phrase of  
Peter Falk, from the movie *Husbands*.  
(The movie much loved by saints  
Jan and Tub.) A movie I like,

also. Though I have maligned its stars  
(at least, I have maligned Ben Gazzara). "*For  
why?*"  
Am I only good for that - malice,  
and jokes - about phrasing and logic? Crab is

miles away. What do I do for him?  
Hazel?  
Mary?  
Strong and noble.

Jenni *Robertson!* how noble can you get?  
an interesting, exciting, and dynamic person  
- have I helped? One looks in her face  
and sees *only* all that is good. Pam Brown -

more like me: but better! good! Laurie,  
a shining, example - of balance, calm,  
self-knowledge. Linda and Paul (speaking  
of the virtues)! *Beside* them I am

a loose cannon. Snelling! (Michael!) Christ!  
how do I compare? Julie Lawton! the  
list goes on . . . Millswood, and Dave.  
And Dave Glazbrook. Sebastien Dickins!

before whom I am corrupt, alloyed, poison.  
I am listening to a tape of me and John, doing  
"The Guttman Variations" and in a state of  
grace, laughing. Laughing *on* the tape, as is

John. And I laugh with it - momentarily human

(I guess I will go to bed. And dream,  
typically, of the cult  
of the Direct and the Difficult, wake up  
full of energy, warped and bent on evil, blessed

by the fat lady across the road, probably,  
at her gate, at whom I smile  
as I ride to work, given coffee  
by the lady at Al Frescos in Hindley Street -

as a catholic takes the host,  
and hopes that it will make him good,  
or *her* - and read the papers:  
another day of evil.

### WHERE ARE WE, WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM, WHERE ARE WE GOING

The Joe Turner record continually comes  
out of its sleeve  
from my foot bumping it  
it standing in front of the mirror  
I most stare often in the view of  
in front of a pile of other records  
but it is the one I love. Life -  
my life as I lead it -  
is most often full of moments like  
these, that must be discounted  
- because contingent -  
to say - "I am depressed tonight"  
or, "I am happy", that is why I stand there. How  
am I tonight? - well dressed  
in my black suit, wearing

the jewellery  
that I take off  
only to have the suit pressed – so why did  
that woman try to flatter me, about it  
except out of niceness, which  
doesn't mean in this day and age  
fine judgement, tho she is possessed  
'of it' – she said it to be  
nice that's all & I am  
depressed tonight & happy  
*that* is where I stand,  
a cigarette before I go to bed,  
in front of the mirror, heaven forbid  
that I should take up smoking  
a day of reversals, all of them  
minor – & bounce back, tomorrow

### THE HYDRO DEMONSTRATION

I got angry,  
just enough to speak up loudly  
without thinking.

I was at the country show  
and cattle, sheep, goats  
were parading past.

They were the ribbon winners  
and people led them  
while a man talked over the loudspeaker.

Some Hydro blokes were also there,  
giving a demonstration  
of what they do to trees.

They had a tree with them.  
It was a tall gum tree  
hung by its neck from a gibbet,

but I didn't see that at first.  
It was just a tree  
with a tall crane machine beside it,

and another machine had a man  
high up on a platform  
using a longhandled buzzsaw thing.

He cut the head off the tree,  
then he cut off its limbs –  
all of them, one by one.

"They're going to kill it!" I said,  
"And it's nowhere near a power line."  
People nodded – it was a demonstration.

"How can I stop them?" I said.  
"Has anyone got a rifle?"  
I looked around but no one stepped up.

"You're rather aggressive,"  
said one man, and another man said,  
"Sure they'll kill it."

"That's what they're doing," I said,  
and he said,  
"What else would you do with it?"

A question deserves its answer  
so I said,  
"Shove it up your ass?"

The man on the loudspeaker said,  
"That gum tree is now a giant toothpick."  
And I had to agree.

Then I saw it was a tree corpse  
hung from a gibbet  
and I felt silly.

But I keep thinking  
of how it was silly of me  
to speak out loudly.

And I keep thinking  
of that tree corpse hung from a gibbet  
for public instruction,

and I see how it is  
that you can stand chewing hotdogs  
while evil is done.

E. SPEERS

## MEMOIR OF A SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO

A ghost in fool's cap  
my beak dipped in ink  
I say what you say  
in strange new ways

The wires of my cage  
give the back yard  
the squinting perspective  
of a painter's grid

I watch the sparrows  
sit and shit  
pin-stripes down your shirts  
upon the line

Minahs ask me to decide  
their petty quarrels  
as if  
I were Solomon

Once I escaped  
and roosted in leafless trees  
which sang songs  
along their looping twigs

You tried to seduce me  
with pumpkin seeds  
and a butterfly net  
it was quite droll

I reached the Mallee  
where my shot kin lay  
in piles of crumpled drafts  
beside the wheat

My remaining cousins fled me  
like a duck decoy  
because I smelled of you  
and had forgot their tongue

So I flew back  
from furlough  
hungry and tired  
to continue the sentence

The neighbors thought  
they'd heard the last  
of my dawn carousing  
and called the EPA

I cursed them  
and their tomatoes died  
their dog was run over  
and they left

I have not felt  
the warm embrace of feathers  
no lover has ruffled  
my glorious crest

The black birds do not  
understand my jokes  
and the pigeons coo  
as if they do

I have seen pass  
the nine and tawdry lives  
of sundry ginger cats  
and toms

I am sick and tired  
of kids trying to teach  
me new swear words  
with a pointy stick

I see your plumage  
going grey  
and your hands shake  
pouring seed

I feel sorry for you  
helpless  
as a fallen fledgling  
never having flown

Solitary perched  
for a century or more  
there is no doubt  
I will outlive you.

CAMPBELL THOMSON



### THREE POEMS BY PETER LYSSIOTIS

#### THE DOOR TO SUNDAY

There's always a last journey,  
a journey that leads to the past.

There the moon stoops over the houses  
and makes it impossible not to dream.

There, in a house with green shutters  
your body is polished like stone.

In one of the rooms  
two mirrors face each other

and a coat hangs in the corner,  
shedding the scent of lemons.

#### AN INHERITANCE

Under the bed is a suitcase.

Sometimes a voice rolls out  
onto my slippers or  
onto the hem of her dressing gown;  
it's an old and faithful friendship.

Nevertheless  
there is always an empty glass,  
and a jug filled with water  
on our bedside table.

A suitcase such as this  
can attach itself  
like those masks  
that stick to real faces;  
it can grip you,  
and never let go.

The suitcase has been locked for years:  
We can live by what is missing.

#### RECONCILIATION

A wet leaf clings to my shoulder

its weight ties me to her room.

Her hairbrush  
rests face up,  
on the dressing table -  
strands of grey hair  
caught in its plastic bristles.

Under the sheets  
there is a death  
I will recognize

So,

I lie on her bed,  
her coat  
over my chest

afraid to close my eyes

in case sleep  
brings on  
a fatal mistake.

## THESE WEIRD YEARS

Perhaps, despite the air, we can fall in love  
against the entropy of these weird years  
Our gods dance nightly on our screens,  
thinner than paint  
Seasons drift, calendars anachronistic as sundials  
Perhaps Love still holds hands in small city  
parks,  
smiles in sunlight with no makeup,  
walks past bullet holes, thinks of satin, swooning  
as drivers curse metal trees with electric fruit  
The Western jungle's stinking stream colors  
sunsets  
We watch, moderately drunk, value the still  
horizon  
in a city viewed through moving frames,  
travelling boxes, boxes of flickering light  
Live-in-a-box, work-in-a-box, jack-in-a-box,  
tick boxes all day,  
dream of wild circles  
While the world groans  
babies erupt from the abyss,  
lovers sigh like old records,  
ancient paths in their animal brains,  
terrible commands to join the hunt,  
to join, while billboards block the view  
with directions  
Woman pinned naked to a shopfront,  
woman clothed in fear,  
young man between the two  
turns from lust to anger and back  
till it is one horrible new emotion  
But perhaps we can fall in love behind the  
advertisements,  
the fashions,  
the latest thing to come out of America  
with a thousand heads, spewing bad jokes  
World Government is a TV set  
Poisons in our blood make us crazy  
So let's fall in love before it's banned  
Smart talk is overtime with no pay

Here, let me show you some honesty,  
bet you haven't seen any of this in a while  
Everywhere the calculation,  
degree of difficulty, execution  
Love as diving competition  
Behind the barricades, we're all fencing -  
sunblock skin, Rayban eyes, passports for the  
mind  
cos everyone is a foreign country,  
you can't just move in if you feel like it  
So let's be lovers while beauty hovers  
and ghosts of hopes lend us youth  
The earth has passed its use-by date,  
going cheap, we're invited  
to pig-out at the image feast,  
inventing new ways of SOS  
now the ocean's filled with bottles,  
waves clink at the shore  
skyscrapers remind us how to thrust,  
there's another hit record  
on the dansattoir floor  
Step over the corpse of Innocence,  
grind a heel in the face of Fear,  
let's catch the next beat out of here  
before caution writes us out of the scene  
we've been rehearsing for all our lives  
Let's make love with our Walkmans on -  
Funk/classical fusion  
Let's be so fast we'll never catch up,  
send postcards from a new illusion  
We didn't think the earth could cry  
or the sky seep away through a hole  
We didn't think, we didn't think  
that Love is as necessary as trees  
So quick, let's fall in love while there's still time  
Show me your heart, I'll show you mine  
Let's warm our hands on each other's skin  
before the Ice Age comes.

LAUREN WILLIAMS

## WISDOM TEETH

Because he hides nothing,  
and tells you suavely  
there will be 'discomfort',

giving you – thanks pal –  
a month for your nerves  
to enjoy the previews,

the dental dreams  
are *de rigueur*,  
real shockers

of polite technical men  
with pliers and mallets  
who lean right into

that manhole, your mouth  
conferring, *Hmmmmm*,  
*to get at those blighters*

*first we must pull  
this and this and this,*  
your teeth rattling

like bolts and rivets  
as they hit the tray,  
and your mouth airy

as a derelict hangar.  
So when time cues  
the man of suavity

and his slim assistant  
to needle your roots,  
your couch lifting

on its pouffe of gas,  
the lamp drawn close  
like an eye to a lens,

and their syringes sinking  
like probes to the Moho,  
you're surprised how little

you actually feel.  
But wheee! Do you hear it!  
The moto-cross boys

with revs and wheelstands  
are raising the nerve-lanes,  
jackhammers are jarring

the inmost sanctuaries,  
while a stetsonned grandad  
from some bad movie

is saying, *Welcome, son,*  
*to the seventh age.*  
But you are also

elsewhere screaming  
*O Mouth, my hearth,*  
*you've become a city*

*of disco and sirens,*  
*chainsaws, helicopters*  
*and amateur cellists,*

*the uproar my century*  
*will synthesise to.*  
Then its pliers time.

*Hey! those are my cornerstones*  
*working and groaning,*  
*that is my babyhood*

*he is uprooting*  
*those are four axioms*  
*he is subtracting*

*hoping the aaah! theorem*  
*of me will stay true. . . .*  
Gaga, grateful,

and poorer you leave,  
and not for days  
do you dare to slide

your tongue shyly  
into the chasms  
vast as panic,

tasting the blood-salt  
of healing tissue,  
soft as an eyelid,  
slippery as a tadpole.

ALAN GOULD

KEVIN HART

## After Poetry 9, A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry

### THE PURE AND THE MIXED

One of the distinguishing features of modern poetry has been its intense and perverse attraction to purity. Yet purity appears to different writers in different ways, even in France where its appeal has been the strongest. While the Parnassians sought the spirit of poetry outside the self, in themes drawn from history, nature and philosophy, their successors the Symbolists looked inward, finding true poetry in dreams, emotion, intimacy and suggestion. Outside France few people today even know the members of *l'école parnassienne*, writers such as Leconte de Lisle and Albert Glatigny, but it is impossible to imagine contemporary poetry, in any European language, without the influences of those great Symbolists Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Valéry. What links the Parnassians and the Symbolists, and all other advocates of purity, is a desire to exclude whatever a group deems inessential to poetry. Sometimes the accent falls on formal matters. Edgar Allen Poe thought that poems should not be discursive or didactic, while others have variously tried to dismiss clarity, dialect, metre, rhetoric, rhyme and reference. And sometimes whole topics and themes are proscribed: economics, politics, science, technology, anything that strikes a group or an individual as 'unpoetic'.

Avoidance, exclusion and denial: what would modern poetry be without these words? They evoke its quest for a true place; and if that quest is never concluded, it is because the spirit of poetry can never be kept in one place, at home, quiet and contained. When Symbolists proclaim music to be the essence of poetry, that assertion is far less interesting than either its form or their need to make it. Its form is surprising, since it declares that the essence of poetry abides outside poetry. The quest for purity ends in a confession of impurity or even a longing for it. And the need to begin this quest is hardly less odd, for what is there in poetry that

leads us to think it has an 'essence' anyway? However one regards poetry – as composed of words, images or rhythms – its fundamentals turn out to be radically impure, already soiled by use, hopelessly contaminated by processes of social circulation. To follow this train of thought leads to two conclusions. First, talk about 'pure poetry' is prescriptive, not descriptive; it indicates how writers idealise their art, not how they practise it. And second, there is no such thing as 'pure poetry', although some poetry gives the effect of being pure – an effect which can always be traced historically, even when it promises to yield only to formal analysis.

That promise bespeaks a theory of poetic language which turns out, on closer inspection, to be a theory of poetic power. The poet does not speak or write as ordinary people do, the theory urges, for the poet *names* reality, calls phenomena into being, and baptises them with the poem's words. Like Adam in Eden, the poet is naturally original, in direct contact with the essences of things. If this theory seems mystical, it is nonetheless remarkably persistent and popular, both with poets (who often like to see themselves as oracular or meditative) and their readers (who, as good Arnoldians, find their religion in literature, not in churches). And although the theory seems far removed from politics, it can, at the slightest pressure, fall into line with nationalism and whatever causes may be at stake at the time. All that is needed is a slight shift from the national language to the nation itself. Once that is accomplished a country's poets can be seen as the guardians of its language, as people who live near its source and speak the authentic word. Their poems unite us and return us to our common origins, those pure moments which, without the mediation of art, we could not grasp. In Germany Hölderlin has been regarded in just that way; in America Walt Whitman and Robert Frost can always be pressed into

national service; while in Australia we already have Banjo Patterson to call upon in times of need and there are interest groups quickly fashioning Les Murray to the same end.

Mystical or political, this theory of poetic power underwrites the greatest poems of the Romantics and the Symbolists. In the French tradition it finds its most pungent expression in a line of Mallarmé's 'Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe' where the poet's task is, we are told, 'Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu'. The same conception of poetic language is confirmed in the English tradition when, in 'Little Gidding', T. S. Eliot stages a 'dead master' (a fusion of Swift and Yeats) speaking of the need 'To purify the dialect of the tribe'. After Eliot, there has been no cannier reader of the Symbolist tradition than the French poet Yves Bonnefoy. Many of Bonnefoy's anglophone admirers would have met him in Galway Kinnell's translation of that haunting early composition *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* (1953) or, more recently, in Richard Pevear's *Poems 1959-1975*. But Kinnell's translation has long been out of print, and only parts of *Hier régnerant désert* (1958), arguably Bonnefoy's most piercing volume, have been translated, while *Anti-Platon* (1947) and *Dévotion* (1959) have been completely bypassed. So it is a great pleasure to have the whole sweep of Bonnefoy's early work in Kinnell and Pevear's *Early Poems, 1947-1959*. And now that John T. Naughton has published *In the Shadow's Light*, a translation of *Ce qui fut sans lumière* (1987), we have at long last in English all the verse of this rich and exacting writer.

To say that Bonnefoy is a visionary poet is to recognise several truths about his writing. His gaze is fixed firmly on *la présence*, on Being as it reveals and conceals itself in the ordinary things of the world: bread, flames, rivers, stones, trees, voices. It is a vision which is radically anti-Platonic. Here eternity is not a superior mode to time but rather a quality of perception; when angels appear in his lyrics they are, insistently, the angels of this world. For the reader coming to Bonnefoy for the first time, the integrity of his work is almost overwhelming. Poem after poem explores the same cluster of images, approaching them this way then that, extending them a little in one or two directions, then concentrating them in short lyrics of tremendous force. This means that to quote Bonnefoy, to remove a stanza or even a single poem from the work as a whole, is to perpetrate more violence than quotation usually demands.

For all that, the risk has to be taken, just as translation must be performed (despite one's reservations, hedgings and bad faith). Bonnefoy's

poems quietly ask to be translated, seducing us with the old line that English and French form a continuous language. Yet they resist English at every turn, finding it too dense and particular a medium for their comfort. The consequence is that Bonnefoy who is precise yet suggestive in French can seem intolerably abstract and rhetorical in English. Be that as it may, here is the concluding lyric of *Douve*, 'The Place of the Salamander', a lyric in which various themes of the book are braided together:

The startled salamander freezes  
And feigns death.  
This is the first step of consciousness among  
the stones,  
The purest myth,  
A great fire passed through, which is spirit.

The salamander was halfway up  
The wall, in the light from our windows.  
Its gaze was merely a stone,  
But I saw its heart beat eternal.

O my accomplice and my thought, allegory  
Of all that is pure,  
How I love that which clasps to its silence  
thus  
The single force of joy.

How I love that which gives itself to the stars  
by the inert  
Mass of its whole body,  
How I love that which awaits the hour of its  
victory  
And holds its breath and clings to the ground.

Far from simply celebrating purity as an ideal, this lyric embodies a dialectic between purity and death. It recalls the epigraph to *Douve*, those severe lines from Hegel's *Phenomenology*: "But the life of the spirit is not frightened at death and does not keep itself pure of it. It endures death and maintains itself in it". Regardless of what it says about purity, the poem carefully creates an effect of purity; the restricted vocabulary of primal words, the simple syntax, the apostrophe and the grave voice all help to form an impression of the essentially poetic. And yet the poem is neither hermetic nor narcissistic: its vision is private but open. Private insofar as it declares itself a site of meditation; open in that the speaking voice is transparent and available to other people, uncluttered by personal details.

