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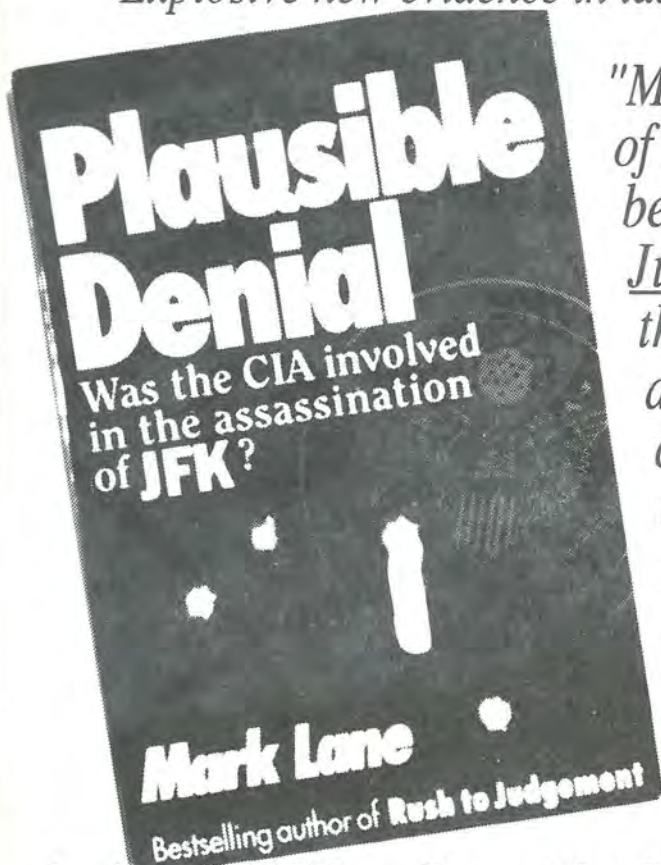
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He twitched on the floor, back jerking against the hard boards, dust catching and matting his fine grey hair, the spittle-flecked dry lips. Heavy boots slammed and jittered, the skin of one knuckle raising a pale dotscreen of blood.

The muffled tattoo of this 57-year-old *Hampelmann* slowed, moisture seeped from crutch and mouth a stream. Finally, electrical storm havoc wreaked, eyes forward and not rolled in the old skull, he wept child's tears.

"Schwitters, mein Gott, are you alright?"

"Herr Z, Herr Z, I am sorry, I am, sorry. Not since I was a boy, no..."

"How lucky we have not tables or chairs, eh? Have you hurt yourself anywhere?"

Herr Z knelt at Schwitters side, checked the limbs swiftly, the back of the poor head.

"No pain?"

Schwitters laughed weakly at this sad joke. Z dragged him up on the lumpy thin palliasse, cradled him.

"Quiet, quiet. Sleep now?"

Entering the requisitioned garret room for the first time, Z's nostrils had recoiled ever so slightly. Remnants of internment camp food in a state of becoming objects, or parts thereof, lay on the floor: also pieces of lino, shattered glass, small batches of glue, scraps of wood and wire. Unrecognisable matter in change; growing new life, colors and odor in its decay. Schwitters stepped proudly over it to an amorphous mass in the corner.

"This I will use for my next work of art."

"What is it, this...stuff?"

"Porridge. It is, was...My own ration, scraps from others."

"Food? People have hunger, Schwitters, and you must play with it? There is still a war on, you know. I don't understand."

"Do you want to eat it?"

Herr Z regarded the square-cut lump of porridge

Schwitters proffered to him impaled on old army issue cutlery, its skin with a faint red tinge.

"No. Thank you. No."

Schwitters crossed the room in two strides and gestured at the window.

"Look, Herr Z, here will be the column I am building. I will have to keep the blackout on it and build around, but this will make a very nice centre-piece I think."

Both men regarded the tiny picture presented by the window: British barbed wire, British coastline, British sea beating incessantly against the break-water.

"You see what we have in common apart from our place of rest, as it were? Our opposites. I make towers and columns inside buildings and you make holes outside and inside the earth."

"I don't think coal-mines and powerstations can be identified as holes, Schwitters. Besides, that is not exactly what I am engaged in at present."

"One day, Herr Z, perhaps, perhaps. I have made a tower for many years now. My *Ka De Ee...*"

"*Ka De We?*" The Berlin department store? Ah, that food hall..." Z's lined grey face seemed to smooth and expand at the memory.

"No no no. Not the *Kaufhaus Des Westens*. Though yes, my friend, a good analogy. No. *Ka De Ee. Eeee!* The *Kathedral Des Erotische-Elends* (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)."

"Now I understand. You were in cabaret in Berlin."

"No. This is the tower I have built in my home in Hannover. It takes up all three storeys from the well in the cellar, to the attic. A column – departments you are correct – filled with grottoes, niches, nests. Not all I can tell you, but some they contain: the Great Grotto of Love, the Goethe Cave, the Cave of Murderers, of Deprecated Heroes, of Sex Crimes, of the Nibelungen. Also caves for my family, my friends. And yes, maybe one for you too – I had one of brown coal and the like for the Ruhr."



"Here in this closet room, this place we are in, you wish to construct something like that?"

"Yes, why not? Wouldn't you be building a powerstation if you could? You see, the two of us, we like to make new worlds."

Herr Z exhaled through his nostrils and pushed back his gold-framed spectacles.

"We are classified enemy aliens, *Kamerad*?"

"But one day maybe, they will come to their senses and let us out. Before this war is over, early 1941 at the latest I have heard."

"Then why begin your tower or column here?"

"Because also one day, they may not let us out."

Schwitters slumped on his haunches, back against the wall to the side of the window.

"You called me *Kamerad*. Not me. From 1914 to 1918 I paraded Hannover's grounds on my own. But you, I think, are or were a good German?"