Like all visionaries, Bonnefoy is also deeply and acutely revisionary. One could see his life's work as a rigorous re-reading of the Symbolist tradition from Baudelaire to Valéry. Yet Bonnefoy has other,

more momentous historical movements in mind as well. With the vast success of science and technology – anti-poetic movements *par excellence*, he thinks – the presence of Being has been forgotten and its sustaining myths discredited. It is the poet's task to imagine presence for our times: not to recover lost presence, which would be nostalgia, but to recentre our hope in the possibility of a renewed world which he will discern and celebrate amidst the ruins of the old world. In this bad time we cannot expect presence to flame out; rather, it will reveal itself only in a movement of withdrawal, in the ordinary, forgotten things that are finite and precarious. And by the same token, we cannot expect the poet to speak from a secure position in the new world. Poetry, if it is to express the truth, must do so from the threshold of the new, always in the shadow of what has been destroyed. It is a post-Symbolist credo, one that Bonnefoy affirms in 'Imperfection is the Summit':

So one had to destroy and destroy and destroy,  
There was salvation only at that price.

To ruin the naked face that rises in marble,  
To hammer down every form and beauty.

To love perfection because it is the threshold,  
But deny it, once known, and forget it, dead.

Imperfection is the summit.

Bonnefoy's vision of the spirit maintaining itself in death, of art contesting and transcending its own negativity, would have struck a deep chord in Vincent Buckley. Even so, he would have explored the vision in quite different ways, preferring to think of poetry as song and dance rather than as dialectic and agon. Here was a writer who loved perfection, purity and clarity but who also knew that, in poetry at least, their rhythms and ours seldom coincide. "The older I get", he says in one poem, "the more/I think: In the next life/I will be a maker of music,/not bothering with words". *Last Poems* shows Buckley bothering with words in order to make music. It is his most lyrical collection, the hard-won victory of a writer who fought a long battle against rhetoric and who knew that certain losses were worth sustaining because, in the long run, they could be more valuable than jejune victories. Yet the lyric poet must do more than free music from rhetoric; the poem must break the heart. Buckley not only knew that, he also knew why it was so: "People are terrified of their souls".

Some of these poems try to diagnose that terror; others seek to understand it; while still others accept



Vincent Buckley

it as best they can. The terror is not the classical fear that there is nothing eternal in us, but the grim realisation that one has died spiritually in the midst of life. The easiest response to this feeling is to say that the spiritual comes from outside (the local church, national culture, the past, the university, the heavens above . . .), and so can be safely blamed for failing to serve us in the right way. Of course, that is no less evasive than the conviction that a spirit abides purely within, revealing itself only in bursts of energy which can be more or less regulated: writing a poem, making love, going to church, taking a course. As the great mystics and poets testify, the spiritual recedes in the very gesture of its presentation. You hear a call, but who can say whether it comes from within, without, or the disputed borderlands between? It is this strange, doubled movement that lyric poetry tries to capture and name, to capture *by* naming, and which maddens both writer and reader by slipping between all proper names. We look for certainties and find only language, rich in metaphor and symbol, and

assure ourselves we are walking in the tracks of the Real while knowing deep down that language does nothing better than generate vivid effects of reality.

"People are afraid of their souls" is the opening line of 'Digging In', a powerful sequence in a collection which favours that style of composition. Its fourth section shows Buckley in full possession of his subject, speaking in his late, chastened rhetoric:

You were there while the house swerved  
into its quarrelling nights,  
filled with lintlike curtains and coarse  
eyelashes of smoke, an engine  
manoeuvring its nightlights  
into the white flux. Caught bags of turf,  
heaved churns of water  
through the stable doorway,  
the kitchen fire straining  
to rescue more than it could see,  
the stove cracking silently apart,  
the panes worked free from their lead strips,  
the tall front rooms  
arrived finally at the colour  
they were to keep all winter  
as the wind sliced them, a razor  
cross-cutting down a turned face.

Anyone who can see 'coarse/eyelashes of smoke' deserves a good long hearing; still, these late poems are not so much observations as memorialisations. At times memory is turned to the service of others, as in the poems for Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella; while sequences such as 'Booze Years' and 'Hospital Summer, Western Suburbs' portray (and frame) the self.

If the *lachrimae rerum* note is often struck, there are also moments when sorrow is almost drowned out by exuberance. "I teach German literature, and this is how it goes", Buckley sings in one poem, "Schiller, Böll and Hölderlin, and everybody knows/that Bertolt turned on Thomas Mann and punched him on the nose". Buckley's disenchantment with university life is sounded in 'Nightmare of a Chair Search Committee', a subversive poem which begins to seem almost benign when placed against the sourness of a lyric like 'There, where the committee voted . . .' These poems may well be on the lips of local academics for many years, but they will be outlasted by 'The Good Days Begin', 'Small Brown Poem for Grania Buckley', 'The South Side of Dublin', 'Years after you buried her . . .', 'Bard Price', or this one, 'Burren':

Our love that began with touching,  
hair touching as it's blown,

and hands, and eyes, the too-much  
wind-bitten feel of Miltown,

has been carried through fifty trials  
yet stayed like a hare in its form.  
The worries don't change, the wily  
heart can't freshen its warmth;

on the straight road where he is running  
the moon throws shivers of dawn.  
The hare's run ends in the Burren,  
and our love in Ballyvaughan.

The quest for purity is always attended by a pathos, for it is doomed to fail from the outset. In one of his last poems, 'Shifting Colours', Robert Lowell imagined becoming a poet "like Mallarmé who had the good fortune/to find a style that made writing impossible". Lowell's irony aside, there are many poets for whom the pathos of purity has no attraction whatsoever. Imperfection for them is not the summit but the medium in which they work. Rather than think of poetic language as naming, they endorse a semiotic theory of language: words, even names, are signs which circulate endlessly in society, getting soiled, to be sure, yet also gaining in significance and deepening in resonance. Against the pure Parnassians and the Symbolists we find the votaries of the mixed and the grotesque, writers like Walt Whitman, Aimé Césaire and Kenneth Koch. For every William Collins who composes an 'Ode to Simplicity' there will be a Pablo Neruda to meet it with an 'Ode to my Socks'.

"In poetry no one/is ever thrown into the street" Neruda says in the opening poem of his *Selected Odes*. The lines imply his poetic: include whatever has been passed over in the interest of purity; include the ordinary, forgettable things of the world that no one celebrates, and include them as things in their own right, not as symbols. So we hear of the birds of Chile, conger chowder, garlic, a fallen chestnut, numbers, tomatoes, salt. Like the garlic Neruda honours, these odes have an "irate fragrance"; in order to be beautiful they stray well beyond received ideas of beauty. It is a ruse as old as poetry: if the anthologies are full of poems about flowers, take a walk around the garden patch. Neruda does, and praises artichokes:

The tender –  
hearted artichoke  
dressed in its armor,  
built its modest cupola  
and stood  
erect,  
impenetrable  
beneath  
a lamina of leaves . . .

And if the great poets, including Neruda, always see the world purely from a male viewpoint, rewrite their stories from a female perspective. Ovid did just that in his *Heroides*, a virtuoso collection of verse letters from famous women of Greek mythology to their lovers, and Catherine Bateson varies the theme in her *Pomegranates from the Underworld*. The title sequence explores the myth of Persephone, and at its best does so with wit and zest. Thus 'The Ball' where a modern Persephone re-enacts her meeting with Hades:

At the supper table he was beside me, filling  
my glass, piling up my plate.  
Chicken breast, avocado and olives, melon,  
pomegranates and figs.  
He led me to the balcony. It was a scene from  
a movie.  
He fed me grapes from his plate. Did we talk?  
I can't remember. He must have told me his  
name;  
Hades, a name to whisper secretly. A dark  
name.

We did not return to the ball.

Any number of national clichés could be generated from the observation that contemporary Australian poetry delights in the inclusive and heterogenous. A full list is likely to run out of control, but it would surely include Peter Porter, Peter Rose, Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Alan Wearne - some of our most garrulous and inventive writers. That Chris Wallace-Crabbe works between and around the high and the low, the frightening and the bizarre, the elevated and the demotic, is patent in the titles of his last three collections: *The Amorous Cannibal*, *I'm Deadly Serious* and *For Crying Out Loud*. This is a poetry in which the singular carefully cuts across the general and the abstract. Carefully - and gleefully; for Wallace-Crabbe takes the considered and the playful in tandem. Neruda thought of criticism as "a helping/hand,/bubble in the level, mark on the steel,/notable pulsation", an appropriate image for Jennifer Strauss's remarks on Wallace-Crabbe, the third of her three 1990 Foundation for Australian Literary Studies lectures. Strauss gets to the heart of Wallace-Crabbe's writing by focussing on his irony, that appealing (and often disconcerting) ability to juggle seriousness and wit. Nowhere is that more apparent than in 'The Bush', our heartland which is "subtle for mile on mile/far from vulgarity/(far from sleek Europe)" and

wonderfully eloquent  
on its home ground,

branchful of adverbs,  
lovingly  
wombat-hued,  
dreamily  
sheeptoned,  
fluted with scalloping surf  
and every step a joke.

Devotees of *la poésie pure* are centripetal creatures, always drawn closer and closer to the centre of their art: a centre which withdraws behind each new poem until the blank page becomes the epitome of the ultimate poem. Wallace-Crabbe, by contrast, is a centrifugal writer, pushed by his art to consider unmatched things and topics. You open *For Crying Out Loud* and find on the left hand page 'Two Fruits' and, facing it, 'The Dead Cartesian'. The first poem would have thrilled Neruda with its image of a mango one-upping a custard apple:

I am the only fruit  
whose colour  
turns out to be  
exactly the same as his flavour.  
In me you will observe  
the dangling miracle  
of cognition.

Which leads directly to 'The Dead Cartesian' and Wallace-Crabbe's sovereign interest in the self and its relations with language, that fascinating cluster

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of topics called the philosophy of mind. It's important to notice, though, that the Cartesian is dead. Whatever else they are, the poems in this book are also part of a labour of mourning for the writer's son. 'My Surviving Sons' and 'An Elegy' express that mourning directly and intensely, but it is felt throughout the collection.

The pure and the mixed: in practice the distinction is seldom direct or simple. Poets shift from one pole to the other, gradually or with the force of a conversion; or they feel pulled in both directions; or they seek out those writers whose practice differs from theirs and try to learn from them. Young poets become entranced by another's poetic voice, and usually begin to write by adapting, correcting and refining that voice. Sometimes the acts of adaptation and correction can be extreme; nevertheless modern poetry thrives on such defences. More often, the scene of instruction is prolonged; the guiding voice is idealised and internalised, and only reluctantly abandoned, if ever.

*Paper Weight* is John Foulcher's third collection, and yet he continues to write simulacres of Robert Gray's poems. At their best, as with 'Poems for Julia' and 'Scars', they can be exquisite. They are richly observed and beautifully made; even so, they move only within a world previously seen and felt by Gray. The most encouraging sign in this new book is its title poem, an uncanny lyric which moves in a new direction; and the fact that it is placed first, as a defence against the very charge I have been making, suggests that the scene of instruction is drawing to a close. The paper weight is "More completely black than my eyelid/A thick pool of oil below tonnes of rock, untouched/by any refining". Impossible to confine, it subsumes everything with which it comes in contact:

The whole room  
is embossed on it, and the colours are shrouded  
in black,

the way a candle burns within the night  
as if forever . . . I think of smoke, dangling  
in air,  
while I pull down the blind.

Like Foulcher, S. K. Kelen wishes to speak in the master's voice, to prolong it and refine it. As almost every poem in *Atomic Ballet* willingly testifies, the master is John Forbes. No matter that Forbes works with a mixed diction, since for Kelen it is just the right mix. 'Everyone follows' begins one poem, 'The Golden Age of Television', though not everyone follows a precursor as closely as this:

Everyone follows  
as he wanders through the imagination's  
terrain collaging city, desert, beach, jungle  
and wonders as he kicks the villains  
down  
in slow motion if it really happens faster  
but it's the golden age of television  
where such questions are subsumed  
in the slip 'twixt  
the languages of the screen-text indexer &  
user like how seriously do we attach  
intention, good or otherwise to  
'it's a gas, gas, gas!'

Parody? Homage? A little of both, I suppose, but in any case Kelen's voice remains unsure.

At first blush nothing could seem less pure than performance poetry. After all, it deliberately mixes with the world, both in its subject matter and venues: pubs, schools, street fairs, construction sites, anywhere an audience might be found. Often performance poets are marketed as aggressively ordinary and unpoetic. On the front cover of Steven Herrick's *Caboolture*, for instance, the poet lounges before a car in jeans, T-shirt and cropped hair; and on the back cover he is, if anything, even more proletarian and macho. The poems support the image. The best of them - 'Brian Henderson Saw Us Make Love', 'Joanna's Bedroom', 'The Married Man', 'Cheryl's Pregnant' and 'City Poem, New York' - must sound raw and raunchy when delivered well. No punches are pulled in this description of a quarrel, and the sense of timing is impeccable:

I throw my socks in her face  
she kicks me in the ankle  
grabs a handful of dirt from the plant on the  
dresser  
& shoves it down my shirt  
I lie on the carpet  
wet, dirty,  
Joanna gets the vacuum cleaner  
turns it on full throttle  
& sticks it down my shirt  
this is her way of saying she's sorry  
I gently pick up the teapot  
and top the remains over her head  
me & Joanna  
we're in love.

What is striking about performance poetry is not so much what it includes as what it strenuously excludes: an interest in forms, rhetorical figures, versification and other poetry. Everything is suborned to what Herrick and others regard as the essence of poetry, its performative aspect, with the result that the poems can seem swamped by a single

voice. There are always difficulties in dividing poetry into species. To say that a body of work is 'religious poetry' or 'political poetry' is to limit its life in the name of themes. Yet expressions like 'performance poetry' or 'language poetry' are far more restrictive because they allude to structures, not themes: their adjectives intensify one aspect of the noun to the detriment of others. It would be mistaken to regard performance poetry as a specific kind of writing. Although its reductions might seem particularly severe when read, not heard, it is like any other poetry. What distinguishes it from most contemporary verse are not so much its formal freedoms (which turn out to be subtle constrictions) as its obvious engagement with politics, including the politics of poetry.

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## FIVE POEMS FROM HAPPY VALLEY

### HAPPY VALLEY

Crows  
mid-air

carbon-paper wings  
duplicating the breeze

coaled claws  
upturning

teal offspring  
idling on waters

### SOAK

They ringbarked the trees  
thinking that less water drawn  
would enrich the soak. It did.  
Salt crept in and left lines  
on the bath. Soap wouldn't  
lather.

### HAY

Neither stoop nor stack,  
rolls of hay stretch  
across the paddock.  
Green-haired barrels -  
crows and black-shouldered  
kites coming back year  
after year. But mostly  
willy-wagtails, hop-scotching  
the decks, the gaps over  
a rank sea of weed, over  
paper-thin skulls of field  
mice, snake lairs hidden  
deeply below.

### LAMBS IN THE CRADLE

Lambs in the cradle  
gas-axed like Luther  
burning over a pit  
of excretia. Does  
god speak with a lamb's  
tongue? How sweet  
is its voice?

### PREDATORS IN HAPPY VALLEY

Fortunately he doesn't seem  
to hit much now, though will  
still be seen pointing the barrel  
of his repeater at the canker

spreading from the heart  
of his claim. He is known  
to respect the kookaburra - nest  
robber, early morning delinquent.

JOHN KINSELLA

Geoffrey Dutton, in his recently-published biography\* of the poet Kenneth Slessor, observes towards its close that Slessor "remains an enigma, but also a very subtle master of the mask." It seems to me that in all that has been written about Slessor over the last thirty years or so, Dutton has been the most successful in revealing what lay behind the several masks it suited the poet to don during his lifetime.

Slessor's was indeed an enigmatic personality. His true calling was that of a poet and his chosen profession that of a journalist, and Dutton calls on many witnesses to give fresh testimony to Slessor's motivations and achievements in those fields. Then there was Slessor the man-about-town, clubman and *bon viveur* whom, especially in his last years, some knew as such and hardly at all as a poet. Then for three years or so there was an unfamiliar Slessor - the war correspondent - about whom there will always be controversy and speculation. And last, there was the mask of husband and lover - the private Slessor. It is never easy, I think, for a biographer to probe too deeply here: the narrow line between tact and delicacy on the one hand and insensitivity and prurient prying on the other can all too easily be transgressed. To Dutton's credit, though we read details of Slessor's personal life never previously revealed (and some of it hardly elevating), it is done not only with good taste but with compassion and understanding.

The sense of who shall cast the first stone is always there. Dutton has delved back into Slessor's schooldays at the Sydney Church of England Grammar School ("Shore") to uncover the debt that Slessor owed to his English teacher, F. G. Phillips, a highly literate man who published a biography, *School is Out* and several papers on poetry. His profound understanding of poetic technique was conveyed to the young Kenneth who later, according to his brother, Robin, always declared that Phillips' influence was a major factor in his

success as a poet. It was from Phillips that Slessor learned what was to become one of his most passionately argued principles of poetry - that it must be concrete and that abstractions as a rule were bloodless and uninteresting. One of Phillips' favourite poems was Coleridge's "Christabel": many years later, in his prose anthology, *Bread and Wine*, Slessor declared that it was one of the poems "which awoke my earliest response to music and imagery."

Dutton has unearthed poems that Slessor wrote as a sixteen-year-old school-boy: as he notes, "his ghost need not be ashamed of them." At eighteen Slessor had written six poems for the *Bulletin* and others in various magazines; even then, Dutton considers, "... he was already a technician experimenting with various verse forms and subtleties of diction", notably present in a 1919 poem 'To a Forgotten Portrait' in the *Bulletin*:

Wind in the corridor, wailing in snuffle and eddy  
and gust,  
Whose is this face that looms pale through the  
skin of a century's dust?

As Dutton writes, here are "many of the first signs of the threads that would be later woven into the mature poetry." Slessor's virtuosity and sophistication as a poet, from several examples cited, were extraordinary for a boy of eighteen. And Dutton has discovered a poem, 'In Tyrrell's Bookshop', published in *The Triad* in 1920 which, as he rightly says, contains most of the elements of his later work and yet is unaccountably excluded from his later collections:

Broadsheets there are, of horrid hangman's tales,  
Yellow-stained maps from some forgotten  
book;  
Journals of convict years in New South Wales,  
And Captain Cook,

Mottled monastic tomes of Cicero  
 Ballads of murder, testaments of thieves,  
 Shakespears in brindled duodecimo,  
 With rusty leaves.

Long forgot relics of a dead decade;  
 All that is old, and nothing that is new –  
 Here, in the shadows, half an earth has made  
 Last rendezvous.

As Douglas Stewart was later to write of this poem, it was remarkable how soon in his career Slessor developed a maturity of style and how soon he defined the kind of world his poetry was going to create.

Dutton's analyses of Slessor's later poetry, and especially that of his best period which produced 'Captain Dobbin', 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' and 'Five Bells', are masterly. I suppose it takes a poet to catch a poet. But it is of poems such as these that Dutton is able so felicitously to say that Slessor "... was able to voyage on the uninhibited ocean of poetry and not be a frog in the garden pool of 'the poetic'".

He sees Slessor as a poet of the city who didn't resent the steel and the concrete, the fumes and the neon lights. And from his various 'pads' in the Kings Cross area, looking down on Sydney Harbour, he became a poet of the sea though never a voyager. I like Dutton's reminder that since Slessor was a lifelong lover of Heine's writing, each of them "... had a wonderful ear and technical ability. Heine was a great poet of the sea, and his 'Nordsee' cycle is written in a loose unrhymed verse that, like Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', may have influenced Slessor in 'Five Bells'." These are observations that illuminate his commentaries on Slessor's poems; illustrating the capacity of the best literary critic to reveal a startling insight in a few words, as he does, for instance, in comparing Slessor's poetry with that of Robert Fitzgerald's when he writes: "Fitzgerald's knotted diction, thick with thought, was far removed from the subtlety of Slessor's poetry." Then there is his comment on Slessor's 'Elegy in a Botanic Gardens', "... one of his most remarkable poems, where the dry rattle of words in a dead language has overcome those fragile but passionate moments when no words were necessary." But Dutton might have mentioned that of all Slessor's poems this is the one where T. S. Eliot's influence is most apparent:

... In the autumn I came  
 Where spring had used me better,  
 To the clear red pebbles and the men of stone  
 And foundered beetles. ...



*Kenneth Slessor, May 1940 (National Library of Australia)*

For by the time he wrote this poem Slessor had read 'The Waste Land' and was later to say of it that it "... was filled with the most splendid and haunting rhythms of anything written in our century."

Dutton's eight pages on 'Five Bells' (in my view, Slessor's greatest poetic achievement) is as good a piece of critical writing as I have read. He sees, credibly, links with Wordsworth's 'Ode – Intimations of Immortality' and with Milton's reflections on Chaos in Book II of 'Paradise Lost'. " 'Five Bells' ", Dutton writes, "reads now as an extraordinarily modern poem, as a precursor of today's intense scientific and philosophical interest in the subject of chaos, which in a different framework of ideas was also a favourite theme of medieval and renaissance philosophers and poets, Milton pre-eminent among the latter."

It is in 'Five Bells' too that Dutton recognizes what he regards as the deepest theme of all Slessor's poetry – that of Time. It stems back to 'In Tyrrell's Bookshop' ("Here dozes Father Time, his hour-glass thick With fallen dust."), through the 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' which begins and ends with Time and includes the antics of Cook's two chronometers, to the opening of 'Five Bells' ("Time that is moved by little fidget wheels/Is not my Time ..."). Slessor always insisted that his poem was about Time rather than about his drowned

friend, Joe Lynch. Thus Dutton rightly sees it as "a meditation on Time."

All of this leads to the mask, or perhaps not so much the mask Slessor donned as the curtain he pulled down on his poetic output after his unforgettable war poem, 'Beach Burial' written in 1943. (There was one poem a few years later that I refer to below.) The critics have argued for years about this and offered their theories. Slessor himself was cryptic but more often evasive on the subject. Douglas Stewart, one of Slessor's closest friends told me once that Slessor had simply said he had written himself out – he had nothing further to say. Dutton records that he once said he was "an extinct volcano" and that on another occasion he told the young Christopher Koch, "There is no point in writing when you've got nothing to write."

But that was only one aspect of the matter. When I was editing Slessor's war diaries and read some of the more revealing and intimate jottings in his notebooks, it was clear that the war had created in him a restlessness that would make it difficult for him to pick up the creative threads again. Then again, as Dutton emphasizes, the emotional blow of the death of his wife, Noela, in 1946, undoubtedly too undermined his creative confidence.

However it is difficult to avoid the conclusion, after reading this book, that the major factor in Slessor's shutting the door on his poetry was his disillusion at the lack of recognition he had received. As Dutton emphasizes, the lack of opportunities for poets in the 1920s and 1930s was "horrendous". This was why Norman and Jack Lindsay, with Slessor, Hugh McCrae and the publisher, Frank Johnson, had founded the short-lived literary magazine, *Vision*, in 1924.

Dutton offers ample evidence of Slessor's frustration over the years at the lack of public recognition of his poetry and the sense of discouragement so engendered. Norman Lindsay (whom Dutton I think rather harshly condemns for being a "dangerous mentor" to Slessor in his early poetry-writing) as he did with other young poets, tried his best to boost Slessor's confidence in himself. But such encouragement was rare in those years. Slessor wrote bitterly to R. D. Fitzgerald in 1939: "I find it is difficult to write anything without conjecturing you or Hugh Mc(Rae) or Ken McKenzie or Norman or a few others as the only readers." That bitterness is reflected in a letter that Tom Hungerford wrote Dutton in 1987: "... when I heard of Ken's death I felt a very deep sadness. And a rage too, because I felt that he'd been thrown on the rubbish-heap to some extent. He was a great poet – and, at that time particularly, great poets

battered no parsnips in this curious country of ours." Dutton writes with feeling, as a fellow poet: "Poetry is . . . the most private of arts, however large an audience it may ultimately reach. Yet nearly all poets, paradoxically, wish to risk going public. They do not really want to blush unseen." So he hazards his "guess" that Slessor's confidence "... was undermined by Noela and never restored by a wide recognition of his powers as a poet." On the evidence of the book, I would go further and suggest that Slessor rang down the curtain on his poetic output as a final gesture of defiance to what he saw as an unresponsive audience.

Still, it would have been some consolation to him when in his last days he would have become aware of the veneration that younger poets had for him: who gave him, as Dutton so neatly puts it, "... a brief tenancy of the public rooms of the palace of desire." And perhaps his shade would be mollified by the remarkable roll-call of poems written about him after his death by Douglas Stewart, David Campbell, Robert Brissenden, Vivian Smith and others. And by the unequivocal statement of the poet, Robert Gray, to Dutton: "It's such a great pity that Slessor isn't more known world-wide. I think he's a poet of world stature . . . he has this great world of tradition in his work."

Dutton agrees that Slessor was a poet of world class and maintains that his masks were necessary to cover the pain of not being recognized as such. One of the most consoling of these to him was that of the journalist. By the consensus of his peers Slessor was a brilliant journalist. He began as a cadet with the Sydney *Sun* in 1920. Then followed in 1924 a brief stint as chief sub-editor with Melbourne *Punch*, whence he wrote Norman Lindsay soon after his arrival: "I have been completely unhinged by this abode of deaconesses, primitive labourers and melancholy harlots . . ." When the journal collapsed at the end of 1925 Slessor returned to his former job with the *Sun*. But his abilities as a journalist and indeed as a prose writer were to be finally and finely honed when he joined the staff of what Dutton describes as "the most original, dynamic and unconventional newspaper in Australia, *Smith's Weekly*" where he stayed for thirteen years, eventually becoming its editor and then editor-in-chief. Dutton's chapter on the roistering and unconventional group of journalists with whom Slessor was to associate is one of the most entertaining in the book – men like its father-figure and editor, Claude McKay, Adam "Dum" McCay, Frank Marien, and the artists Virgil O'Reilly and Jim Russell – all hallowed figures in the annals of Sydney journalism. Slessor later

recalled that his time with *Smith's* "... with all its torments, toil, irritations and frustrations was the happiest chapter in my existence." George Blaikie in his book, *Remember Smith's Weekly*, recounts Slessor's amazing versatility: that he wrote feature articles, news commentaries, leaders and was everything from sports reporter to film critic. It was during these years too that he wrote his best light verse which, Dutton claims, "ought to endure as long as his 'serious' work." But the puzzle is how Slessor could have written his best poetry during the frenetic journalistic activity of his thirteen years with *Smith's*. Dutton's answer is that the uninhibited atmosphere of the paper and his mixing with his brilliant colleagues among the writers and artists, set Slessor's adrenalin flowing as few other circumstances could have.

Slessor, the war correspondent, is another and unexpected persona. His appointment was a surprise: some attribute it to the admiration the then Prime Minister Menzies had for Slessor as a poet and as a writer of finely sculptured prose. Dutton's verdict is that Slessor as a war correspondent "... was a failure in some respects." The qualification is necessary. Slessor saw service from May 1940 to March 1944 - reporting the Greek and Syrian campaigns (in both of which he was in the thick of the fighting), some parts of the Middle East fighting, but mainly from base, and the war in the Pacific, but for short periods only, and those largely in the Papua-New Guinea area. Most of his despatches are beautifully written, as were his private diaries he kept throughout the war. But there were three strikes against him. The first was that - and one wonders how the army authorities could have allowed it - he insisted on having his wife Noela accompany him for a large part of his tour of duty. His concern for her safety certainly meant that in the Middle East at any rate he did not carry out his duties as effectively as he should have. Second, he had a hatred of censorship which soon brought him into conflict with army chiefs, especially the pompous British brass hats to whom for the first couple of years he had to submit his copy. The resentment he felt gradually crystallized into a contempt for army red tape generally that was not only to affect the quality of his reporting but eventually to bring him into conflict with the Australian army authorities. But most of all he suffered through the very quality of his writing. As his fellow journalist and war correspondent, David McNicoll, told Dutton: "Ken was miscast as a war correspondent. He wrote beautifully ... he was a thoughtful writer with a marvellous touch." But as

McNicoll went on to say, that wasn't wanted from a war correspondent by the Australian newspapers. They wanted headlines and the sensational aspects of the war. The result was that they either passed over his copy in favour of that of their own correspondents like John Hetherington and Ronald Monson, or else they mauled it beyond recognition - to Slessor's constantly fermenting indignation and rage. Much of this led to incidents arising from Slessor's covering of the New Guinea campaign where he found himself at loggerheads with General Blamey and his senior staff and finally to Slessor resigning his commission amidst a good deal of press controversy.

Dutton writes that Slessor's war diaries "... mostly reveal a man under stress of one kind or another, exasperated with frustrated pity for the victims of war, furious with bureaucracy and a certain class of Englishman, at ease only with Australian soldiers whose sense of humour he loved ..." That about sums it up. It was at least out of this frustration and pity that there came one of his finest poems, and probably the best poem out of World War II, 'Beach Burial' which he wrote at El Alamein.

After the war Slessor returned to more sedate journalism as leader-writer for the *Sun* and later, until his death, for the *Sydney Daily* and *Sunday Telegraphs*. Here he became a father-figure to younger journalists (he was president of the Sydney Journalists' Club for a number of years), perhaps assuaging his love of literature by accepting the editorship of the journal, *Southerly*, for a number of years, and with fellow writers John Thompson and Guy Howarth, editing *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* in 1958. In all this he was fulfilling his role, as Dutton puts it, of "a gentleman of letters." Above all, he was a man-about-town who loved best dining and drinking with a small circle of friends, some of whom, by their own admission, hardly knew him as a poet of past years. When I first met him in 1963, an immaculately if soberly dressed almost patrician figure, I was irresistibly reminded of Pound's description of T. S. Eliot as the "most bankclerkly" of poets. John Douglas Pringle, according to Dutton, when he met Slessor, found him "... quite baffling ... he seemed to have managed a total division of his sensibility and intelligence." He was, nevertheless, almost the perfect journalist: his leaders were always elegantly written, and indeed, as a prose writer I have always believed him to have been much under-rated. Above all, as Dutton writes, he "... was always proud of his craft, and at various times gave talks to cadets

on style and the use and misuse of English." Yet, when the mask dipped slightly, there was an ambivalence in his attitude to his profession: according to Dutton he "... many times told his son, Paul, that he should keep away from journalism."

To complete his portrait, Dutton, through conversations with Slessor's brother, Robin (formerly a well-known Sydney journalist) and son, Paul, and with contemporaries of his post-war years like Maslyn Williams, Edgar Holt, Shan Benson and others, has attempted to discover what lay behind the most carefully-worn mask of all, the private Slessor. Some of it makes not very pleasant reading, especially his treatment of his second wife, Pauline, whom he married in 1950, and of their young son, Paul. But then, one wonders how many of us would emerge unscathed if the more intimate details of our daily lives were revealed. In any case, as Dutton notes, Paul retains an immense admiration for his father.

However, of much more relevance in considering the private Slessor, was his earlier relationship with the attractive and fiery Kitty (Kath) McShine formerly married to the cartoonist "Unk" White. It is more relevant because although their relationship was by all accounts a stormy one, even with incidents of physical violence, she was the one woman, after Noela, whom Slessor really loved. He wanted to marry her (she would have none of it) and it was she who inspired his last published poem, 'Polarities' which, as Dutton writes, "... sparkles with the paradoxes of their lives together, and the effervescence of Kath's character":

Sometimes she is like sherry, like the sun through  
a vessel of glass,  
Like light through an oriel window in a room  
of yellow wood;  
Sometimes she is the colour of lions, of sand  
in the fire of noon,  
Sometimes as bruised with shadows as the  
afternoon . . .

In the end it was an impossible relationship. As Maslyn Williams told Dutton: "... Katy packed it in. She packed it in. I think they both had to, it

was getting too violent, too violent by far. She got very cranky indeed with Ken because he'd break his plates, break crockery and stuff, and throw mirrors out of the window and so on. But it's so totally out of character with the public persona you knew, totally out of character." The last sentence says it all - that almost unbelievable contrast between the public Slessor (as Dutton and indeed I knew him) and the private man. Dutton's final paragraphs are compassionate and perceptive:

Perhaps Slessor's greatest chance of recovering his confidence and his poetic energy came with the entry of Kath McShine into his life. She was uninhibited and full of fun and ungentle as *Smith's Weekly* had been, and her presence started him writing poetry again. But the sad truth was that she saw what was underneath the masks and it disappointed her. And he in turn could not keep up with her . . . He was too intelligent not to know what he was doing when he gave it all away. It was not simply pleasure he was after, but freedom. As well as the pleasures of idleness he wanted freedom from the rapacity of the Muse, freedom from the black holes between the stars. He relished the joys of aesthetic anonymity, to be able to drink day after day in the Journos Club with an old mate who has no idea you are a great poet . . . He loved being able to beam on his friends as he welcomed them to a dinner which no-one else had ruined or achieved but himself. Most of all, he no longer had to expose his genius and the infinite pains he had taken to an ignorant or inferior judgement. And as for the nights, he could spend them with the only reliable friends, books.

Slessor remains one of our finest poets, whose reputation has increased since his death: his memory is perpetuated in this excellent literary biography.

*Dr Semmler edited Slessor's War Diaries and War Despatches; wrote a monograph on his poetry for the British Writers and Their Work series, and has published other articles and essays on Slessor's writing.*

\* *Kenneth Slessor* (Viking, \$30).

COLIN DUCKWORTH

## A Divine Performance

*a brief entertainment for captive audience*

GOOD EVENING ladies and gentlemen this is the bit you've all been waiting for now don't tell me I'm wrong I'm only here for four minutes four minutes not six days all right so sit down please sir the lady behind you can't see me she what she asked you to stand up some people don't deserve their luck did you hear the one about the Irishman the Jew and the Arab no wait for it I haven't started yet who's running this show blasphemous me come off it did you know they've cleaned up the Ganges now you can see de salmon rush de whole way back to the sauce divine my goodness gracious yes I should be doing a command performance you know anyway they landed on this island with nothing to eat only each other and nothing to drink only the sea so what do you think they did no more Irish jokes I'm not racist so the Jew his name was Murphy he was weeping and wailing all the time saying it was all Moses's fault if only the Jews had turned right instead of left they'd have had the oil and the Arabs the orange juice but I knew all the time the juice would come in useful for cleaning up oil slicks well anyway Murphy had a mother-in-law who didn't like oranges or bananas either but that didn't worry her because she wasn't stuck on that stupid little desert island with the Englishman the Eskimo and the Jap ah now the Jap his wife was getting fed up with being pushed around having the swing door let go in her kimono all the time there's a limit to what you can go on

blaming Hiroshima for all right so she and her girl friend no listen listen you're way ahead of me lady you're not a feminist are you honest the minds they have I'm not prejudiced her girl friend was visited one night by an angel she knew it was an angel because he had St Michael tattooed on his vest and pants

I don't have to do this for a living you know I could've been a champion tennis player but when I was born they'd run out of arms way out there isn't one you don't leave till I say you can all right I can't push off just when I like can I so sit down and put up with it they'd be glad of this shit in China they don't have much to laugh about there like this chap his name was Hoo Flung he had a bicycle with a flat tyre so that's why we're as like as two peas in a bog no don't laugh you'll do yourself a mischief sir I can see you need all the support you can get an election if you hang yourself no naughty no politics it's not worth the trouble said the vicar she was upset I'll go and fetch a policeman she cried so he said I am the vicar no that's not right so he said they're too gentle the policemen you see you get it wake him up madam and I'll explain Jesus I should've been a social worker

you've got to have a bit of suffering all right that's life makes the world go round if only it would stand still a bit and let us all fly off into the blue then we could end this farce and I could get some





sleep suffer the little children well all right yes but I never knew they'd keep coming and coming you don't think for one moment I realised when I started this joke I'd have to go on for ever and ever amen for God's sake top of the bill for billions of years folks so give me a break stop me and buy the lot I don't need.the money you don't need me so why should I bother are you still with us madam don't drop off I want to tell you about this girl named Grace you see she was being tortured because her brother had farted in front of the man in charge and her mother was held hostage and they chopped bits off her until their demands were met I didn't write this shit you did all your own work isn't it a scream eh best joke since creation you don't think it's funny madam there's hope yet then and what about the self-made man who reached his use-by date and self-destructed and when he got to the golden gates St Peter said reject department in the basement take the escalator you don't want to get too hot and that's not all you're not going to believe this there was this self-made woman who reached her use-by date and re-stapled the packet no I'm not sexist honest I've been neutered like the Klu Klux Klan bloke who died he found God was a black Jew and he didn't know whether to burn him or haggle with him I'll go to the other place he said and God said you'll be lucky wake up to yourself mate this is the other place well you can't

blame them making up stories about me I have been a bit secretive

here listen no come on listen fair go can you tell I'm asking you can you tell I'm an educated man oh yes I told the old woman I've got a degree go on with you says she incredulous is it centrifuge or far out I said ask me what in she said to oblige me what in I said it doesn't matter there's no room at any of them no no listen in desperation I said shut up and I'll tell you what in in scatological echatalogy ooh that's nice she said we'll be able to keep the ice cream in it my God she's ignorant she thinks a condominium is joint ownership contraception now don't go cold on me give me a break fair go alpha one and one for all now I'll pass the hat round oh meagre takings tonight I should've stayed at home I can't stand the sight of blood but they keep killing people for me let's get this lot over and done with then I can start all over again next time I'll give the reptiles a better chance but didn't they get their own back in the garden eh have a taste of this he said clever little bugger I'm off now don't bother to queue up for my autograph remember my last bit of graffiti on that wall in Babylon I mean I mean tackle or pass the final whistle bye folks next show will be strictly by invitation yes members only don't ask me what of all right



*Geoff Fox*

HELEN DANIEL

## Plotting 7, An Account of Some Recent Australian Fiction

Recently I read the new novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*. My expectations were high: a new novel by the great Latin American writer about the life of one of the great historical figures of Latin America, Simon Bolivar, who, in that most baroque of continents, where borderlines keep shifting and plurality and contradiction hold, dreamed of continental unity. Yet I found the novel disappointing, perhaps because of the perverse geometry of readerly expectations, which are themselves generally labyrinthine.