"When I was a young man. France, 1916. Iron Cross First Class."

"Ha! *Eisernes Kreuz Erste Klasse. Ee Ka Eins* – you see you see! We fit: *Ka De Ee Ka De We Ee Ka Eins*."

Z couldn't see the other man's face clearly in the darkness against the window to the sea, but heard his soft giggling after the repeated mantra which stopped abruptly.

"They gave you the *Ee Ka Eins*, and tattooed numbers on the skin of your arm, but not at the same time I think?"

Z walked to the window so its light and space only filled his vision, if he squinted. Looked not at the other man.

"We are here, Schwitters. And presently, that is all."

For the Camp Cultural Evening, Schwitters declaimed his Merz lecture. After the other's performances of Schubert and Beethoven, orations of Goethe and Schiller, then someone's guttural bravado in Shakespeare, he began:

The language is only a medium to see. Not to understand.

Do you understand that?

You understand?

Do you really understand?

Do you understand that there are things which you cannot understand?

You understand, it is difficult, not to understand.

Why speak a language which you shall not stand under?

Why paint a picture which you shall not read...

Laughter: poor old man, what a fool. Some with disgust hissed: where and what does he think he is – a Dada on the Berlin Kurfurstendamm in the twenties? How sad and pathetic, it's 1940, this is the real world: senility in the Irish Sea, an internment camp on an isle of man.

They listened, gossiped, laughed on, would not speak to him. Not worthy of it.

More often now, he losing them, losing all world dropped against the good and dirty ground. Sand dust dirt, with tears and body leaks. Storms overtaking his old carcass: it fitful its own worst enemy.

In the afternoons, on scraps of toilet-paper, Herr Z practised his English:

I do not believe in fate

There is a flaw/flow? in the world

(speak how)

the muttering of the guns

the streaks of the searchlights

it is the conditions that are to blame.

They looked at one another

he stroked the other's face

At night Schwitters and Z rolled together, empty sagging folds of skin and damp overcoats rubbed for warmth. Mornings, the bedsheets had to be returned due to a camp-issue regulation against luxury. Even during his sojourn in K.Z. Buchenwald, Herr Z reflected, he had been able to keep his own rough cotton sheets. 'Their' own here, two men to a bed necessity ruled.

Schwitters began construction of his column. It was Spring.

Rumors and gossip flew around the camp. Invasion, suicide, the promised land. Jews and not Jewish. Humans not human. Stories circled, swooped, soared. No letters, books, newspapers: starvation for men cored to life on the word.

First rollcall second rollcall. One day a separate list of names was read off.

There would be a ship.

"I have heard it may be Canada. Or Australia. But we are not to be told."

"Australia? What is there?"

"For myself some most interesting things: the largest brown coal deposit in the world, powerstations. I also believe there are a lot of sheep."

Schwitters did not look convinced.

"I think, Herr Z, I am almost glad to remain here, whatever happens. Though I do like sheep. Such innocent creatures."

He reached inside his coat.



"Here, I have made you a gift."

"Why, Schwitters, thank you. Most kind."

"You told me your story of the alphabet – how your name beginning with a Z made you last on a list and saved your life. I can admire German order and propriety at times too, you know?"

Herr Z stared at the small cigarette-pack sized collage Schwitters had placed in his palm, with its centrepieced red S.

"You see, S.Z., every time you look at this I will tell your story back to you. I know your first name is Siegfried, and so I have made you an S of your self, made this S big and red. For it now, then, there – is the beginning again of your life?"

"No porridge?"

"No, no porridge involved, well, some in the glue maybe. Would you have rather'd a portrait sketch of my old face?"

An extra lens of tears washed for a moment over Z's eyes.

"No, no Herr Z. This is a story, this is important. You look at this S and I will be telling it back to you: the beginning again of your life?"

Z clasped the other man's hand.

"I want to tell you, Schwitters... You know, some of the men say you are mad calling yourself an artist, that you are crazy, deluded. That you make these things because you are never good enough at painting real pictures of people and so forth. But I know it isn't true, I know they are wrong."

Still clasping Schwitters' hand, he carefully, formally, inclined his head,

"I bid you a most gracious thanks, honored sir."

"So. And now we should sleep I suppose. The last time. If by chance I fall asleep and am so when you leave in the morning, will you wake me so we can say goodbye?"

"Yes, Schwitters. Quiet now?"

Schwitters did sleep, curled on his side. Herr Z stared unfocusedly at the ceiling.

Herr Z dozed, his chin fallen open against his shoulder. Schwitters sat up, arms hunched over his knees, chanting to himself.

Thirty-seven different attitudes were lethargically nudged into as repose. Before dawn, the cycle of exhaustion, sleep, cold, semi-wakefulness, fear, worry, exhaustion, had run through its course repeatedly, finalising in one particular condition.

A *Hampelmann* with plenty of space in the bed, human body-sized space. A *Hampelmann* yes like such a jerky wooden toy with lesser level of warmth, not spine of heat centre. A *Hampelmann* old with emptiness, no sound of breathing or snoring.

Damp post-dawn. Schwitters sat up suddenly,

eyeballs swivelled round the room. Z had gone, body and possessions meagre, goodbyes stolen out with him too.

There was a ship. Had been. Several seas and oceans, months, hardly skies, locked in a filthy stinking hold, gunbutts and curses. But the S.Z. remained intact.

There was no invasion. Schwitters sat, slept, knew the impression of another body, writhed on the floor infrequently. The porridge grew growths upon growths. Natural order kept on attempting to re-establish itself, particularly in decay.

The world slowly turned upside down for Herr Z, then halted.

Ever-present barbed wire now fronted a sea only of paddocks. This wire drawn in coastal mills not far from a desert inland. This wire aping British but stronger, tougher. Different stars. Southern Cross ablaze over a lonely figure in an overcoat. Hell, Hay, Booligal, years.

Then, war over.

London: Schwitters. Melbourne: Herr Z.

For both, rented rooms, more years, trudging back to the edge of the bed at night.

Hours from their respective metropolises, Schwitters discovered the Lake District, Mr Z went to the Valley.

Trapped willingly in the ridiculous prettiness of a Derwent colored-pencilbox picture, Schwitters wished he could ignore the damp and cold inevitable in such an illustration. But the old body wouldn't let him. It fitted on, snapped femurs, shut down arteries; temporary paralysis one side, then blindness the other, heart waiting for arrest.

He found a stone barn, began construction of his greatest Ka De Ee. Sleeping twenty hours, working four, his previously bleeding lungs settled with the damp coat of plaster-dust inside them. Once a week he turned out a pretty landscape for sale to the tourists – enough money to eat. While the rain poured in through the barn, he fantasised about coal unrationed and warm, remembered his now bomb-flattened Hannover home, and painted an S in one constructed niche (oil paint to last, yellow).

The year turned. Things once liquid stayed frozen.

The body ceased.

Mr Z kept Schwitters' picture with him always. Carried it to work in his brown leather briefcase with the S.Z. gold-stamped carefully on the corner. This case S.Z. protected the internal, the story S.Z. had told and been retold.



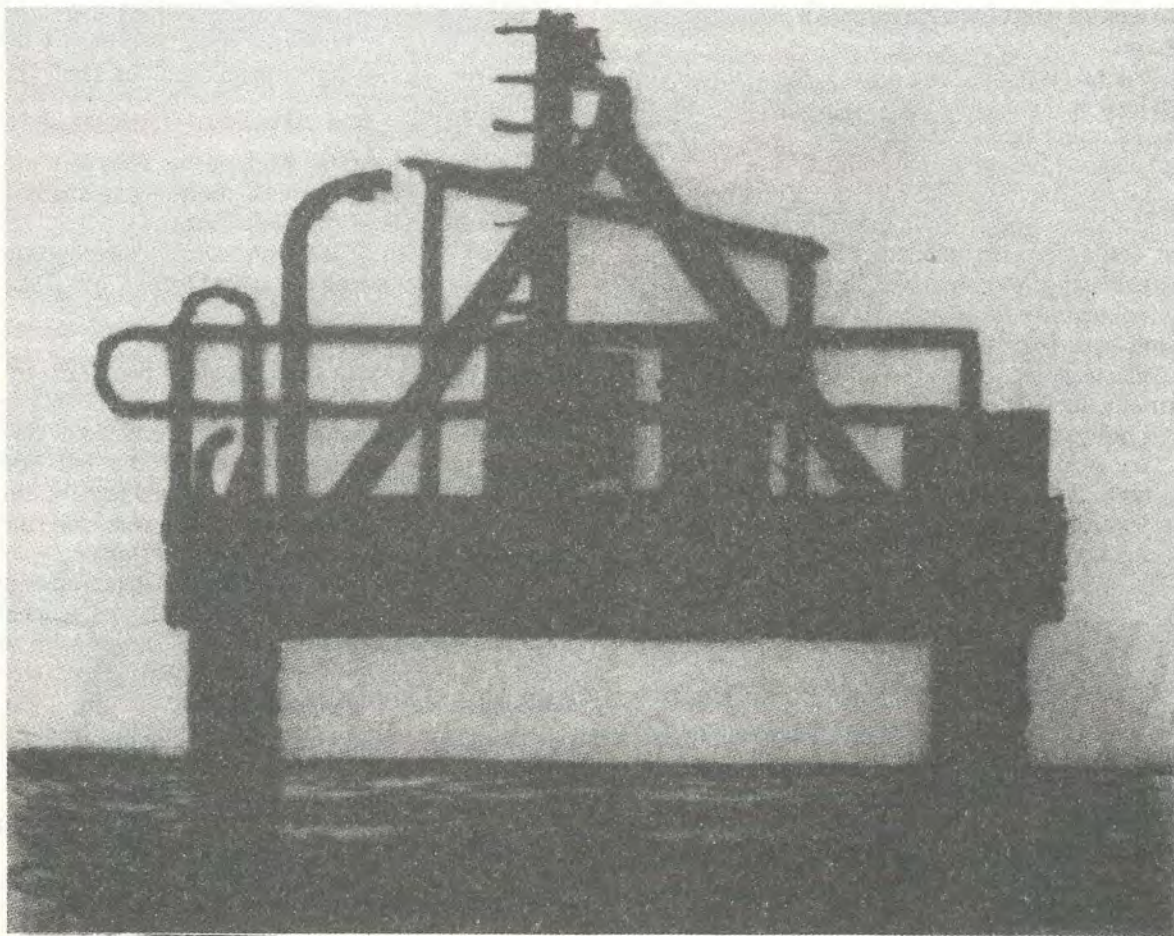
Sweat soaked his shirt, his tie some days a sodden choking ring around his neck. The coaldust blowing off the opencut (Largest Brown Coal Deposit In The World), its conveyors and powerstation, showed a new patina to his skin. Day after day century heat. He followed the truths, the laws of engineering, building a new world in the new world, and still made occasional notes of his English: jerry builder, jerry built, jerry.

The crust of the opencut smouldered in spots, sparked. Small flames caught daily. Fires put out, water sprayed on the breaking down skin, it simply wouldn't stop, inert. In the fresh deep cut to the centre, tree stumps were found, spores, crush-preserved for eons, turning black and brittle with air.

Moisture-laden clouds from the powerstation billowed into the hot air of the Valley. There were towers in the turbine hall many storeys high.

No Schwitters towers stand. Z also dead. Half a lifetime, two halves of largely separate lifetimes later, such acidic clouds roof that hemisphere of the old world: raining, suffocating; rivers lakes trees forests won't stop dying. Such amorphous ephemeral things (clouds) once ignored.