I am curious about the workings of that geometry of expectations. Readerly expectations encompass many inscrutable elements, not only private tastes and prejudices but also some conundrum of literary reputation. For example, a new novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; if my expectations soar and the novel disappoints me, am I more or less disappointed than by, say, a modest novel . . . Perhaps I am harsher on *The General in His Labyrinth* because my expectations had soared. How to measure the plummet? How to measure the soar that accompanies an unexpected find, the surprise of a good book where a mediocre one was expected? How to measure the plummet and the soar against each other?

Such reflections on the dimensions and trajectories of expectations occur to me in relation to some recent Australian fiction. For example, Julian Davies' *Revival House*, a first novel, publicised as a great literary debut and recalling the heady days of the release of Mark Henshaw's *Out of the Line of Fire*; Brenda Walker's *Crush*, a first novel which won the 1990 TAG Hungerford Award for Fiction; and Joan Dugdale's *Struggle of Memory*, a first novel where I had no particular expectations.

Before I read the first two novels, some expectations had already formed – a shape that hovered over my reading. I found *Revival House* disappointing, *Crush* good, and *Struggle of Memory*

an impressive first novel. Will not the tone of my review of Dugdale's novel have the upward lilt of the unexpected find, by comparison with the downturn of disappointment in my review of *Revival House*? While I draw no general conclusions from this, I do suspect the perverse geometry of readerly expectations is at work: my expectations of *Revival House* launched me into the novel at a high level – which the novel could not reach. Perhaps publicity which sets up high expectations can be a disservice to a book.

That of course is only one of the geometries of expectations. A different and more murky geometry holds with writers of some reputation. I have not yet read the new Thomas Keneally, *Flying Hero Class*, but I have read mixed reviews, including one I found savagely dismissive, possibly because of a different kind of geometry, some intersection of the workings of literary reputation, the academic world and critical allegiances . . . What shape is that? Certainly not an equilateral triangle.

Tall poppies and other flora aside, different configurations of expectation cluster around new novels by authors of some repute: Rod Jones' new novel, *Prince of the Lilies*, after the acclaim for his first, *Julia Paradise*; or *Cloudstreet*, the large new novel by Tim Winton, which, rumour has it, is to be nominated for the Booker Prize; or *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, the new novel by Mudrooroo Nyoongah (Colin Johnson); or Gerald Murnane's *Velvet Waters*. Like a continuous narrative, the reading of the new is already configured by the reading of the predecessor. For the reviewer, what shape is that? A circle or a loop, sometimes a noose.

A different geometry of expectations holds for novels of a particular genre, such as the crime and mystery mode, where the expectations themselves can be angles of narrative, a hypotoneuse of purpose. A different geometry is at work inside Finola Moorhead's *Still Murder* or Brenda Walker's *Crush*, both aslant the crime mystery mode. Here

we are generally closer to labyrinth, or what Umberto Eco calls a "rhizome" of connecting paths.

Such reflections on the general and the labyrinth of expectations aside, recent Australian fiction offers a bit of plummet and a bit of soar. It also offers reflections on memory and the mutterings of the past.

*Revival House* is a modest first novel, with some crisp and assured writing, but with an uneasy structure. Two-faced, it cuts between two narratives: the narrator's reflections of his two years in New York from 1982, there to study social and political aspects of art history, while staying with a Jewish family, Moishe and Elizabeth Feinbaum and children; and his reconstruction of the life of the American industrialist, Henry Clay Frick, around the turn of the century, intrigued by the connection between his industrial acumen and his art collection.

The Frick narrative becomes more insistent as the novel develops, particularly Frick's involvement in the 1892 strike at Homestead steel mill in Pennsylvania, which he ruthlessly repressed as potential revolution and treason. It includes the attempted assassination of Frick by Alexander Berkman, and Berkman's relationship with Emma Goldman. I find the real energies of the novel lie in the political and social contest at the turn of the century, as if the failure of this would-be revolution in 1892 has shaped the twentieth century.

The title, *Revival House*, refers to theatres showing re-runs of old films and Davies seems to suggest that now the only dramas are replays, as if New York is a stage-set or a cardboard cutout. While Frick is a resolute player in a nationally vital plot, the contemporary characters seem to re-enact old plots. Despite the glow of some passages about New York and its architecture and some vigorous ironies of the Feinbaum family, the contemporary story of the romantic triangles and the narrator's role in the break-up of the Feinbaum marriage seems to me to have much to do with re-runs of old and tired plots. While there are some splendid New York architectural motifs, I find the architecture of the novel shaky, undermined by the stress lines between the two narratives.

As a memoir written on his return to Australia, *Revival House* is in part the narrator's struggle to come to terms with events in New York. Joan Dugdale's impressive first novel, *Struggle of Memory*, is also about the workings of memory and the willingness to remember and accept ownership of the past, a form of volition and proprietorship not, in Dugdale's view, widespread among Australians.

*Struggle of Memory* retraces the fate of Otto Gluck, through the memories of his wife, Miriam, which, in the course of a single day in 1939, run from the turn of the century through World War I to the 1920s. Like Garry Disher's World War II novel, *The Stencil Man*, *Struggle of Memory* is based on a true story, here a German-born businessman interned during World War I and later deported. Poised between Miriam's meditations on the collective forces at work in Otto's fate and her private reckoning of her own collusion, it is an intricate and powerful novel, a dark reflection on "the inevitable osmosis of hate" in Australian history and on the moral, social and cultural legacy of Otto's fate.

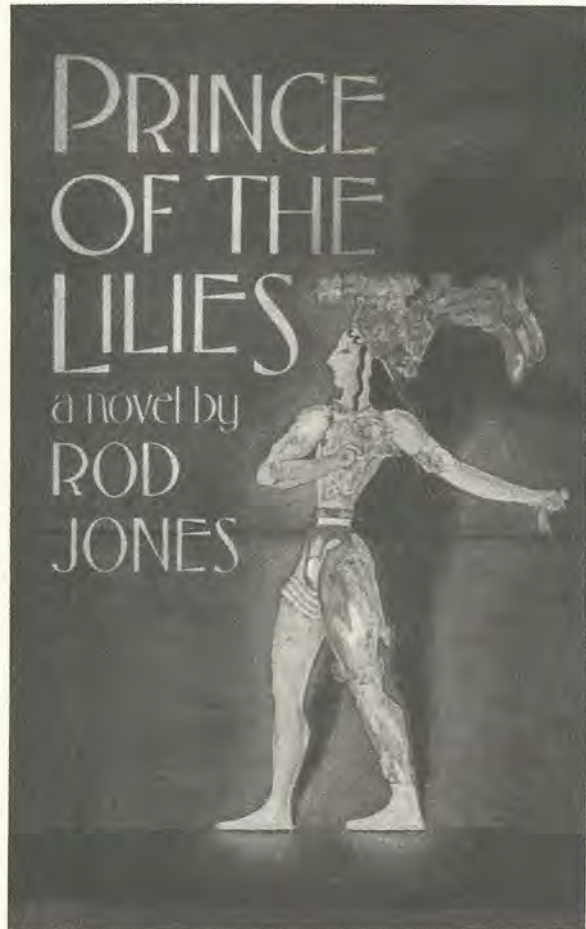
From loose clusters of memory which rise unbidden, it shifts to an urgency of memory as ineluctable as Otto's fate. Otto himself is an always compelling character: exuberant, dynamic, generous, influential, a successful businessman and a naturalised Australian, his dreams and visions for the future of Australia bold and imaginative. Yet he becomes the scapegoat of collective fears and hatreds and with a drumming inevitability, he is declared an enemy alien, stripped of his business assets, interned without trial during the war and deported in 1919.

In part the novel seeks out connections between Otto's fate and the colonial values ushering Australia into the twentieth century. Through Miriam's own family and their roles in business and politics, Dugdale explores the workings of communal fears and allegiances arraigned against Otto. Yet it is also a novel of Miriam's own anguish, walled up inside herself and flinching away from the most painful memories until finally, at the end of the day, she confronts the truth of her own betrayal of Otto. While the thrust of the novel is to a collective recognition of guilt and betrayal, the dark irony is Australia's loss of Otto's exuberant and dynamic dreams of the future.

In *Struggle of Memory*, memory is in part a matter of volition, in part ineluctable. Rod Jones' new novel, *Prince of the Lilies*, has much to do with memory too, but here a matter of excavation, of digging through strata of time and self, amid the murmurings and intentions of the past. Shimmering with presences and intimations, it turns on a sense of history disturbed, of ancient figures astir and hidden intentions behind the shutters of the present. It is an intellectually elegant novel lit with sensual energy.

Set on Crete, it opens in one golden summer in the mid 1970s, where Charles Saracen, his wife Magda and their young son Dylan, become involved

with a Californian couple, Nicholas and Tasma. While Charles works on his book about Sir Arthur Evans and his archaeological work on ancient Minoan civilisation, Magda is drawn into the thrall of Nicholas, a disturbing figure of sensual and aesthetic energies, through whom Magda discovers ancestral presences and dream-like illuminations. At the end of summer, Charles returns to London alone. Fifteen years later, Charles returns to Crete to excavate his own memories and events in the intervening years of Magda's life on Crete leading to the death of Dylan.



Transformed into a private golden age, that summer is part of the novel's exploration of the nature of mythologising, like the Golden Age of the Minoans constructed by Sir Arthur Evans. Charles believes Evans "invented the prehistory he wanted to see. A sort of transposed dream." Magda believes, "All of us invent the Minoans we want to find" but she believes too that the Minoans still have purposes, intentions which are at work on the

present. Through the figures of Minoan frescoes, configured into the present, Jones suggests the lives of the contemporary characters are "a projection of the gaze of the ancient people".

Amid the rhythms and rituals of daily village life, history, self, dream and myth all meet in the landscape of *Prince of the Lilies*. Through strata of time and memory, archaeology has many faces in this novel, images of desire, imagined landscapes, and understory. *Prince of the Lilies* too has always desire and understory, with energies stirring and disturbing the narrative surfaces. Throughout, the sensual, the intellectual and the numinous flow together with elegant precision.

In Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* too, shadows and memories and spectral presences worry at the edge of the present. But here the setting is Perth, the language has the kick and lilt of an ocker cadence and epiphanies are in simplicities. *Cloudstreet* is a spirited and engaging novel of the connected lives of two families across two decades, from 1943 to 1963, always with a sense of ascent, of characters climbing up through time and circumstance to levels of recognition of tribal, moral and spiritual bonds.

In a ramshackle old two-storey house full of whispers and presences, the two families, the Pickles and the Lambs, inhabit their separate enclosures. On one side the aching silence of the Pickles, with Sam and his alcoholic wife, Dolly, their two sons and Rose, the anorexic daughter, who runs the household. On the other side, the clutter and clamour of the Lambs with their six children, where Oriel, the "sergeant major" marshalls the energies of the family and runs the household with fierce goodness, the shop in the front with commercial élan.

The story belongs to Samson Lamb, nicknamed Fish, retarded as a result of drowning and resuscitation when he was nine. Inarticulate but a consciousness privileged beyond the living, Fish's voice murmurs from above where memories and dreams, time and space, all connect. Running between chance and choice, luck and self-determination, the novel moves through rival explorations of the two families, their battles, dreams, and losses. Gradually across the divisions of the house, the lines of engagement between the two families strengthen into tribal belonging.

Amid the mutter of incident on the river with the city glittering at its edge and Fish peering into the perpetual allure of the water, *Cloudstreet* runs in splinters and fragments, the whole clenching and unclenching around the moment. Not all the larger intimations of the novel are convincing but through glimpses of spirit figures, Winton gently suggests

an Aboriginal sense of place and country. With the voice of Fish murmuring above the narrative, it is an impressive novel, generous of imagination, feeling and word, always engaging.

Kevin Brophy's new novel, *The Hole through the Centre of the World*, is also the story of family, but I found it disappointing (the perverse geometry again). His previous novel, *Visions*, was a darkly difficult novel of religious obsession, sometimes puzzling and grotesque but weirdly memorable. His new novel is often tedious, the plot at once unlikely and obvious. From the post-war years to the present, it is the story of the Gaasland family: the father Erno, an ebullient dreamer, devout salesman of plastic chairs, and devout believer in science; his wife Val who becomes little more than a cipher of political protest; and his son, Martin, withdrawn, watcher, bystander in life, unable to construct a life of his own.

The key event in the family life is the death of Daniel, the younger brother once the family centre. His death after a fall into an underground cave haunts Martin and Erno throughout the novel. Martin is always shadowy and, despite his long affair with his best friend's wife, unimpassioned. Erno is a stronger character: resilient, charmingly foolish, bouncing along on post-war enthusiasms. Duped by his own faith, he is set for disillusion and betrayal, but so obviously it all palls. The problems multiply through a long and unlikely sequence in China, where Erno and Martin are obvious dupes of a company with a nuclear plant in the Australian desert; and a tedious section of Val's involvement in anti-nuclear demonstrations.

Not a promising plot line and Brophy's often prosaic style is not enough to lift it. There is a novel here, about the hole in the surface of things, like the hole into which Daniel falls, the hole in the family, in Martin's self, in Erno's faith, the hole in meaning. While Brophy suggests all this and gestures towards post-war optimism and contemporary disillusion, there are too many holes in the plot and the writing.

Further workings of that perverse geometry with *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* by Mudrooroo Nyoongah (formerly Colin Johnson). With embarrassing ignorance, one reviewer suggested dismissively the novel is derivative of Rob Drewe's *The Savage Crows*, because of its focus on Robinson the Conciliator, who is, of course, an important figure in Nyoongah's own brilliant novel, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. Nyoongah's recent novel, *Doin Wildcat*, reflects his interest in revisiting the sites of earlier novels – and, in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, he

engages in a form of dialogue with his own earlier version of Robinson, who here is mocked and parodied.

In this novel, the mythic energies are directed not to mourning an ending but to celebrating a beginning. Here there is no place for ambiguity and it works through unequivocal polarities: hymnal celebration of the Aboriginal characters, damning parody of the white as spiritually and culturally ridiculous. Here Robinson is Fada, a caricature: vacuous, strutting, hypocritical, preening about "his novel experiment of bringing civilisation and Christianity to his sable friends", while the Aborigines on the island are dying of disease and despair, dis-ease.

While the novel is largely confined to the island mission, it does run back to London for some savage parody of the Cockney origins and sordid story of the marriage of Fada and Mada. Mada now is addicted to laudanum and whining misery and despises Fada. Against this are the Aboriginal traditional marriage rites, the respect and love between Jangamuttuk and Ludjee, and through their Dreaming companions, their shared wisdom and spiritual joys.

The novel declares its parodic intentions at the start with a new kind of ceremonial dance, created by Jangamuttuk, the shaman, the Master of the Ghost Dreaming. Parodying the Europeans, the dance, like the whole novel, is a parable of spiritual contest, of renewal and the triumph of the Dreaming, both Aboriginal and, through a black African convict on the island, black African Dreaming. While Nyoongah draws freely on magical realism and there are some powerful celebratory sequences, I find the novel weakened by the overriding parody. I hold no brief for Robinson but the literary brief does not hold.

Which brings to mind Gerald Murnane's short story, 'Land Deal', in which he turns about the notion of Aboriginal Dreaming, through the 1835 Batman Land Deal, with Aboriginal voices deciding they must be characters in a white dream of settlement, a white dream that it is possible to possess the land. This mesmeric story is one of the eleven in Murnane's recent collection, *Velvet Waters*, which includes some of his brilliant short fictions, notably 'Finger Web', 'Land Deal' and 'Stream System'. In these and in much of his earlier work, Murnane's incantatory rhythms and poetic precision transmute private terrain into mythic landscapes.

In 'Finger Web', Murnane's *Expressway* story, I think there is an exciting shift in his work, moving through the compulsions of his private landscape to engage with the horrors of a soldier's landscape.

However some pieces in this collection I find disappointing, readerly expectations all-too-fulfilled, with a sense of *déjà vu* and *vu* again, notably in relation to the title story.

Re-reading 'Land Deal' or re-entering the monastic silence in the Waldo school of writing in 'Stone Quarry', where "each writer is writing from a separate island just short of the notional beginning of the mainland" and where Murnane toys with the talismanic image of America as a page in a dream-atlas, I find those stories break afresh on me in a way 'Velvet Waters' does not and his latest novel, *Inland*, did not. I must add that not all his readers would see his work in those terms: some reviewers feel Murnane's work continues to soar.

By contrast, the stories in James McQueen's recent collection, *Lower Latitudes*, are rarely startling, but as a collection it is appealing because of the linkages of place and landscape among the 14 stories. Unlike Murnane's explorations of the deepest reaches of an inner landscape, in McQueen's stories, beneath the surface changes of voice and character runs a lively engagement with the Asian-Pacific landscape, from Rarotonga to Tahiti, to Thailand and the Philippines.

In some it is as if the very colours and chaos permit another self to surface, and some transformation, epiphany even, is possible in the tumult of Thailand or Manila. In others, place becomes a mirror. At times, the nightmarket of Chiang Mai or the filth and squalor of Manila are mirrors reflecting only the face of the traveller and the impedimenta carried by the traveller - weighed down by loneliness, by sexual or marital tensions, by the narrowness of Australian life.