Schwitters fragments and pictures all store exalted, ph & rh museum-balanced, appreciating in international value annually. All but the S.Z. – cased, cracked by hot sun, eaten up by moisture – and the porridge.



*Rick Amor: Sea Structure. Drypoint*



Only one rat deserves to be famous in Australian art. Painted by Ludwig Becker during the Burke and Wills expedition of 1860–61, it is *rattus villosissimus*, otherwise known as the longhaired or plague rat. It is known as the plague rat not because it carries some bubonic pestilence but because it sometimes swarms across inland Australia in vast numbers, from north-western New South Wales to the Barkly Tableland. On a small sheet of grey paper, just fourteen by eighteen centimetres, Becker not only showed one of these rats in profile but also painted a portrait of its face and two details of its claws; underneath he gave a written description of its appearance.

This watercolor has all the hallmarks of art in the service of science—a tradition which started in Australia with the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1770. Cook was accompanied not only by the naturalist Daniel Solander and his assistant, Hermann Spoering, but also by the artist Sydney Parkinson whose task was to make up for the limitations of written descriptions of specimens and the loss of color and form which often went with preserving them. Once Solander had described and classified what he had found, Parkinson sketched the specimens, and then Solander or Spoering preserved them for further study in England.

Becker did not have the opportunity to preserve his *villosissimus*. Before leaving Melbourne, he had asked the Royal Society of Victoria, which sent out Burke and Wills, for pillboxes and traps, alcohol and arsenic. But as part of the confusion and incompetence which saw the expedition start overladen with certain types of equipment and lacking in others, Becker left without any of these materials. Despite ample opportunity, the Royal Society also failed to answer his requests to send this equipment after him.

All Becker could therefore do was to paint and describe his specimens and, as artist and zoologist on the expedition, he did both himself. Since the key to the type of natural history illustration prac-

tised by artists from Parkinson to Becker and beyond was to convey as much information as possible, he showed the rat from different viewpoints. As corroboration as much as elaboration of his drawing, he recorded, for example, that the rat's nose, ears, feet and tail were covered with small white hairs and that its upper lip sported five rows of bristles: the first three black, the lower two white. And he painted with marvellous delicacy—almost microscopic precision.

Yet as science Becker's painting is hardly significant because his rat was *not* a species new to European zoology. One had already been collected thirteen years before, in 1847, by Thomas Wall, the naturalist on Edmund Kennedy's expedition to the Barcoo. The following year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had announced this discovery. Six years later, that great entrepreneur of art, science and publishing, John Gould, had included Wall's specimen in his three-volume *Mammals of Australia*, dubbing it the longhaired rat because of the many long black hairs down its back, and showing it both frontally and in profile.

When compared with other animals he painted, Becker's notes on the longhaired rat are also hardly illuminating. While physical description of his specimens was always Becker's primary concern, he often recorded something of their diet and habitat. In other words, he showed at least some interest in what we now know as ecology—a term coined only in 1866—and the relationship between animal and place, species and environment. When writing, however, about the longhaired rat, Becker described its appearance as if classification of the species was all that mattered; as if the contents of Australia were simply to be catalogued rather than understood.

Why then did Becker even bother to paint the *rattus villosissimus* and why does it deserve to be better known than Gould's earlier drawing, let alone famous?

Becker painted the rat when he was one of the



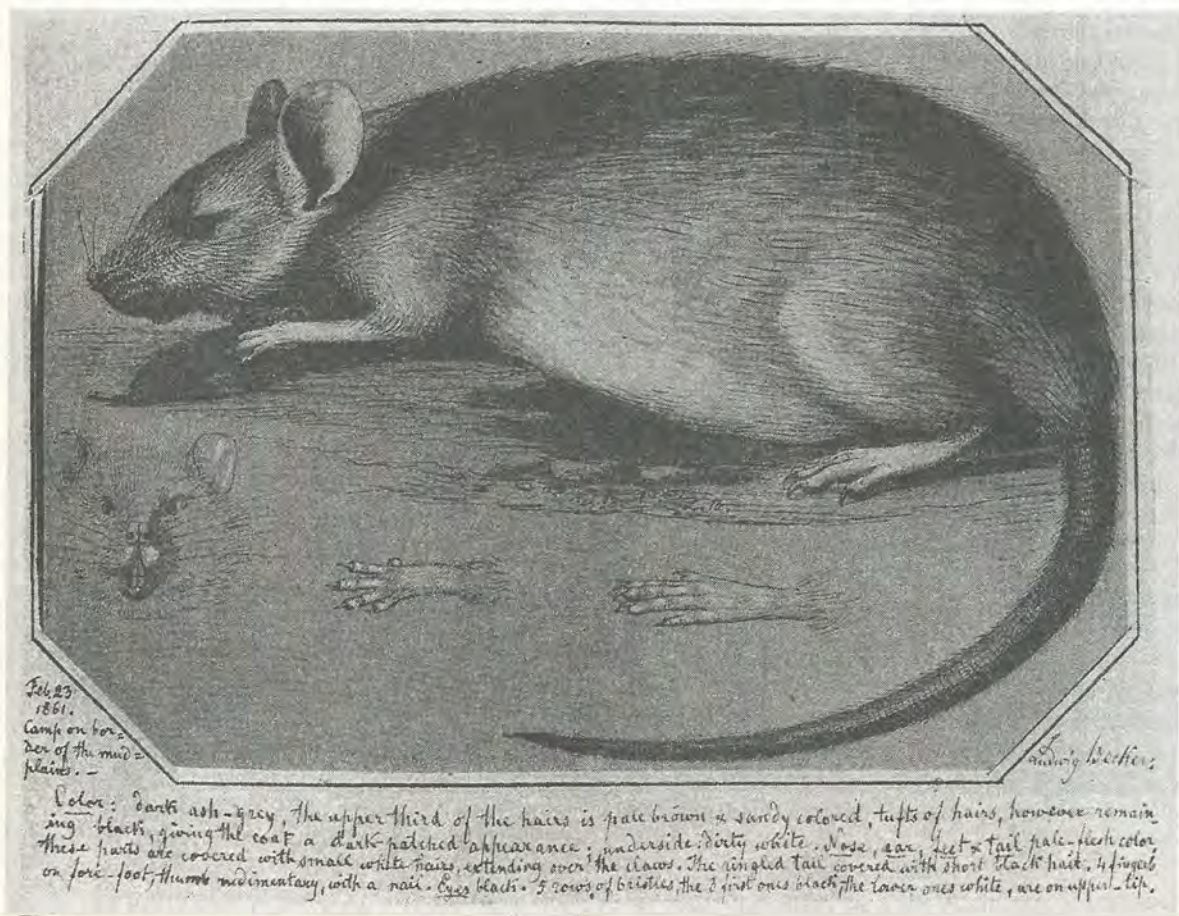
rearguard which Burke left on the Darling in October 1860 while he raced off for Cooper's Creek and hence the Gulf of Carpentaria in order to be first across Australia. Three months later, this rearguard led by a local station manager, William Wright, finally set out in mid-summer to find none of the good grazing lands which Burke had excitedly reported as he hurried north. Creeks running when Burke had passed though were dry; Torowotto, half way to the Cooper, was no longer a handsome lake but a labyrinth of shallow channels, grey-white from all the clay suspended in it.