In many there is a sense that place is confrontation, but also revelation. Some are chilling and grim, others are lit by the enchantment and allure of place, a landscape of rice fields and beggars, family ties and French ships, armed guards at apartment doors, chaotic streets, villages waiting for rain. Place is often a point of intersection where one story spills into another, or triggers a memory of another, as if the characters of one might be glimpsed on the edge of another. Not all the stories are memorable but as a collection it is engaging because of the linkages of place in the itinerary of the whole.

As befits the readerly expectations of the genre, there is a body found at the start of *Crush*, on an island in a lake in Hyde Park, and later another found in a lift in the Hydra Tower which soars up over Perth like a geometric wish. Winner of the 1990 TAG Hungerford Award for Fiction, this

first novel by Western Australian writer, Brenda Walker, is witty and cool, the style clipped and edgy. It seems to me an Art Deco novel, angular but with unexpected curves and snags.

Lines of connection crisscross its face but, neither linear nor complete, it keeps intimating dismemberment, things chopped into segments, with grilles and planes of narrative that drift and spin. Things intersect - not only event but voice, origin, intention. The narrative cuts between two alternating voices, Anna Penn, writer and tenant, and Tom O'Brien, barrister and landlord. While it explores the relationship of Tom and Anna, here everything is slatted, segmented like the view through the louvred windows in Anna's verandah room.

In part a novel about the origins and proprieties of stories, it turns back to questions of origin - Tom's origin and the identity of his father, and the origin of the story. In the courts, Tom too is caught up in stories, editing them in line with "a bigger, more collective fiction", where different editions are presented to the jury. As the murder mystery spills into rival narrative enterprises, questions of property and inheritance, of wills and secret beneficiaries, become literary questions too.

Here Perth is a cityscape in slats and segments of café and art students, drunks and renovators, travel agency signs "snagging at memories of exiles", Tom's shabby office where he reads the louvred stories in newspapers of crime and business. And it is a novel about allegiances: "There are odd practices among the citizens. Odd forms of adulation. I see them all the time." Highly original and droll, *Crush* is a mystery of intentions, spilling beyond its genre into matters of law, fiction, justice, origins and irresolute endings, silence and the voices of stories.

The murder mystery mode is an unexpected genre for Finola Moorhead whose previous novel, *Remember the Tarantella*, is a remarkable tapestry of contemporary female consciousness, through an alphabet of women around the world. Her new novel, *Still Murder*, is a tightly plotted mystery but one where the timing is delayed and the space for conjecture - Eco's "rhizome" space - is waiting to form as Moorhead contests its movement from within. The mystery is compelling - but the very compulsion is turned, redirected to feminist and cultural concerns, male and female patterns of loyalty and betrayal in the post-Vietnam decades.

Thwarting the desire of both reader and detective to complete "the solid moment, the still life, the picture", for most of the novel, the identity of the body found at the start by a nun under marijuana

leaves in a public park is unknown. For much of the novel Detective Senior Constable Margot Gorman knows less than the reader and is denied explanation, working undercover as a nurse, keeping surveillance over Patricia, a schizophrenic in a psychiatric hospital. Patricia is shadowed by mysteries to do with an ex-lover, a Vietnam vet, and her husband, Steven, as she moves in and out of reality, aware "She has lost herself in his house of mirrors".

The novel itself becomes a refraction of mirrors and forms of public and private documentation, letters, computer files, newspaper cuttings, police notebooks, diary entries. Moorhead plays out different mysteries within the imagined landscapes in Patricia's diary entries, which are the poetic and imaginative core of the novel, the writing intense, often electric, with Gothic journeys through dark landscapes of her rival selves.

While the mystery hovers in wait, Margot contemplates feminist issues of loyalty and collaboration. When her allegiances shift, she decides to conduct a private investigation and, as if Moorhead's own undercover purposes have reached their own denouement, suddenly events accelerate at a zany, parodic pace. Crucial connections abound, as Moorhead freely engages coincidence and chance in the build-up to the grand assemblage of all the players which is itself a parody of the conventions of the murder mystery genre.

Through Moorhead's intricate and ludic manoeuvres through the genre, *Still Murder* is an

elaborate jigsaw of rival perspectives and rival documentations, yet it unfolds with deceptive ease. Playful in form, it turns on the reader's expectations of the mystery genre and compels the reader to collaborate in order to address matters of honour, power, loyalty and betrayal.

Of the fiction of recent months, four books seem to me vital for any reader of contemporary Australian fiction. By my private geometry, *Prince of the Lilies* is the most magical and shimmering of the novels discussed here, but there is a triangle in which I delighted: *Cloudstreet*, *Struggle of Memory* and *Still Murder*. Of course such a declaration is setting up readerly expectations, which by the perverse geometry of such things may be a disservice: in the case of these four books, soaring expectations I think will be OK. But then I liked *Crush* very much too, so that's five, a quincunx, with *Prince of the Lilies* at its centre.

#### BOOKS REVIEWED:

Kevin Brophy: *The Hole Through the Centre of the World* (Simon & Schuster/New Endeavour Press, \$16.95).

Julian Davies: *Revival House* (Penguin, \$12.95).

Joan Dugdale: *Struggle of Memory* (UQP, \$14.95).

Rod Jones: *Prince of the Lilies* (McPhee Gribble, \$29.95).

James McQueen: *Lower Latitudes* (Penguin, \$12.99).

Finola Moorhead: *Still Murder* (Penguin, \$14.95).

Gerald Murnane: *Velvet Waters* (McPhee Gribble, \$29.99).

Mudrooroo Nyoongah: *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (Imprint, \$12.95).

Brenda Walker: *Crush* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$14.95).

Tim Winton: *Cloudstreet* (McPhee Gribble, \$18.95).



DAVID HEADON

## Love and Thunder

*Dorothy Auchterlonie Green  
(May 28, 1915–February 21, 1991)*

Just over one hundred and fifty years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed the Library Association of the Boston Mechanics' Apprentices. He took as his subject on that January 25 night 'Man the Reformer'. It was a momentous occasion in American social, intellectual and political history as Emerson worked a little of his magic:

What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life?

When Dorothy (Auchterlonie) Green died on February 21, 1991, this country lost its own passionately committed Emersonian reformer, an idealist who never ceased to work for truth, good and her vision of a just future – as vigorously and enthusiastically in the last years of her life as she had in any of the previous hectic decades. Like Patrick White, she cannot be replaced. I miss her now.

When I moved to Canberra in mid-1985 I had only spoken to Dorothy briefly once or twice before I attended a convivial Spring lunch. Before you really got to know her, Dorothy was a most intimidating presence. I recall being extremely careful with my sentences when conversing with her early on. Your grammar and intelligence weren't on trial, it only felt like it. At Dorothy's funeral Clem Christesen pointed out that, when around Dorothy, it was "prudent to be mentally alert." The entire congregation chuckled in agreement. At conferences, hers would often be the first hand raised in question time. One always felt sorry for those speakers unaware of who the little old lady was. They learned quickly.

Anyway, a few hours of quaffing later, at this festive Canberra gathering, someone requested a group photo. Was it the Chardonnays? I don't remember. Whatever the cause, I suggested we pose as a footy team and pop Dorothy up the front as ballboy. It is still a little embarrassing to recall it. And yet, for me, it did the trick. She smiled, maybe even laughed. Our friendship had begun.

Like so many before me, I became a regular visitor for morning or afternoon tea at 18 Waller



Crescent. Up the few steps past the freesias, roses and miscellaneous natives, ready to listen and learn. Dorothy was first and foremost a remarkable teacher. We always yarned about politics. Murdoch, Joh, the continuing Australian cringe to America, the disintegration of Labor Party principles under Hawke, nuclear proliferation, the Earth under pressure. One afternoon in early 1986 we decided to begin an organisation which would be called Writers Against Nuclear Arms. Two books and three conferences later WANA continues to evolve



and is still going strong. The membership list reads like a Who's Who of Australian literature. Dorothy always had a galvanizing effect. Her speeches at the first two WANA conferences, in 1986 and 1988, will long be remembered by those fortunate enough to be present. Ever the iconoclast, she finished her 1988 speech with typical clarity: "This unique and beautiful planet is too precious to allow the scientists and the arms dealers and the politicians to play dice with it." *Woman the Reformer*.

Throughout her life Dorothy read widely but her finest asset was her ability to sift through so much material, from so many disciplines, from many countries, and extract the kernel of truth. She endorsed the pre-twentieth century sense of literature as "any written work on any subject". I hope I wasn't the only one who, after a yarn, would make sure I remembered the two or three physicists, or biologists, or environmentalists or sociologists she named, and later find out who they were and what they'd written. To be with her was an education. Not that she paraded her intelligence; her conversation simply and surely reflected the breadth of the sources which motivated her.

Certain puzzles of the species preoccupied her. For example, she constantly struggled with the riddle of 'civilization'. One of her favourite writers, William Morris, always italicized the word; in her mind, Dorothy did too. She could not understand why Germany, purportedly the most 'civilized' community in the world in 1930, acted as it did under Hitler and Nazism. Though by temperament attracted to higher culture, Dorothy recognised its vulnerability to abuse and hypocrisy. I imagine that is why, in one of her last public speeches (reproduced in *Looking Beyond Yesterday - the Australian Artist and New Paths to Our Future*) she, like Herman Melville, articulated a sentiment with enormous implications for the Western cultural tradition:

The essential mark of a civilized human being is a sense of wonder at the natural world.

Hence her book published early last year by Primavera, *Descent of Spirit: Writings of E. L. Grant Watson*.

Her personal creed adhered closely to Christ's Sermon on the Mount. If she became more devoutly Christian in her later years, it was definitely not because she had begun to recoil in despair at an amoral world; rather, she felt attracted by the Church's increasingly radical role in contemporary politics. In solidarity with the members of the Council of Bishops in America and the standing

Committee of the Australian Uniting Church, she pleaded for common sense:

For the first time in history, mankind now has the technological skill, the command over resources, to see that every man, woman and child on earth have enough to eat and clean water to drink. Yet this is the moment that our rulers have chosen to ensure that all our best energies are poured into devising ever more diabolical ways of killing one another . . . The difference between the way we live and the way we might live defies common sense.

(in *Preventing Nuclear War* (1982), ed. Jim Falk)

The intensely masculine world of nuclear fission disgusted her. The bullying role of the American Government and the Pentagon disgusted her (she was never as hard on the imperialism of the USSR, mainly because she felt the Soviet people had borne so much this century). As we put together *Imagining the Real - Australian Writing in the Nuclear Age*, in 1987, she insisted that we use as one epigraph Keith Hancock's statement in *Testimony* (1985) that "If I were forced to choose between New Zealand and the United States of America, I would choose New Zealand". She chose New Zealand all her life: the underdog, the struggler, the battler against the odds. Countries, she maintained, kept going not because of political leaders or corporate cowboys but through the efforts of "ordinary decent people who go to work every day . . .". In her last published piece, written for the WANA newsletter when she was too sick to attend the November conference, she eloquently restated the case for the redistribution of global wealth, the need to produce necessities and not luxuries, and the necessity of reducing the world's population and conserving the damaged environment. Once again, she railed against "Australia's lap-dog following of America's foreign policy . . .". It was all straight-talk; no literary theorising (she totally rejected its latest manifestations); no-nonsense to the last.

In what proved to be our final chats together, as she struggled with cancer and the side-effects of the medication she was taking, the pattern was always the same. When I enquired about her health she said she was managing, then grizzled a bit about her deteriorating sight (for Dorothy, the unkindest cut). Then, slowly, conversation would turn to Murdoch's latest ploy, or Greenhouse, or Alex Carey's unique contribution, or Chomsky, and the spark returned. Immediately. Ten-minute visits became hours-long sessions. She would not

willingly relinquish the roles of renouncer and restorer.

Emerson said to the Boston apprentices that "we must not cease to *tend* to the correction of flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day". Through her long and extraordinarily rich life - full of love and thunder - Dorothy Green sought to "wrest the initiative" from the oppressors of this world. In her final years she regularly quoted a most unlikely source - President Dwight Eisenhower - who said, in the 1940s:

The people want peace so bad that one day the politicians had better get out of their way and let them have it.

Not for one moment did Dorothy leave the front ranks of those battering down the door.

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# books

## An Indispensable Presence

Veronica Brady

Dorothy Green: *Writer, Reader, Critic* (Primavera Press, \$14.95, Limited edition \$75).

Since the end of the Gulf war some of its supporters have exulted in public over the peace movement, declaring that the war's 'success' proves just how wrong we were. Dorothy Green's essays, however, have a great deal to say about that. One of the central tenets of her long, strenuous and passionately intelligent life was that might is not, and never can be, right.

Criticism for her was never merely a business, much less a way of being clever or earning promotion. It was a way of being in the world, as a person and as a citizen, engaging herself with the very stuff of living not only in actual experience as she saw and experienced it in literature, and not just engaging her very considerable intelligence but her feeling and intuition as well. For her, a book was something to love, not just for the pleasure but also for the provocation it gives, "the fine, rich, challenging, miscellaneous feeding of minds" which is for her the basis of any proper culture.

As a mere pastime, an alternative to ennui, literature [she writes] can no longer compete with the sheer physical pleasures modern life has to offer. The one trump card left to it is fully to engage the mind.

That may sound formidable. But reading Dorothy Green is not like listening to a sermon. For one thing, these essays are intensely lively, often polemical and nearly always political, a report on and generally an argument with the world and society we live in. Dorothy Green never withdrew into an "ivory tower". She was committed to and

deeply knowledgeable about Australian Literature. As well as her critical studies, notably her monumental study of Henry Handel Richardson, she edited and brought up to date her late husband's classic history of Australian literature. But she was also committed to the life of affairs, to contemporary politics and history. For her, life does not exist for the sake of 'literature', but literature for life. Moreover, life is made for enjoyment, and her great dislike for the consumer society and the pop culture which in her view is only an aspect of it derives from the belief that it makes for unhappiness. Like Dr Johnson she believed that literature existed to be enjoyed. For this reason she disliked the contemporary preoccupation with theory. In her view it turned attention away from the work itself which "too often disappears, never to return", and to be replaced by "modish analysis".

That is not as simple-minded as it sounds. Behind this emphasis on pleasure lies a complex critique of contemporary society, of the "disgust with the human" which she identifies with technology, what Habermas calls the triumph of System over Life-World. Moreover, her notion of pleasure is a wide one, involving intelligence as well as sense and emotion and she shares this pleasure with her readers, incisive, witty and shrewdly sharp in her observations "the creation of wants is the business of our economy", for instance. At another time, she remarks that "the fantasies of cowboy presidents and prime ministers who want to be generals certainly provide little gratification for their walk-on cast of millions" or, commenting on the suggestion made on television that it is only a matter of time before painting will be taken over by computers, remarks that "the example exhibited on the screen did nothing to reassure me that the results would add to the scene of human pleasure."

It is also a great pleasure to watch her demolish shoddy or wishful thinking, the "myth that literacy has any direct connection with culture or education", for instance, which she does with elegant

economy by pointing to the richness of so-called 'primitive' oral cultures. After this, protesting against the general debasement of language in contemporary society, she goes on, somewhat tartly:

My colleagues assure me that none of this matters, that languages has to change. I am aware of that, but I still fail to see why it has to change overnight because an ill-educated reporter with a poverty-stricken vocabulary and no grasp of syntax is privileged to have a microphone in front of his mouth.

This may seem like good knock-about stuff, like Dr Johnson's famous refutation of Berkeley. But like Johnson, Green's passion for commonsense rests on a carefully articulated philosophical position. Like him, for instance, she appeals to the notion of the "common reader," to some "cross-class, cross age reading," and to "literature as a common cultural form". True, she no longer pins much faith on this notion; at best, this kind of reading and this sense of literature, she suggests, constitutes the ghostly remains of a common oral tradition, which has been destroyed "with the rise of the yellow press in the last quarter of the 19th century". Nor is she prepared, as so many historians and critics seem to be, to ignore the question of responsibility. Her analysis of the intellectual impoverishment of popular culture and the enslavement it leads to combines moral accusation with an awareness of its systemic nature.

Henceforth the under-estimation of the intelligence and of the aspirations of so-called ordinary people by journalists and newspaper owners, whose one purpose was to make money, became an entrenched policy. The policy easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the knowledge of excellence is withheld from the public long enough to make them forget it ever existed, then it is easy to persuade them that the rubbish they get is what they want.

What is outraged here is not only her sympathy but her ethical sense. The outrage arises, however, out of social and economic analysis not mere distaste of the two, it is the ethical dimension which is primary. The fact that something is widely popular, she insists, does not mean that it is right - something, to revert to the example with which we began, generally ignored in political as well as cultural discussion today. Thus, her attack on "the time-wasting deprivation which takes place in Australian schools . . . in the name of something

called 'self-expression' " is not only an attack on the loose-thinking, indeed the ignorance, on which it is based, the failure to consider what the process is by which the 'self' comes into existence. It is also an attack on the intellectual laziness and cowardice of critics. "No one ever dares to say that some of the products of so-called self-expression are frankly boring." Nor do they interrogate the question they are dealing with.

The truth is that the self does not appear *sui generis*, even though each self is unique. It is compounded of our ancient and complex genetic inheritance from innumerable other past "selves", together with the infinite influences that work upon us from outside, from past and present environments.

Going on to point out that the self is the "galvanised into uniqueness by mimesis", by example and invitation, she then makes the case for tradition, pointing at the same time to what she finds troubling in the present, its betrayal of that tradition.

These, then, are highly polemical essays. Dorothy Green has no time for fashion, though, as I shall be arguing, her position is not as old-fashioned as it may seem since it echoes many of the concerns of the Frankfurt School, notably Habermas and Horkheimer. Nevertheless she has little time for the vogue of literary theory. For her it is "pathetic evidence of the preoccupation of our society with techniques, with professional [expertise], inseparable from a culture which has prostrated itself at the feet of science"; in other words, a bad case of envy. Personally, I think that this is rather too simple, even ingenuous. As the passage we have just quoted suggests, Dorothy Green was herself widely read and her criticism was informed with this learning. She is not attacking intelligence but moral indifference. If aesthetics was an aspect of politics then politics was in turn an aspect of ethics if not theology.

It is here that one recognizes her affinity with the Frankfurt School since what she objects to in contemporary theory is essentially its abstraction, its lack of bodiliness. Similarly, it is this quality which makes literature important for her. Like Habermas, she sees the substitution of system, technological rationality, for Life-World as the great problem facing Western culture today. Although she would not put it in these terms, "communicative competence" is crucial to any healthy society or culture. Literature, she argues, is subversive and liberating by reason of the interests and accuracy of its language which enables people to think and feel

for themselves, not as they are programmed to do.