Becker painted the rat at a camp between Torowotto and Cooper's Creek where Wright expected the water to last four or five days but which the party's horses left dry within a few minutes of their arrival. Together with the expedition's cook, William Purcell, Becker stayed at this camp for more than three weeks in February–March 1861 while Wright sought out a possible route north and other members of the party returned south to fetch water. The situation of this campsite was appalling. It lacked both

natural shelter and fresh water and most days the temperature soared above 90 if not 100 degrees Fahrenheit. While Purcell idled away the days, Becker devoted himself to art and science. Apart from keeping a meteorological log, he finished seven paintings, starting with a dragon lizard and followed by the longhaired rat.

Becker may have chosen to paint this rat rather than some other species either in ignorance of Gould's work or uncertain whether the animal he recorded was the same as that already published by the Englishman. He may also have been keen to extend beyond the reptiles and insects which provided the subjects for most of his natural history drawings and paint at least one mammal during the expedition. If so, he was probably mindful of one of his instructions from the Royal Society that in selecting mammals he should play "particular attention" to nocturnal animals and mouse-like creatures because they were "most interesting". The longhaired rat fitted both these prescriptions.

Becker also painted the rat, however, because the



Ludwig Becker: *Rattus villosissimus*. 1861. Watercolour, pen and ink on grey paper, 14x13cm. LaTrobe Library, no. 47



summer of 1860–61 was one of those periods when there was an extraordinary outbreak of longhaired rats in central Australia. Kennedy and his men were probably the first Europeans to encounter one of these plagues. But the members of the Burke and Wills expedition would not have known this because information had not been published in accessible form. They probably thought themselves the first to experience this phenomenon (which makes it all the more remarkable that Becker confined himself to describing just the specimen before him).

For members of the Victorian expedition, as for later settlers in the area, the rats were a source of misery, attacking their supplies and ruining their sole attempt at agriculture: as the first shoots appeared, the rats promptly ate them. Whereas Aborigines of the area looked on the rats as a welcome supplement to their diet, the explorers saw them as a source of nourishment only when near death, and then depended on Aborigines to catch them. A few weeks before he died, Wills recorded that the local Yantruwanta people gave him "a couple of nice fat rats" which were "most delicious". But even then he did not try to trap any for himself.

Nowhere do the rats seem to have been worse than at the camp where Becker painted his specimen—the camp where Becker began to suffer from what was probably a combination of scurvy and beri-beri which led to his death two months later. While Becker called this place "Desolation Camp", other members of the expedition dubbed it "Rat Point". As described by Hermann Beckler the party's doctor, the rats were the "indisputable owners" of this territory. Every day they came out soon after sunset making the "wildest" noise, gnawed through every pack bag and bit the men as they tried to sleep. When the temperature hit 112 degrees early in March, Becker for once departed from his impersonal meteorological record. Their camp, he recorded, was "a very hell".

It is this context which distinguishes Becker's painting from the earlier lithograph of the longhaired rat in John Gould's *Australian Mammals*. Gould never even saw, let alone suffered the depredations of a live longhaired rat. The specimen he described and illustrated had been safely dead in Sydney's Australian Museum for five years before its directors obliged Gould by risking this only known example of the species and shipped it to him in London. Gould's work is therefore an example of objective, impersonal science; the rat was just another specimen which the colonies provided for one of the great figures of imperial science to include in one of his lavish catalogues of the world's natural products.

Becker, however, had none of the luxury of being able to draw his rat in a London studio or even at a table in the cool of a ship's cabin like Cook's artist, Sydney Parkinson. Becker's choice lay between his tent (where the temperature climbed even higher than outside) or the edge of a mudplain. On the twenty-third of February when he finished working on his longhaired rat, the temperature was still 90 degrees at 5 pm—hardly the easiest of conditions to work with watercolor and pen-and-ink. Wherever he worked there were the flies which, as Hermann Beckler recorded, "sucked the colours and inks from his quills and brushes, and threw themselves recklessly onto every damp spot on his painting".

For Becker the plague rat was also a hazard of daily life. A less professional artist might have conveyed some sense of this in his painting or at least in his descriptive notes. But Becker, an experienced natural history artist who had illustrated many scientific publications both in Germany and Australia, succeeded in transcending his situation. In turning the rat into art, he gave no hint of how these animals were despoiling the explorers' camp. This triumph of objectivity—the removal of the personal (except for the choice of subject)—now makes this painting all the more remarkable when one comes to it with an understanding of the context in which it was produced.