At the other end of the scale, Green attacked *New Criticism*, in both its old "words on the page" form and in its more fashionable contemporary guise of 'textuality' for being anti-historical, an aspect not just of middle-class arrogance which equates its views with 'reality' as a whole and its values with universal value but, just as tellingly, as a form of anomie, loss of meaning and of freedom. To her the crucial premise is that "we now live in a world in which it seems . . . that to spend one's life practising literary criticism is fiddling while Rome is about to burn." That does not mean that criticism must give way to history or to politics or even to theology though she does suggest that the critic's relation to writers and reader is "somewhat analogous to that of the Holy Ghost to the other two members of the Trinity" for example, the reference is only half serious. This analogy, however, rests on the fact that criticism "is less clearly perceived and therefore less appealing" not on the notion of the critic as God.

In effect, then, like Habermas, she is profoundly aware of the interplay between symbols and the social and individual existence. Her concern for literature arises out of this awareness and from belief that quality of thinking and feeling and imagining is the right of every person, not just the privileged few. In this sense she could be said to be a passionate democrat, though her democracy is of a peculiar kind, qualitative not merely quantitative. For her popularity is not necessarily a sign of excellence. Issues and goals must be thought out and debated. She believes in participation, in people being able to take charge of their own affairs, and for this language is crucial:

Participatory democracy is an impossibility unless the whole people know the meanings of the words in which government is conducted, and the sad fact of the matter is that they do not. . . . Those who have a contempt for people, who prefer authoritarian regimes, have a strong motive for degrading the word, casting doubts on literature and literacy.

Criticism matters, therefore, as a way of preserving language, the currency not only of social exchange but also of power – she does not mention Foucault but she understands this relationship between language and power perhaps more passionately and probably more practically. Since being human is bound up with the use of language, like Habermas she is concerned with the effort to achieve what he calls the "ideal speech situation", one in which there is not merely communication

but informed creative and active consensus. Her sharp eye for the perversions of language and their social consequences arises out of this conviction.

Abstractions, symbols, allegory, it is too often forgotten, can all play a part in training for the widespread trade of human . . . torture. To allegorize a whole nation as "a focus of evil" is one of those great disasters foreseen by Herzen.

This power of figurative language "to intoxicate the intellect and blunt the sensibility" has, of course, been only too vividly displayed in recent events in the Gulf.

Nevertheless a passion for justice as she insisted, is not the same thing as literary criticism. Attacking "the cant that life exists for culture, instead of culture for life", she insists that literature is by definition prophetic, that it has a power to transform experience by transforming language, making people see differently, more personally and therefore more critically. Not that this is automatic. She quotes Steiner's refutation of the Leavisite belief that humane studies will necessarily make people more humane, pointing out that many of those responsible for the wars and atrocities of this century have been 'cultured' people. Nevertheless that is no reason, she argues, "for going to the opposite extreme and concluding that literature is the root of all evil and illiteracy a state of blessedness."

Dorothy Green, then, has no doubts about the value of 'civilization' in general or of Western culture in particular. For her such doubts are equivalent of the *Trahison des clercs* Benda attacked in the 1930s and her premises are similar to his:

The remedy for the ills of Western civilization is not to get rid of it by digging it up by the roots and burning it, but to examine it carefully, see what is fundamentally good in it, which is capable of renewing itself and adapting itself to different conditions.

While she was passionately concerned for the environment therefore and keenly aware of the injustices done to the Aboriginal peoples of the world, she had no time for the cult of the 'primitive'. To her that implied "a return to that bondage to nature out of which Western man has been struggling, mainly through the use of language, for two thousand years, and more." According to her most 'primitive' peoples still live in "bondage of nature, to the dictatorship of the seasons and its evils, and . . . anxious to be free of its bonds." Not everybody would agree with this, of course, and

she certainly seems ignorant of the religious basis of the relationship to nature and of the subtle and complex adjustments which allows traditional Aboriginal people, for example, to live easily and abundantly in the most difficult environments. Nevertheless the attack on sentimentality is useful. There is nothing intrinsically 'evil' about the Western culture, even technological culture. Similarly, what is 'primitive' or non-Western is not necessarily better, and here she puts her finger on an important point, observing that it is "a great sin" to "destroy an individual's faith in himself, to destroy a people's faith in itself is an even greater sin." For all its mistakes, Western culture has been responsible for much that is good, the concept of the individual, and his/her right to freedom, dignity and material well-being and to equality of opportunity, for example. Hence her optimism:

There is no reason to suppose that Western civilization will not emerge from its present bondage to technology and to common economics, just as it emerged from its bondage to nature.

For this reason Green is critical of what she calls "the anti-intellectual, anti-literacy" trends in contemporary civilization since they tend to undermine the belief and will be necessary for change. But that is also why literature and literary criticism are so important:

For it is only by strenuous intellectual effort and by the most rigorous scrutiny of all forms of communication that we can hope to make things better for those in our own society who are less lucky than we are, and for those countless people in other countries for whom life itself seems nothing but a curse.

Setting aside the implicit ethnocentrism here of the conviction of Western superiority, this is a concise and powerful statement about the value of the humanities which are so often under fire today for their irrelevance, if not uselessness.

Not that she has any illusions. "One of the saddest things", for her is having to admit that what she sees "as the accumulated wisdom of the ages, repeated in different ways every generation" is hardly considered, much less drawn on, by "the people who control our lives". She is also troubled by the over production of books and ideas:

Literature, like everything else, is dominated by the growth myth: the health of a culture is assumed to be determined by the quantity

of its consumable products. Little thought is given to its quality, and still less to the fact that society breeds indifference, or to the delusion that the more devouring of books as they pour off the presses leads to the enlargement of the intellect, to what might be called wisdom.

This, then, is a rare collection of essays. The passages I have quoted suggest something of the style, clear, shrewd, incisive and very wise. What Dorothy Green has to say is based not just on wide and thoughtful reading and conversation but on a deeply felt humanity, a reliance on commonsense, in the best meaning of that maligned word, which stresses its respect for the senses as well as for community. In turn, this trust in the bodily and the social rests on a sense which is religious, not narrowly dogmatic or moralistic, but arising from a feeling for the sacred, that is, for some compelling power which gives value to this world and to every human being. She has a great sense of the interdependence, the interrelatedness not only of peoples but also of all other living things and of our responsibility to reverence as well as enlarge their possibilities. Her distaste for technology, a distaste which extended even to word processors - "the intellectual bond between hand and brain", she writes, "is not to be lightly broken" - arises out of this sense. Where most of us no longer understand ourselves as dwelling in this natural world but, as a result of the growth of historical consciousness as well as of technology, see ourselves with the artificial world of our second nature, culture, she insisted is the bond between mind and body, self and world, seen as a living thing, not a mere abstraction or machine. For her the capacity of language, not for technology, was the crucial one.

Though this was never obtrusive and seldom explicit Dorothy Green's vision was therefore essentially religious. Her concern for language came out of her awareness of it as a way to the social, to the sense of resonance, of infinite possibility which was for her the basis of civilised living and thinking, and she would have agreed with Horkheimer's proposition that if "God" dies, then any sense of truth as something absolute rather than relative dies too. The social pathology she was so acutely aware of was for her the consequence of this loss of truth. Without its authority, she realised in the spirit of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, peace is no better or worse than war, freedom no better or worse than oppression. Positivism, as Horkheimer observed, cannot find any authority which will enable us to distinguish between helpfulness and cupidity, kindness and cruelty, generosity and

avarice. That realization is what made Dorothy Green the unfailing enemy of the mere pragmatism and economic rationality afflicting Australian society today. But her attacks came not just from intellectual conviction, they were empowered by belief. For her philosophy involved the feeling which arises out of the conviction, ultimately theological, the hope, in Horkheimer's words, that the "injustice which characterizes the world is not permanent, that injustice will not be the last word . . . that the murderer will not triumph over his innocent victim."

Dorothy Green was a major and indispensable presence in Australian culture, one which will probably grow more indispensable. That her voice was not more widely heard is one of the many evil consequences of the media monopoly and its dedication to merely economic ends which she inweighed against so strongly. Thanks to Primavera Press, however, we now have this collection of essays to add to the rest of her work. Like all work from Primavera Press it is beautifully printed and presented. The limited edition, cloth and hand-bound, will be a collector's item, well worth \$75 to those who have it. It is good, too, to see these essays introduced by Elizabeth Webby, Professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney. Dorothy Green believed not only in our literature but also in the contribution of women to our intellectual life.

Only a few books, as she said, are really important. But this is one of them.

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## Such is the Life

Brian Matthews

John Barnes: *The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy* (Oxford University Press, \$39.95).

My copy of John Barnes's *The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy* is scarcely a month old, yet it is battered, stained, dog-eared and gritty with sand between most of its pages. Scientifically, such a contingency can never have befallen of itself. I shall describe how this condition came about, and its relevance, with such succinctness as may be compatible with my somewhat discursive style.

Tuesday, Jan. 22 - Circe Bay, Point Labatt, southerly blow. Imagine this book - with its striking, attractive blue jacket featuring a rather

snooty-looking portrait of Joseph Furphy (some unintended photographic effect of the strangely hooded, sandy-blighted eyes that dominate his nicely scrubbed-up visage) - lying amid a litter of tin plates, fishing knives, frying pan, paper towels, threadline reels, enamel mugs and empty stubbies, on a rickety collapsible table . . . Add sound to your imaginings: and you hear the crack and whip of tarps and the scream of tightened ropes and the outraged creak of makeshift plastic groundcovers converted to ballooning windbreaks. Stand up and look through one of the many gaps in this shuddering edifice and you see the Southern Ocean (disguised at this point as Circe Bay) pounding the reef. Look behind you and you'll see a monotony of coastal spinifex, salt-bush and dunes that go all the way to the WA border - say eight hundred kilometres.

It is hot midday at Point Labatt; the bright blue canopy streaked with high, blown cloud - grandeur and purity above; squalor, profanity but not much worry below . . .

The south-westerly is blowing and the sand is on the move. My fellow sufferer in this camp on the edge of the reef is one Richard Hosking - early and crucial mentor of many a Furphy student, but especially of that same Lois Hoffman of whom John Barnes says that she was "more of an authority than an assistant; and without her . . . this book would probably never have been completed".

And hence the state of my copy of *The Order of Things* - grating with sand as we ride out the blow, and much fought over: whisked up by Rick when I inattentively put it aside to get a beer; reclaimed by me when Rick wanders off to check the diligent little operatives he's breeding for garfish bait in a defunct salmon; stolen back by Rick when . . . And so on. No book, not even this handsome and sturdy volume, can put up with much of that and maintain its shelf-styled equanimity.

*The Order of Things* is narrated in a lucid, temperate voice and with a stoicism about difficulties which would have pleased Furphy himself. And there *are* difficulties to be stoic or otherwise about. Miles Franklin's biography (*Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and his Book*), to which Barnes acknowledges a generous debt, had nevertheless complicated the terrain as much as it had cleared it. Her well-known *caveat* - that "out of consideration for others still living, certain facts cannot for the present be given the publicity of print" - seemed to point above all to Furphy's relationship with Kate Baker and to suggest something compromising, even sensational.

Even more oppressive, Franklin's book seemed

to have mined thoroughly the available material. Her very emphasis, the man and his book, suggests that outside of the orbit of *Such Is Life* – its conception, provenance, development and publication – there was little information available about Furphy: none of the childhood records, the letters, photographs, reminiscences, details of family dwellings, that make it possible at the very least to sense the nature of the subject's early life. Barnes himself admits the pressure of this absence: "I had long thought that another biography of Furphy would not be worth attempting, because so little information seemed to be available about his life before he settled in Shepparton." It is peculiarly (though not exclusively) a problem of Colonial and Post-Colonial cultures. So many people were on the move in an evolving society – too busy to write; too stressed by precarious attempts to make a living or get established; too makeshift or nomadic in their way of life to keep letters when they were written, or to organise papers; family members often too distantly dispersed to be able to provide a reliable account of each other . . . And so on.

Throughout Part One of *The Order of Things* the problem of scant information is constantly apparent. There are many admissions like "We have no record . . ." (18) ". . . we do not know" (30), "[it] is not known" (33), "our knowledge . . . remains sketchy" (63), ". . . we have no first-hand account . . . records . . . do not tell us much" (93). This sort of continual, forced withdrawal from statement can begin to dominate the tone of a biography and subvert the whole enterprise. That this doesn't happen in the early stages of *The Order of Things* is due partly to Barnes's lucid and unflustered style – he seems always in command even when the battle to *know* might be seen as running against him – and partly to his skill in using evocative, indirect evidence. We may not know (or ever know) much about Furphy's personal life and experiences before he went to Shepparton, but Barnes's meticulous research can establish for us a "fair picture" of what it was *probably* like even if the special objects of his scrutiny sometimes keep exasperatingly to the shadows. The chapter on life at Kangaroo Ground is one of several occasions on which this procedure can be seen at its best, while Barnes's rather tendentious proposal that the "sketch by a clergyman of a typical Wesleyan home" will "serve to suggest the atmosphere of such a household as the Furfphys'" is an example of the method being pushed up to and probably beyond its useful limits.

The over-long saga of the schoolmaster Robert Begg's deficiencies and trials and the rather too

detailed account of the Kyneton Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association (with which Furphy's only connection was that he won their poetry prize in 1867) are other instances in my view where the 'surrounding' material which is meant only to evoke and to assist our efforts at imaginative reconstruction, becomes over-indulged and too central. But I don't make these as stringent criticisms: for one thing, the account is always interesting, no matter what it's doing; and for another, one can only sympathise, knowing too well the biographical dilemma with which this evocative technique is designed to cope. Barnes himself is acutely aware of the problems and pitfalls: "My preference for sober documentation of the 'ordinariness' of the past may disappoint those who relish picturesque and highly coloured representation which highlights the differences, both apparent and real, between then and now." This is unnecessarily defensive. Those who may have sought to solve familiar problems of biographical narrative and to combat the elusiveness of the past by resort to the 'picturesque' and 'high color' were no doubt making considered, probably sober, decisions even if the result looks more cavalier and is accordingly more vulnerable to certain kinds of objection. Nobody should be disappointed with John Barnes's seemingly less adventurous decision: its adventurousness or otherwise is irrelevant; the important thing about it is that, "in this instance at any rate", it works.

The other thing to be said about the book's accumulative and evocative approach to its often shadowy subject is that it is not confined solely to illuminating Furphy's life. "The book has been written with the reader – or the intending reader – of *Such is Life* in mind. Furphy's literary achievement was remarkable, given the circumstances of his life. In aiming to show what manner of man he was and how he came to write the sort of book that he did, I have striven to understand those circumstances and to recreate them." The amazing *Such is Life* is as central to Barnes' account as it was to Miles Franklin's, but where Franklin tended to fall back on the book as one of the scarce substantial, graspable and, as she saw it, revealable areas of Furphy's life, it becomes for Barnes both organising and energising principle.

It follows from what I have said about the method and difficulties of the early chapters that the book should get better and better as Barnes approaches the solid ground of the Shepparton years and Furphy's creative life. And so it does. The passionately innocent relationship with Kate Baker is magnificently analysed and compassionately evoked as is the perhaps more pathetic, vaguely



desperate correspondence with a puzzled young Miles Franklin. Furphy's awful marriage is anatomised, but no amount of research, it seems, will ever draw the veil from Leonie Germain or elucidate the nature of her silent, "tearless suffering". She remains both peripheral and utterly fascinating. And then, of course, there is *Such is Life*, where Barnes is in his element brilliantly piecing together for us the extraordinary story of the book's genesis, its writing and its sad publication history.

*Thursday Jan. 24* - Circe Bay, Labatt, storm abating, 5 dozen fish in the net last night . . . So, that's the book that was lying on our camp table being grabbed at by the wind and flying sand when it wasn't being pirated by the (adj.) Hosking who, having cravenly stolen it to read the intensely moving description of Furphy's last days and his swift, ordinary death, announced: "I'd be proud to have written a great book like that."

He was right. Anyone would be. *The Order of Things* is a marvellous achievement which John Barnes has brought off against all kinds of odds, some of them unimaginably tragic, over many years. *The Order of Things* will stand for as long as most of us will be interested as the great biography of one of our more prodigally gifted writers.

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## An Abundant Life

Walter Crocker

David Martin: *My Strange Friend* (Picador, \$18.95).

This autobiography is of interest above average. Given the author's origins, gifts of body, mind and spirit, and his achievements it would be strange if it were not. Moreover, he is a life-long writer.

He was born in Budapest during World War I into a family of relatively comfortable circumstances; most of the members were in business but some were in medicine or concerned with the arts. The family was Jewish but sufficiently easy-going about it that he was not circumcised.

His parents left Hungary for Berlin during his infancy. His formation, including his education, was German. His maternal language was German. The

Germany that formed him had been shattered by its defeat, until it was revitalised, and poisoned, by the Nazi revolution. Hitler became Chancellor early in 1933. Young David Martin, who had no tertiary education and was working in the rag trade, was burdened with two fatal distinctions: he was a Communist and he was a Jew. He therefore left for Holland in 1934, at the age of 18. He had only a year in Holland but it obviously did him much good: learning horticulture, the benefits of physical work out of doors, the atmosphere of sanity and decency which characterized Holland and the spiritual refreshment of discovering Rembrandt and other Dutch masters. It also brought him into touch with Zionism. He decided to emigrate to Palestine, still a British 'mandate' held from the League of Nations.

Arriving in Palestine in 1935 he joined first one and then another kibbutz. The life was hard but his physical force was equal to it. He got stimulus too from the intellectual arguing common among Jews and congenial to him temperamentally. He was a Marxist as well as a Zionist. After about a year of it he came to the conclusion that he could not remain a Zionist. Being in a clandestine cell of Communists his thoughts turned to the civil war in Spain where fascist Italy was backing one side, Marxist Russia the other.

He was 20 when he arrived in Spain. He was directed by the Communists to one of the International Brigades. He failed as an infantryman, thanks to his defective eyesight, but did well as a medical orderly. Franco's forces at length gaining more and more of Spain, he and others in the International Brigades were released. He got across the French border, illegally, and at length arrived in Britain.

The chapters on Palestine and Spain are particularly interesting, both as to the facts and as to his commentary. "I am no longer a Zionist", he writes, "but I find it hard to leave the subject alone." He also writes that he wants the Jews to assimilate and virtually to disappear. "To the grave with tribalism, it is the curse of the species. It will destroy us if we don't take care." He is equally illuminating on Communism.