The art of science therefore provided a means for Becker to order and reduce the environment in which he found himself. When colonial artists painted landscapes or Aborigines the interesting question is usually how their preconceptions or the tastes of their market led them away from naturalism—how their idea of the noble savage, for example, prompted them to cast Aborigines in classical poses. When colonial artists painted natural history subjects, the interesting question is not what the artist added but what he or she omitted as a result of adherence to the conventions of objectivity. Gould's longhaired rat omits little or nothing. He probably knew no more of the rat than he included in his lithograph and text. But Becker's painting shows us just a fraction of what he had seen. It is this gap between what Becker recorded and what he knew, his art and his experience, which lifts his painting above the ruck of natural history illustration and ultimately makes it so memorable.

*Dr Tim Bonyhady's latest book is Burke and Wills: from Melbourne to Myth (David Ell Press, 1991). He is a member of the Urban Research Programme, the Research School of Social Science, ANU. He was a curator, Department of Australian Art, Australian National Gallery, and Boulton Fellow, Faculty of Law, McGill University, Montreal.*



When the note came from Joan Clarke to say that Dora Birtles had died, my mind went back to the Australia Day gathering years ago at Walter and Jean Stone's when I first met Dora and Bert, and I felt again the warmth of Dora's keen, lively, outgoing personality.

Beyond that, my memory went back to a small Left Book Club meeting in Malvern in the late 1930s. It was a period when people were thinking – and changing. There were a few communists there, but many of whom were not; one of them, I discovered as we talked afterwards, was a member of the Young Libs – or was it the Young Nats or the Young UAP in those days? – and we became good friends; later he became a leading member of one of the Soviet Friendship societies that helped build and strengthen the world alliance that finally dealt the death blow to fascism.

The Left Book Club for some years was an important part of that alliance. One of the books that we discussed at those Malvern gatherings was *Exiles in the Aegean*, by Bert Birtles. Bert and Dora Birtles had been overseas for some time, and had almost been forgotten by most Australians, but this book brought them into the forefront of the rapidly growing anti-fascist movement, not only in Australia, but on a world scale.

The book began with these words:

Within a few days of our arrival in Athens shots were fired in the Parliament. Two men were wounded, Cabinet Ministers involved...The incident took place at midnight on September 9, 1935. It was in fact a prelude to the coup d'état by which the Republican constitution was abolished and the Greek monarchy restored...

Bert and Dora Birtles had gone to Athens for a holiday together after a long period of separation. But they became caught up in the drama of witnessing a country lose its democracy. In a small boat in the



**Mosman adventurer, sailor, author, feminist and pacifist, the late Dora Birtles.**



darkness they landed on the island of Anaphi where men and women had been exiled for the crime of being opposed to fascism. Like many writers in many lands, the Birtles became aware that if the meaning of the early 1930s had been the struggle against the Depression with its unemployment and poverty, the meaning of the later 1930s had become the struggle to awaken people to the menace of fascism and the world war and genocide it was bringing in its bloody trail.

French writers Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland had helped in 1933 to call together in Amsterdam a World Congress Against War and Fascism representing some 30 million people for 27 countries. Czechoslovakian writer Egon Kisch had come from Hitler's death cells to Australia in 1934 to warn of the deadly danger of the men in colored shirts who looked like comic figures but who carried the germs of mass slaughter. Vance and Nettie Palmer had come back from Spain where they had seen the fascists strike in 1936; their daughter Aileen stayed to serve with the British Medical Unit. Vance and Nettie spoke out at meetings; Nettie became founder and active president of Melbourne's Spanish Relief Committee which not only supported the Australian nurses in Spain, but did a long steady job spreading the facts about the war.

And as a result of Kisch's visit, a small body called the Writer's League was formed in Melbourne, with a similar body in Sydney known as the Writers' Association, as branches of a worldwide anti-fascist organisation, the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture. Overseas members included George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster, H. G. Wells, Thomas Mann, and Alexei Tolstoy; in Australia the national president was Katherine Susannah Prichard.

The Writer's League in Melbourne was a small group, but full of life. Arthur Howells in his book *Against the Stream* remembered among its members Alan Marshall, John Harcourt, Aileen Palmer, Alan Moorehead, Judah Waten, Hal Porter, Dick Diamond and Frank Huelin; I can remember a brother of Harold Holt, the journalists Gavin Greenlees, Kim Keane and John Fisher. One of the by-products of the League was a small quarterly magazine called *Point*. Or rather, it had hoped to be quarterly, but the second issue began with the apologetic statement: "POINT NO. 2 appears six months after the first issue" – and after that, as far as I can remember, it faded away. Contributors to the second number included Hal Porter, Arthur Howells, Jack Maughan and Aileen Palmer. It can be seen perhaps as a forerunner of *Overland*. What was not viable in 1938 became so in 1954.

In 1937 the Sydney body, under the leadership of

enthusiasts like poet-journalist Bartlett Adamson, flourished to such an extent that it was able to propose amalgamation with the Fellowship of Australian Writers which, under the presidency of Frank Dalby Davison, accepted the move early in 1938. The combined body, while under Left leadership, was strong and broad enough to be able in 1938–39 to prepare a book for publication, *Australian Writers in Defence of Freedom*, with this imposing list of contributors: Miles Franklin, Dymphna Cusack, Furnley Maurice, Leonard Mann, Brian Penton, Kylie Tennant, Dulcie Deamer, T. S. Gurr, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Dora Wilcox Moore, Bert Birtles, Eleanor Dark, Jean Devanny, Bartlett Adamson, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Vance Palmer, Sir Isaac Isaacs, A. B. Piddington, Norman Lindsay, Brian Fitzpatrick, Nettie Palmer and Frank Dalby Davison. Technical wartime difficulties prevented the book from being published, but the fact that it was written is evidence of the strong opposition to fascism and oppression felt by writers of the 1930s.