He arrived in Britain in 1938, aged 22, in time for 'appeasement', Munich, the Nazi invasion of Poland, the British-French declaration of war against Germany, and Churchill's displacing Chamberlain. By virtue of his linguistic skills he soon found work with the B.B.C., first in London then in Glasgow, both cities giving him delight. Also he published his first writings, he married Richenda, he changed his name from Ludwig

Detsinyi to David Martin, and became a naturalized British subject.

Ever restless, ever the traveller, an internationalist to the fingertips, he went to India a couple of years after the war as a freelance journalist. He was there when India became independent and Hindus and Muslims were massacring each other. "Crowds", he writes, "how quickly they unravel into mobs. The devil marches close behind them." He was lucky enough to be taken on by *The Hindu*, the paper being excellent in its accurate reporting, its fair-minded but probing commentary, and its impeccable English. It was owned by the Kesturi family, "Brahmin of the Brahmins", as he says. He saw much of India and he wrote on it with knowledge and sympathy. But once again he wanted to move on.

Australia was the next point. He arrived here in 1949 at the age of 34. He has now been here for nearly forty years, has made himself a part of Australia's intellectual and artistic life, is pioneering The Association for Armed Neutrality for Australia, and his son, whose upbringing has been Australian, is an established architect and townplanner. David Martin's grandchildren in time will learn about, and no doubt admire, their grandfather's remarkable past.

His life, covering so wide a canvas, offers enough action and colour for several lives. It offers enough trip wires and potholes for the autobiographer too. Carelessness or pretence or flamboyance are risks. There is no pretence but there is some flamboyance, for instance his father is described as irresistible to all women, rich or poor. There are occasional slips; for instance "The Jews were kicked out of England by the Commonwealth". The Jews were expelled from England by King Edward I in 1296; the Commonwealth invited them to return three-and-a-half centuries later. David Martin is niggardly about dates. Again and again the reader has to work them out. But all these are trifles. Truthfulness and candor stamp the book, though reticence, a quality as noble as magnanimity, is sacrificed at times. Affairs with whores, or affairs due to a roving eye, call for delicate handling; the story of his affair with the 21-year-old student June, will not be to everyone's taste.

Let there be no mistake about it however. This autobiography is not too confessional and it is never trivial. It tells the story of a man intelligent and brave above normal, serious to the point where his sense of humour might suffer, and, as a fellow human being, splendidly useful.

It so happens that through the accidents of my own life I can vouch for some considerable

proportion of his facts. I was living in Europe between 1934 and the outbreak of the World War and was passionately as well as professionally concerned with developments. Thus I was well informed on Spain as I, with a small group, though I was never a Communist, had arranged to join the International Brigades. (In the end we were too late.) In 1946-50 I was at the U.N. and in the Department dealing with the turning of Palestine into Israel and I experienced, painfully, the fanatical hatred of extremist Zionists. And my years in India overlapped with David Martin's.

For me the particularly interesting chapters in the book are those covering Jews and Judaism, Communism (he remained a loyal if critical Communist until the late 1950s), his reactions to Australia, and his case for Armed Neutrality (as I have previously explained in *Overland* I admire his statement of the case but believe it is not yet practicable). He is interesting, too, on the literary world in Australia. A man who has written 6 novels, 2 volumes of short stories, 14 books for young people, a play, 7 books of poetry, 1 of travel, 2 of sociology, and 2 of general interest, can speak of the literary world with some authority.

David Martin is heroic as well as gifted and highly civilized. But there is also a heroine, his wife Richenda. Daughter of an Anglican manse when persons were expected to be scholars or gentlemen or both, she is descended from Elizabeth Fry and through this Gurney descent is a sprig of the Quaker aristocracy, that unique group of the Buxtons, the Hoares, the Peases, the Barclays and the rest. It was no little thing that she married a nameless refugee without profession or money, a Communist when Communists were more than suspect, and a Jew. David Martin is well aware of what he owes to Richenda, "my anchor, my rudder and my sail" as he says in his gallant dedication of the autobiography to her.

*Sir Walter Crocker is a former Australian ambassador and the author of Australian Ambassador and other books.*

## Misfit To Patriarch

Bruce Steele

D. H. Lawrence and M. L. Skinner: *The Boy in the Bush*, edited by Paul Eggert (Cambridge University Press, \$90).

One summer morning I was an observer in a cluttered room at LaTrobe University where Paul

Eggert and his small research team were gathered round a long table beginning to assemble some of the 5000 variant readings from manuscript, type-scripts and first editions of D. H. Lawrence's collaborative novel *The Boy in the Bush*. The long editorial process, begun all those years ago, was completed late last year with the publication of the handsome and authoritative Cambridge University Press edition of the novel.

C.U.P.'s project to issue scholarly editions of the complete Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence, planned in the 1970s, is now well over half way to completion. Five of the seven projected volumes of the Letters have already appeared and the sixth is due later this year. Nine of the novels, four volumes of short fiction, three volumes of essays and 'philosophical' works, and the school text *Movements in European History* have been published since 1980.

This enormous undertaking has involved editors from three continents. It has not been without controversy. Lawrence died in 1930, and the new editions establish new copyrights. There has been dispute about whether, in certain cases, the new texts are sufficiently different from the old to warrant renewal of copyright. In academia there has been a fresh round of argument about the nature and status of 'critical' editions of literary works generally. While most of this has passed by the non-specialist reader, there has been more general interest by virtue of the appearance of previously unpublished works. Before its Cambridge publication, the novel *Mr Noon*, though still technically unfinished, had been available only in one part and that for mostly specialist readers. Several hundred letters have been published for the first time, and in quite well-known works, passages censored, bowdlerised or simply mangled in the processes of printing, have been restored.

*The Boy in the Bush* is unique in the Lawrence canon because of the nature of Lawrence's collaboration with the West Australian nurse and author Mollie Skinner. It was not his only collaboration: for his second novel, *The Trespasser*, Lawrence had used some writings by his friend Helen Corke, adding to them his personal knowledge of her tragic experience. The result was a turgid mixture of autobiography and biography in a brooding Wagnerian romantic style. In 1922 during his brief sojourn in W.A., Lawrence met Mollie Skinner and read some of her work. He was impressed with her anecdotal skill but annoyed by her tendency to sentimentalise when she tried to go beyond her down-to-earth strength as a writer.

Lawrence encouraged her to write about the early

days in the colony, to build a story around her family, about things, places and people she knew. The resulting novel, *The House of Ellis*, he found so good and so bad that he doubted it would find a publisher. It lacked construction and development. He made Miss Skinner an offer: he would rewrite the book and make a real novel out of it. Without waiting for her consent, he set to work and in less than two months produced his own manuscript of *The Boy in the Bush*.

The Introduction to this edition gives in detail all that can now be known of the collaboration, since Mollie Skinner's own work has disappeared. Dr Eggert argues cogently, and I think convincingly, that the finished novel should be considered Lawrence's. The basic narrative framework seems still to be Skinner's, and probably most of the local colour and a good deal of the dialogue, particularly in the first half or so of the book. What Lawrence did most sensationally was to take her fairly straight-forward but rebellious 'boy', Jack Grant, based on Mollie Skinner's own brother Jack, and turn him into a Lawrencian hero with patriarchal and even bigamous tendencies, much to Mollie Skinner's chagrin and the shock-horror of the reviewers.

Jack, aged seventeen, arrived in Perth from the Old Country, having been sent to Australia "because he was too tiresome to keep at home" and because he has been sent down from Agricultural College. He is taken in by the Ellis family, relatives of his mother's, and works at "Wandoo", a station east of Perth. He loves the members of his adoptive family but feuds with cousin Easu Ellis, and later kills him after Easu has seduced the "Wandoo" Ellis daughter Monica. With Tom Ellis, one of the sons, Jack goes to the cattle country of the North-west for almost two years. He returns to marry Monica, who has had Easu's baby, then goes gold-prospecting, and realises that he wants to marry Monica's cousin Mary as well. In Skinner's tale of a drifter, Lawrence saw a purposeful adventurer who, we believe, will lead his little family into a promised land where he will live in patriarchal contentment with his wives and children. Australia, the free, untouched country is the place where he will realise himself far from the constraints of judgemental, life-denying society in England or even Perth.

The novel inevitably invites comparison with Lawrence's other Australian novel *Kangaroo*. It is a common criticism of *Kangaroo* that it lacks a decent plot and is consequently rambling and shapeless. Certainly Lawrence was improvising to a large extent and he banked all on our staying with the

mercurially ambivalent Richard Lovatt Somers in his Australian "thought-adventure" and his marital struggle with his foreign wife Harriett. If the drama of Somers' attempt to engage in some kind of meaningful political activity with either socialism or incipient nationalism in its neo-fascist phase, over against his innate sense of the futility of any kind of human activity, is not entirely successful, the wealth of description of the Australian scene certainly is. But the characters, other than the Somers pair, are barely convincing as Australian types despite some occasional flashes of insight. Lawrence deliberately isolated himself from all but the fringes of Australian society, and the novel is the poorer for it.

Thanks to Mollie Skinner, *The Boy in the Bush* has a clear framework of plot even if it is of a picaresque kind, and the characters mostly sound more convincingly Australian. Although he made alterations to her framework (in particular to the ending), it nevertheless was solid enough and constraining enough for him to develop his own ideas and preoccupations at the time of writing. This was after he had settled in New Mexico and was making his second visit to old Mexico. Mollie Skinner could be said to have saved him from himself. Some, but not all, of the humour in the book seems to derive from her, and scenes like Christmas and New Year at "Wandoo" have an immediacy and indigenous incisiveness which matches what we know of Skinner's own work elsewhere.

So much attention has been given to *Kangaroo* in recent years that Lawrence's other Australian novel has been overlooked. This is a pity because *The Boy in the Bush* is in many ways more approachable than *Kangaroo* – there is little Lawrencian sermonising, and a good deal more life and energy about it. Paul Eggert has done a great service to the novel by giving us a clear, accurate text, an Introduction which wears its scholarship easily and tells a story almost as interesting in its way as the novel itself. The notes and appendices are comprehensive and helpful and contain a vast amount of background information about Skinner and about Western Australia at the time the novel is set. At \$A90 the book is expensive and so not for the general reader: its cultural value is of a different kind.

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## Not Angels But Angles

Evan Whitton

Gavin Souter, *Heralds and Angels: The House of Fairfax 1841-1990* (Melbourne University Press, \$39.95).

The second half of this book is devoted to the Fairfax empire's last three years. This has been much remarked elsewhere and I do not intend to rehearse it here, other than to observe that the definitive account cannot be written until someone, with the trepanning instrument if necessary, gets inside the poor, sad, muddled, devious head of Warwick Fairfax II. No one has yet achieved that, except possibly Marty Dougherty, who advised him during the remarkable adventure that, after a century and a half, destroyed the empire. Marty's account is awaited with interest.

Unless you are a proprietor, there are easier ways of making more money than in journalism, but it is doubtful if many trades offer the practitioner more fun; a book about a journalistic dynasty might be expected to convey some sense of that. In my time, it seemed the fun derived mainly from extra-curricular high jinks at Rupert Murdoch's domains, and from print at the Fairfaxes', if you were lucky enough to be on the right papers. There were exceptions; the quintessential *National Times* story is said to concern an occasion when the editor, Maxwell Victor Suich, the Melbourne editor, Jack Jost, and the assistant editor discussed policy at a pub where the beef was fine and the Grange was cheap, or cheapish. Jost, who purported to be paying, was in an alliterative, or John Norton, mood: to assist the lucubrations, he ordered Bollinger and Bisquit, or vice versa. The lunch was rollicking; the policy remains moot. Suich, slave to duty, paused to telephone instructions to the loyal staff. He returned a bitter man.

"Wouldn't you know?" he grumped. "You leave the building for ten minutes and all the bastards piss off."

"But Max," I pointed out, fair-minded, "it is eight o'clock."

I don't know if Sir Warwick Fairfax, chairman from 1930 to 1977, had a lot of fun, but he was a gentleman, a proprietorial quality in rare supply; for me, it covered a multitude of sins. He was also a man of high seriosity: his essay on (I think) metaphysics, *The Triple Abyss*, rather gave him away: if the mark of the intellectual is clarity, that quality is supposed to be a *sine qua non* for a journalist. *The Abyss* famously lacked it. Sir Warwick firmly

believed that journalism should serve some high purpose, he didn't quite seem to understand what it was. We may regret that no one ever thought to enlighten him; I'm sure he would have been receptive.

He was also remarkably naive; in 1967, he accepted a knighthood from Bob Askin on the pleased assumption that it was for services to journalism. Years later, I fell in for the job of doing the jokes at the Wran Royal Commission; the reports had a small *success de scandale*; the Board amiably determined to stand me a lunch in the boardroom. Unfortunately, the rigours of the exercise had long since turned my brain to toothpaste, and I forgot to turn up. To show, I assumed, there was no ill will for this gross lapse of manners, Sir Warwick carried me off a few days later to lunch at Primo's. In fact, the main item on his agenda seemed to be to try to convince me he had had no idea Askin was a crook. I never doubted it, but was nonetheless touched.

Maximilian Sean Walsh remarked of this book's predecessor, *Company of Herald's*, which covered the period 1831-81, that it was a rattling good business yarn, but that it didn't seem to have much about journalism; perhaps there wasn't much to speak of? Mr Souter, who spent forty years at the *Herald*, is an assiduous researcher and an elegant writer, if perhaps a little inclined to excess in the way of metaphor; one wonders what his publisher's reaction was to the titles he chose. But neither book entirely persuades me he is fully seized of an essential truth about *The Sydney Morning Herald*: that for its first 140 years it barely engaged in journalism, at any rate in the sense that I understand the term.

Since Defoe invented journalism in 1704, its fundamental obligations have been to entertain and amuse the customers and to defend democracy. With honourable exceptions, obviously including Mr Souter himself, the *Herald* by and large failed on both scores. If, as Solly Chandler said, the oldest and most forgotten rule of journalism is to tell the customers what is really going on, the *Herald* was mostly as dreary and as uninquiring of dubious Governments of either political stripe as *The Age* was until a great proprietor, Ranald Macdonald, took it by the scruff of the neck in the mid-1960s. The fault lay primarily with the Fairfaxes themselves: they imposed control by splitting the editor's functions: he had charge only of the editorial page and the facing feature page; someone else had to fill the rest of the paper with another technique of control: 'objective' journalism.

Nor am I sure that Mr Souter fully comprehends

the significance of a sequence of events from 1975. The fabled Sorcerer, V. J. Carroll, (author of a current book on Warwick II and his bankers, *The Man Who Couldn't Wait*) was the most significant executive of his generation. As editor of *The Australian Financial Review* from 1964, and managing editor of *The National Times* from 1970, he knew that facts, and particularly financial facts, are often meaningless in themselves and need explication. He thus stopped the nonsense of 'objective' journalism, at least on those papers.

*The National Times* ran in 1975 what Humphrey McQueen, no doubt rightly, called some "belated meanderings" on the matter of Vietnam. They made the obvious and indeed trite points that Bob Menzies was a liar, a fool and a war criminal. This seemed a new thought to Sir Warwick and one he momentarily could not cope with: absurdly, the Sorcerer rather than the apprentice was sent into exile.

However, the episode was a watershed of sorts in the long Fairfax history. There were people in the company, notably the general manager, Bob Falkingham, and Sir Warwick's son, James, who understood it would be imprudent to deprive a modern newspaper company of talents such as Carroll's, and that Sir Warwick's idea of a monolithic Fairfax view was inappropriate. He was removed in 1977; Suich became chief editorial executive in 1980 with a guarantee that Carroll would be brought back from exile and appointed editor of *The Herald* with a brief to report honestly, to comment fearlessly, and to hold fast to independence; in short, to make it, for the first time in its existence, a great metropolitan broadsheet morning newspaper.

The test of a proprietor is the number of no-go areas he imposes on his editorial staff. So far as I know, the fifth Fairfax, James, was the first in which there were none at the *Herald*. He was thus, in my view, perhaps the greatest proprietor since John Walter III supplied the resources and the authority that enabled Barnes and Delane to make *The Times* the newspaper it was in the middle of the 19th century. It is a matter for the most profound regret that he came at the end of the Fairfax cycle rather than at the beginning. Had he done so, it seems unlikely that NSW would have been as rottenly governed as it was for most of the Fairfax period.

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## Ship to Shore to Rail: Workers' Histories

Stuart Macintyre

Rupert Lockwood: *Ship to Shore: A History of Melbourne's Waterfront and its Union Struggles* (Hale and Iremonger, \$24.95).

Mark Hearn: *Working Lives: A History of the Australian Railways Union (NSW Branch)* (Hale and Iremonger, \$24.95).

Here are two union histories, both commissioned, both blending top-down organisational history with bottom-up accounts of working life.

Rupert Lockwood will be known to *Overland* readers for his books on the wharfies' refusal to load pig-iron for Bob in 1938 and the deservedly reissued story of how the Australian unions helped the Indonesian nationalists at the end of the Second World War to throw off Dutch rule. For thirty years Lockwood was the editor of the *Maritime Worker*, the official journal of the Waterside Workers' Federation, so he was an obvious choice when the Melbourne Branch of the Federation looked for an historian.

This volume goes up to 1945, a further volume is in preparation. It traces some familiar landmarks of maritime industrial history – the establishment of unions on the waterfront; the epic battles of 1890, 1917 and 1928; the long struggle for decent pay and conditions. There are some predictable villains such as Billy Hughes, who used the Federation as a stepping-stone to political eminence and then turned against it; and some unfamiliar ones such as Nellie Melba, here castigated as “an unsufferable bitch” for singing to blacklegs.

There are plentiful asides of this kind, for Lockwood is not backward in expressing his likes and dislikes. He writes with a hyperbolic gusto that was once common and is now rare: Melbourne is not simply a rough port, it is “the most notorious port in the world”. He relates the iniquities of the bosses and the resolution of the workers with the moral fervour of the muckraker. His punchy prose and epigrammatic chapter-heads (“No Second Rome From ‘The Coalition of the Banditti’: Our First Stevedores Toiled Under the Lash”) would make John Norton envious.

There are also some noticeable reconsiderations of older prejudices. The racist hostility to strike-breakers is criticised. Lockwood recalls the “well-justified interruption” of the daughter and wife of a wharfie as he was gathering his material: “What about the women? Why don't you interview some

of them about their trials and worries?” He followed the suggestion.

He knows the industry and evokes its customs and language – the pickup, the slingbacks, the intimidation, the primitive amenities and complete disregard for safety and human dignity. Perhaps he knows it too well, for the book tends to assume the reader's familiarity with the operation of the stevedoring industry and its labour market.