Even in Europe Australian writers were in the forefront of anti-fascist activities. Dora Birtles, living and writing in London, became an active member of the women's section of the British Movement Against War and Fascism, and was selected as a member of a team of women to throw peace leaflets from the gallery over the staid members of the House of Commons during a speech by Lady Astor, who was one of the leading speakers for pro-fascist policies. The other members of the team were unable to carry out their task, but Dora hurled her leaflets over the startled members below, and was apprehended by officials and given a sentence of Detention Until the Rising of the House.

Building and strengthening the anti-fascist movement was not, of course, the only activity of writers in the 1930s. They also transformed the tiny Fellowship of Australian Writers, born in Sydney in 1928, into a broad and influential body with organisations in every State. A campaign was also launched against the Cultural Cringe – an allied campaign for the recognition of Australian literature and writer. Book Weeks, Literary Weeks, Children's Book Weeks – these became very much an essential part of the 1930s. To read the newspapers of the time is to get an impression of a movement that must have had a considerable effect on the thinking of ordinary Australians. Not only in the literary sphere – a national consciousness was beginning to emerge. The growth of this into the 1940s can be seen in the booklet *Australian Writers Speak*, which was based on nine radio talks by leading writers including Marjorie Barnard, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Gavin Casey, and Bert and Dora Birtles. The booklet is dated 1942, but it is



a flowering of trees that grew in the 1930s.

On top of that, the 1930s saw the transformation of the Commonwealth Literary Fund from a small pension scheme for sick and distressed authors into a major institution for encouraging the growth of Australian writing and publishing and in ending forever the days when writers like Shaw Nielson and Steele Rudd had to live in poverty.

The writers of the era also helped to end forever the days when Australian universities had no courses on Australian literature. At that time the Professor of English at Melbourne University, when asked why he did not include Australian literature in his courses, was reputed to have answered: "Australian literature? Is there any?"

Thirties writers had to spend a lot of time organising meetings, conferences and petitions, corresponding with one another, lobbying politicians, pushing Tin Lizzies to Canberra. In between they somehow found time to write, producing an impressive volume of literature, ranging from *Man-shy*, *Flesh in Armour* and *Capricornia* to *All That Swagger*, *The Great Australian Loneliness* and *Sugar Heaven to the Passage*, *Haxby's Circus* and *Old Days, Old Ways*: from the early novels of Eleanor Dark, Dymphna Cusack, Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw to the works of Ion Idriess, Frank Clune and William Hatfield to the poetry of Furnley Maurice, Kenneth Slessor, Hugh McCrae and the Jindyworobaks.

When one mentions the Jindyworobaks one has to put it on record that a few days after the death of Dora Birtles, news came of the passing of poet-mythmaker Roland Robinson, one of the finest of the singers who drew their inspiration from Central Australia and Aboriginal lore.

Dora Birtles, Roland Robinson... Nearly all the writers who made the Thirties such a seminal period are no longer with us. When I heard of the death of Dora Birtles (her husband Bert lives on, but Alzheimer's Disease has taken away his memory), I thought of her passing as the passing of an era. There is a certain truth in this, and it is good, I think, to see her death as an occasion to pay tribute to all the writers of the Thirties, to their determination, struggles, victories, and their gains for the future that we enjoy today. They were dedicated people, men and women who believed in something bigger than themselves – things like freedom and humanity, and the long Australian cultural and social tradition going back to the early years, to Eureka, to Henry Lawson and Mary Gilmore, right to the struggles that faced them in their own time.

But literature, of course, cannot be compartmentalised into decades. Each era develops into the next, blossoms into the next. Dora Birtles will be remem-

bered not only for her activities in the 1930s. Many Australians will remember her as author of *The Overlanders*, the story of the World War II driving feat immortalised in the Harry Watt film – a book that went through ten editions in 1947 and which has recently been republished as a Virago Modern Classic. Others will remember Dora as author of *North-West by North*, or for her children's novels or poems.

And to other Australians Bert and Dora Birtles will be remembered for a love poem that Bert wrote Dora, entitled 'Beauty', that was published in 1923 in the Sydney University magazine *Hermes*. Bert, who had been studying philosophy, was expelled as a result, and Dora was suspended for two years. It was an early incident in the long struggle for freedom of expression. Labelled "indecent" at the time, the poem can now be seen as a tender and sensitive piece of writing, and it was a fitting tribute that the *Mosman Daily* should have published it on Dora's death:

Two lone glad doves are sighing on the roof,  
Sending in mournful notes past the stars  
A faint tremble of wailing joy; the wind  
Is carolling, too – on his lute low crying  
An echoing gladness, echoing round  
The walls...lie still dear and rest awhile,  
Contented, our longing now appeased,  
Till we fall, like dreaming snowflakes, far  
Into a void of delightful sleep...  
Like a gentle wind, I feel your breathing  
And a still joy murmuring, dovelike  
through your blood.

In satisfied desire...

Oh two hot starts

Leapt up in your mad clasp and kissed  
The moon now glowing past the window ledge,  
And blotted out my mind...and now, you warm  
Still thing, are beautiful as any flower,  
Huddled snug to me...how sweet you are!  
A satisfying relaxation sleeps  
Upon your limbs, all beautifully white  
As ivory, warm as its touch is cold.  
Beneath me, and the fragrant roses spill  
Their perfume from the jar. Your moonlit hair  
Is on the pillow...Oh, move not dearest.  
Unfold not your warm limbs around me; let  
Me kiss your mouth, your eyes, your forehead,  
And your breasts...Oh, hold you ever  
in my arms,  
And passionately love your beauty not aloof...  
Dearest, you are so glad, glad as those  
Two birds aloft, still sighing on the roof.