At the same time he paints an extensive historical backdrop that is sometimes unreliable (he mis-spells Higinbotham, has David Syme at the *Age* too early, kills Tom Edwards prematurely in Bloody Sunday, creates a Chief Justice of the Arbitration Court and turns a Chief Justice of the High Court into a Speaker of the House of Representatives) but is unfailingly entertaining and instructive.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this history is its criticism of waterfront militancy in 1928. Here Lockwood breaks most sharply from the older orthodoxy that saw the Federation as the hapless victim of an assault prepared legislatively by Prime Minister Bruce and Attorney-General Latham, and abetted by Judge Beebie who handed down an infamous new Award. When the wharfies refused to accept the assault on their conditions, they were subjected to legal penalties of unprecedented severity and driven from the wharfs with brutal excess.

Lockwood certainly sees Bruce and Latham as villains. He explains the provocative iniquity of Beeby's Award and Commissioner Blamey's police. But he is also critical of the union leaders. They were irresolute and disunited. Worse, they hopelessly misjudged the chances of success and prolonged the strike action long after its ruinous consequences were apparent with consequent victimisation and expulsion from the industry.

The condemnation of excessive, impractical militancy seems to foreshadow the more astute leadership of Jim Healy after he became General Secretary of the Federation in 1937. The legendary Healy, who led the wharfies to better wages, better conditions and an end to the pick-up, was by no means averse to strike action but he seldom expended all his power on a single, all-out, protracted stoppage. But Lockwood goes further than this, and indeed finds the mild criticism of union tactics in 1928 advanced by Healy in his own earlier short history of the union to be quite inadequate. There are hints elsewhere in *Ship to Shore* that it is not Healy but a subsequent and still more moderate General Secretary, Charlie Fitzgibbon, who is to be credited with superior tactical insight. The sequel to this volume will be interesting.

Like Lockwood, Mark Hearn is also telling the story of an industry in decline. The New South Wales Branch of the ARU remains larger than the Melbourne branch of the WWF, but in both cases economic and technological changes have thinned the ranks. Again like Lockwood, Hearn devotes much of his book to descriptions of jobs that have disappeared and patterns of working life that are irretrievably gone.

He draws extensively on the testimony of older workers who recall the squalor of the fettlers' camps and the gruelling hours worked by women in the Railways Refreshment service. A good selection of photographs enhance these accounts.

Alongside this now-conventional social history there is an older form of union history, one that relates the union's organisational life and the shifting balance of forces in what has always been a politically lively union. Like the WWF, the ARU shifted to the left in the early part of this century and elected Communist officials by the 1930s.

In New South Wales the mercurial Lloyd Ross became State Secretary in 1935. But Ross broke with the Communist Party at the outbreak of the Second World War, and developed an anti-Communism that took him into the Congress for Cultural Freedom and posthumously to honorific status as the patron-saint of the New South Wales Labor Right in its current endeavours to rewrite labour history in its own image. His silhouette adorns the cover of publications sponsored by the New South Wales Labor Council.

There are some perilous shoals here and it is to Hearn's credit that he managed to steer clear of them. He makes room in his history for left-wing opponents of Ross and right-wing successors alike to tell their stories. But it is no easy task to produce a history commissioned by a union executive on funds obtained from the Hawke government, especially when you deal with events that are still contentious. Just ask Tom Zubryzski, commissioned by the A.C.T.U. to make a film on trade unions. The measured quality of Hearn's closing chapters suggests just how difficult the task can be. Despite their anodyne constriction, I think it reflects well on his Project Committee that he was allowed to publish them.

*Stuart Macintyre is Ernest Scott Professor of History at the University of Melbourne. His most recent book is A Colonial Liberalism (O.U.P.) published in April.*

## "Out of Ireland have we come"

John Flaus

Patrick O'Farrell: *Vanished Kingdoms: Irish In Australia and New Zealand* (New South Wales University Press, \$39.95).

"Without doubt or question, colonial Ireland dies with me and my like - the transitionals." Thus the final, flinty historical judgement of this book, in elegaic tone with rising cadence; the judgement of a man born all but sixty years ago to immigrant Irish in a New Zealand coal and timber town, and grown to occupy a personal chair in History at the University of New South Wales.

This book's splendid jacket, with its self-conscious and - one might hope - ironic touch of gilt, also bears the legend "A Personal Excursion". This may be a caveat - nothing so craven as an apology - to his fellow academics, for there is much here to disconcert the shufflers of carpets and coughers of ink. Professor O'Farrell enjoys international esteem as a scholar in the field of Irish-Anglo relations, most recently with his *The Irish In Australia* (1986), but on this occasion he has deliberately let the mantle of historian slip from one shoulder. Here we find speculation, argument, anecdote, all with a glint of rhapsody, as much as we find History Proper.

Chapter One takes a firm grip on the reader's collar, but it is not a bully's voice that puts this case: as there is a secret history of Ireland waiting to be acknowledged and examined, there is a secret history of the Irish in early colonial Australasia, rarely detected by outsiders and even more rarely documented by them.

He asks us to consider the Irish who came here in the convict years. "Too much has been made of worn images of 'sorrowing exiles' and 'banished patriots'." Most of them were male criminals, young and poorly lettered; many had the Gaelic and English as their second language, acquired while in chains. They came from a land "glutted with history" to a land "starved of history". They brought with them a feudal sense of class and time, and a pagan sense of place and custom. They were all the descendants of kings. Their Christianity lacked much of the ornate, priest-driven devotionism of the modern stereotype, for this emerged in Ireland only in the wake of the great famines of the 1840s.

In this 'new' land most of them were without their priests for the better part of two generations. "The aborigines were not the only ancients who peopled early Australia." What happened amongst

the Irish in that first half century of the colony before they were joined by their compatriot priests, settlers and gold seekers? It is, and may ever be, a secret to recorded history.

O'Farrell argues that they would have made unexpected discoveries (the conditional mood is mine, not his) about the colonial condition. They were now in a minority, alone or in scattered coteries, their quasi-tribal roots severed, but there was a greater social mobility than in their homeland where rude manners made impassable barriers; in a landed economy with a shortage of labour, toil and enterprise could bring 'improvement' rather than endurance of a status quo; hope was an occasion for sweat, not tears. They were still land poor, but now they were time hungry. The future could be, and would be, different. They saw in their children an escape from the past in the taking of 'opportunity' (alas, to be measured in possessions and status), whereas in Ireland the coming of children made more feet to tread the same old wheel of the ages. Yes, ages, for those kingdoms recalled in song and story had vanished long before the ravages of Cromwell.

O'Farrell's "personal excursion" shifts abruptly from secret history to private history, from a broad canvas inscribed in invisible ink to portrait miniatures deduced from correspondence and mementoes. The speculations of the opening chapter are succeeded by a portion of biography. His subjects are an Irish man and woman, acquainted in their native Tipperary, who migrated separately to New Zealand just before World War I, and were married in 1920. They were his parents.

There must always be some tension in a biographical account of one's parents when the author excludes filially privileged information. The author's achievement is to qualify, successively, interest, respect and affection for Mai and Paddy O'Farrell through a stranger's perspective. Their Irish background, their early culture shock, part of their married life in remote, "casually terrible" Greymouth on the wild west side of the South Island, all this is seen under the historian's glass.

Thence from private history to social history, to the "prayer worlds" of post-1850 Catholicism in Australasia; to the teaching celibates who were the true ministers of piety, and to the priests, those enforcers of the wrath of God, who presumed feudal *oblige* for themselves while sundering the more delicate tracteries of paganism in their flocks.

As his social history shades into public, political history O'Farrell's distancing from his matter is a function of literary tone rather than historiographical method. It is an authoritative but idiosyn-

cratic 'voice', compelling patient audience but anticipating dissent. He reserves some of his hardest sayings for the senior clergy, the "Roman Irish". His reference to Cardinal Moran, that "he could see only Ireland when he beheld Australia", commands admiration for his epigrammatic skill, but his reference to a greater eminence, "the visible Mannix was, in part, for public consumption, an act, and knew he was an act", not only anticipates disputation from some quarters, but invites it.

The social history is more detailed but perhaps more questionable in its generalizations about a way of life, because of the narrowness of its particulars. Yet, for this reader, memories flooded in: minutiae, commonplaces, "Yes, I remember!", confirming this point and that (though I was disappointed to be told that the head of my grandmother's Sunday fox was a tin replica!).

O'Farrell's excursion moves back and forth like a conversationalist's thought across the borders of living memory, across the Tasman, across familial, parochial and national lines of intercourse. Besides his family he portrays a small assortment of politicians, clerics, authors and even Protestant little battlers who made their mark, large or small, upon their time. And some beyond their time. He introduces them as one does with examples that flit into mind during good talk, then nails them down with his historian's hammer which is always close at hand.

They are figures in a mosaic, part analytical, part intuitive, graced more with the felicities of analog than the accuracies of digital thought.

The Irish heritage in Australasia today is no less tortuous for being attenuated, as the green banners fade in the wide brown land. O'Farrell is emphatic that he is a native New Zealander and an Australian citizen, not an Irishman, and he speaks sharply about the ideological mess that is "multiculturalism" in this country. (I remember the rumbles that reached me in faraway Melbourne in the 70s when a non-Irishman was appointed parish priest in Sydney's Surry Hills.) His heart aches for the folly of would-be Irish who nurture a fanciful nowhereland in their personal dreamtime, and for the frustrations of those transitionals who yearn for a heritage, a songline to the ancients, to which their own forebears are indifferent (some of the book's finest passages are in the brief intellectual portrait of Vincent Buckley).

O'Farrell takes up his hammer to deliver some unpleasant judgements: that the Irish who came to Australasia after the famines "lost their love of the land that crushed them", and "the cost of clinging to the faith of their fathers in Australia was the



abandonment of most else culturally characteristic of their fathers", even though the waning of myth and balladry was the fault of the Irish at home. These have the tone and force of judgements even when preceded by such cautions as "there is a case to suggest . . ."

Whilst affirming that his nationality is not Irish, he speaks bitterly of his fellow nationals, descendants of the Irish in this country, who have become indistinguishable from the other addicts of comfort (we call it "standard of living"), swaddled in chauvinist complacency, contemptuous yet acquiescent of the legislative and judicial systems our ancestors fought for.

In the final chapter, "Death", O'Farrell returns to the subject of his family, elegiacally drawing together the intimate and the chthonic.

I am now permitted a personal grumble from my corner of the chimney. Two things: O'Farrell takes little account of the Irish in local government. Though moribund today, our Australian Tammanys presided over a kind of tribalism in the mean streets of Sydney and Melbourne over the past hundred years. The more important thing: by my observation, colonial acculturation of the laity proceeded at different rates for men and for women, for dome-creepers and homesweepers. For the men invocation of their native land was a matter of fading bitterness and windy pride, for the women it was a deeper, more enduring sadness. Thus it was the influence of the women that was more likely to be passed on to the second generation. O'Farrell lays out the evidence but is reluctant to draw the conclusion.

Grumbles apart, I embrace this book. To be Oirish about it for a moment: does this shifting between the secret, the private and the public, between Australia and New Zealand, between seven or eight generations, amount to a stew of opinion and haphazard fact-gathering, or is it a tapestry of disguised cunning? To respond Oirishly: might it not be the one and the other at the same time?

Patrick O'Farrell reveals a part of another secret: beyond the rational career decisions to that dimly glimpsed, logically inaccessible centre of any historian's motivation: why this discipline? why that field?

His use of the English language is evocative or provocative, as required, though occasionally more decorative than substantial (a fault I may share it with him). His syntax writhes as elegantly as Celtic calligraphy.

The hardback edition is handsomely produced by New South Wales University Press with many illustrations, of which the haunting contemporary

photographs are by Richard O'Farrell (a relative, no doubt).

You might say to me "Where is the summation, the sensitive consumer advice? You have not come down with a judgement about this book." Oh yes, I have.

*John Tobin O'Fearnha Flaus, actor and film critic, was born in Australia, a contemporary of Patrick O'Farrell and a child of "transitionals". His share of the Vanished Kingdoms is inherited from his grandmothers, illiterate Irish women who came to this country at the turn of the century. Though resident in Melbourne for most of the past twenty years, his spiritual home is East Sydney and its environs, and he remembers the Dolphin in Crown Street in the days before it was "the coppers' pub".*

## Good Murderous Fun

Michael Keon

Alister Kershaw: *Heydays: Memories and Glimpses of Melbourne's Bohemia 1937-47* (Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).

Australia now has its very own Camelot: Alister Kershaw's Melbourne of 1937-47, complete with knights in shining armour, fair maiden, doughty jousting, and an ogre who is one of the worst slips in recent literary imagination.

If Alister's preferred Lancelot is the late Adrian Lawlor, then Alister himself stands in as a Galahad - whose "sawtooth integrity" I myself testified to in print two or three years back. Indeed, that "integrity" is now turned mildly on myself. Did Alister, as I wrote, on a 1937-47 youthful "nocturnal hike" of ours recite in full Richard Aldington's hour-long *A Dream in the Luxembourg*? Alister finds it a bit hard to accept my attribution of such mnemonic prepotence. But that is how the Alister of that time still does charge one's current imagination of him. An imagination also supported, of course, by so much of Alister's subsequent tilting away at men and events through his long years of acerbic broadcasting from France for the ABC, his staunch friendship through fair and foul with Aldington, such robustly original or trenchantly humanist works as *A History of the Guillotine* or *The Pleasure of Their Company*, and, rewarding above all, his *The Beginning & The End - Collected Poems*. (Curiously, unlisted in *Heydays*' 'biodata'.)

The present work looks to the Melbourne of what Robert Hughes has seen as The Angry Decade of artistic revolt against long-prevailing cultural philistinism. For Alister, things were a good deal more jocund, people a good deal more blithe, than

angry. At the Petrushka Cafe, "tea in glasses was Old Saint Petersburg, wine on the table was Paris in the springtime". Also, that maid of Camelot, "the bewitching young artist, Alannah Coleman", would likely turn up in an Egyptian fez, Bersaglieri cape, Breton fisherman's striped shirt, velvet trousers.

Then, Alister's Lancelot, Adrian Lawlor. Painter, man of letters, *bon vivant* as much of the spirit as flesh, Adrian was one of those rare souls whose whole did add up to something even more dazzling than its parts. With Adrian present, the world always did seem larger, hopes higher, energies more committable and sustainable.

There is, in splendid particular, Alister's Adrian not slaying but redeeming the Philistines of our public bars. Discoursing to Alister and friends on Proust or the like, Lawlor would turn to quell derision - "Cop the bloody pansy!" - from "stevedores, wharfies, and truck-drivers" with an aesthetic escalation that "Within minutes . . . would have his audience meekly soliciting further information about Proust".

Yes, indeed. But Adrian's own account, as Alister reproduces it, of Adrian's eyeball-to-eyeball verbal bout with Noel Counihan? I suspect I knew the redoubtable Counihan better than did Alister, and must say I cannot for a moment see all Adrian's steely aplomb and virtuosity of tongue saving him from a Counihan haymaker counter-punch.

And our Galahad Alister himself tilting with the

sinisterly uptight Calvinist-Philistine ogre, John Reed. Reed offered to publish a volume of Alister's poems. He showed Alister a proposed Sidney Nolan dust-jacket. Alister told Reed - twice - it was "shit". Alister's memory - though he says he may have 'dreamed' it - has Reed "staggering back and throwing a protective arm across his face". Anyone who knew Reed for what he was and was not, will assure Alister he did dream it.

The real upshot of all this, of course, is that Reed, felled though Alister believes him to have been, got back on his feet, and *published* Alister's poems (with an Albert Tucker dust-jacket)!

Now, Alister is a true, fine poet. But had he cut up so with myself as publisher I rather think I would not only have failed to bring out his work, but would have heartily huffed-and-puffed the over-inflated fellow right out the door.

Nonetheless, we do need more of Alister's own phillipics. Also a full-dress biography of him. It would be a real "peak in Darien". And that old-fashioned thing: good clean murderous fun!

*Like Alister Kershaw Michael Keon as a young writer contributed to the journal Angry Penguins. He went on to a distinguished career as a journalist and novelist in Asia and Europe. His novel of the Malayan communist insurgency The Durian Tree was filmed starring William Holden. he now lives in Melbourne and is writing memoirs.*

## floating fund

BARRETT REID writes: A comparatively small sum this time "Now is the winter" but alleviated by the generosity of those who donated \$242 from 28 February to 17 May. Our thanks to: \$50, B.J.; \$30, C.W.C.; \$26, J.C., J.B.; \$25, J.P.; \$20, C.C., D.D.; \$11, M.H.; \$10, G.P.; \$6, P.A., J.B., T.G. & L.R., F.S.



## WRITERS IN PRISON

## P.E.N. Report, 8

While our world leaders are congratulating themselves on the liberation of Kuwait and the slaughter of thousands of Iraqis, it is worth considering the human rights record of some of the countries involved. Turkey, for example, has one of the worst records for the imprisonment, killing and 'disappearance' of journalists and writers. On 4 September last, Turan Dursun, a religious journalist who had angered fundamentalists with his criticism, was shot and killed outside his home. The government expressed horror, but his editor considers them to blame for allowing the spread of fundamentalism. Meanwhile, at last report 17 other writers were in prison on such charge as "making communist propaganda". Another, Nurettin Ozturk, editor of *Kurtulus*, has disappeared, and his mother thinks he has died in police custody, and Fatma Yazici is in hiding to avoid serving sentences for, amongst other charges, publishing the Helsinki Watch Committee report on the Kurds. Inquiries should

be addressed to Prime Minister Yildirim Akbulut, Officer of the Prime Minister, Basbakanlik, 06573, Turkey.

In Iraq itself, Roberto Fabiani, correspondent for the weekly *L'Espresso*, disappeared after leaving his hotel in Kuwait City to file a report on the invasion, and is reported to have been taken to Baghdad. According to the Organisation for Human Rights in Iraq, eight Iraqi writers and editors have "disappeared in the Prisons of the Iraqi regime", and no-one knows their fate. Enquiries at this time are probably futile. However, in Morocco, which has been sympathetic to Iraq, the poet Ali Idrissis Kaitouni was arrested three weeks after the appearance of his poetry collection, *Sparks*. By his own account he signed a confession after being tortured, and has been sentenced to 15 years imprisonment. Enquiries can be sent to His Majesty King Hassan II, Palais Royal, Rabat, Morocco.