*Len Fox was the Victorian Secretary of the Movement Against War And Fascism in the late 1930s, and wrote the 1988 history of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, Dream at a Graveside.*





*Rick Amor:  
In Barrigotic. Etching*



ROB FINLAYSON

## Speech: It's Incriminating

**Speech: It's Incriminating**, my friend Natalie said to me the other day. She's like that, she just comes out and says something like that in that sort of place at that time of day. Which? O all of them: a difficult sentence; in the street surrounded by people staring in the same shop window at the new video display, all watching our images watching our images; at the weekend when everyone's a bit frisky, looking for entertainment, something out of the ordinary, something to tell to everyone else when they're at home later, or back at work on Monday. See, she just says it and then I have to deal with it, and it's not easy, it's not welcome, though I'm very fond of her, and really, I suppose I'm fond of her because she says these things, not despite them, though at the time I just feel annoyed that she should say something like that that I have to find an answer for, though I know it's not even a question, that's the way Natalie asks a question, she makes a statement to a friend, to someone she calls a friend, me, otherwise she never asks any questions of me. No, not a one, not even, How are you today, not even that simple, she refuses. Or she doesn't think of it, I can't tell which. If she slipped up and said to me one day, casually, or strained, How are you today?, I might be able to tell from the context, the way she said it, whether she had really slipped up and therefore had imposed some sort of conscious regime on herself, or whether it was a Freudian slip as they say, or whether a bit of this and a bit of that, she's quite capable of that, I think. But she never has, so I have to wait, which isn't hard, she's such a darling. O yes, she said more, she went on after a few minutes, I couldn't speak, I was just standing there looking at all of us pulling faces, thinking how apt all this was, just like her, despite it being completely inappropriate, when she said, For example, I said to Michael yesterday, I could kill you, and today's he's dead. I was looking at her face on the video on a set that had terrible color mix so her face was all green when she said that and I looked at mine next to hers and it was

green too, it had just changed from red, which now I see as a lucky technojoke, but at the time seemed too vividly cruel, and again there was nothing I could say, though without thinking I put my hand in the pocket of her coat and grabbed her hand. Michael was her lover, and a philandering sort in a goodnatured way, quite upfront, all free love, somewhat of an anachronism, but goodlooking and charming, I'd even been tempted but couldn't because of Natalie, she took it all to heart, so when she said what she said I thought the worst, of course you would too, wouldn't you, especially if you knew her, she doesn't joke like other people, she's quite serious, or rather it's taken a long time for me to understand what she thinks is funny, to do that you really have to be with someone a long time, listening to them, even arguing with them, extracting definitions, watching them under different circumstances, trying out different statements and questions on them. But this time I couldn't tell, the way she said it was completely opaque. Perhaps she had killed Michael. The man next to her glanced at her when she said it, I saw his head move towards her on the screen, inclining towards her, as they say, trying to catch what she might say next. I had gathered myself by then and said, Let's go and have coffee, and tugged at her hand in her pocket, and she let herself be led away, to a lovely little café that we both adore, it's very quiet, with old-fashioned booths that go right up to the ceiling, so you're quite cut off from the other customers, it's like those old cafés I've seen in pictures of Paris, so we both felt at home and safe there, and I thought it best that we not be overheard, and she still hadn't said anything more, just gripped my hand back tighter, until we sat down and she couldn't any more because of the way we sat, facing each other across the table. Then the waitress came and I looked up to give her our orders and as I did the man from the window walked past her, and looked at us, and smiled! I nearly died! I couldn't look at Natalie, I thought it'd only upset her, I just



held my breath, I'd never done that before, and the waitress stared at me as if I'd gone mad, and I suppose I had by normal social reckoning, and then the man walked past the other way with a chocolate bar in his hand. I slid along the seat and looked after him. He was paying for it at the register, and then he left the shop. What a relief! And what trouble the imagination can make if you let it! I slid back to Natalie, who was smiling at me, though she didn't say anything. She looked so sad! Natalie, I said, whatever did you mean? What's going on? What's happened to Michael? Michael's dead, she said, and she started to cry. You poor darling, I said, and slid out of my bench and into hers and put my arms around her while she had a big cry, the poor thing, enormous sobs and coughings, unlike anything I'd ever seen before from her, so I knew that she certainly wasn't joking. The waitress brought tissues, and a glass of water, she'd obviously excused my behavior now that Natalie's seemed to explain it, and eventually she started to talk, just a little: I came home

last night and asked him where he'd been and he said he'd been at Corinne's fucking, and was tired. We'd planned to see a film and I could see he wasn't going to want to do that. I told him I wanted to see it. He told me to go by myself. I told him I'd rather kill him, it'd give me more pleasure. He didn't say anything then, he just got up and left. I went to the window to watch him. He walked out of the door of the flats and straight across the road. The car hit him and he didn't even see it. It carried him about a hundred metres. He was dead when I got to him. I spent the night at various institutions filling in forms. Natalie told me all this in her usual dry manner, though with more emotion than usual, and a few sobs. And then Natalie did it again, she said another one of those sentences. She said, And how awful, what began as a homage to an artist traversed a quotidian scenario and ended in a domestic cliché of the novelistic tradition. Is that it then? And that was her last word, she refused to speak after that. You can see how young she was, can't you?



# M IGRATION



JOHN JENKINS

## The Poetry of Robert Harris

Robert Harris: *Jane, Interlinear and Other Poems* (Paperbark Press, \$15.00).

*Jane, Interlinear and Other Poems* (Paperbark Press, 1992), is Robert Harris's fifth book. Like his four preceding ones, it contains some outstanding individual poems. More importantly, it brings together his major themes of the past twenty years, allowing us to appreciate his unique place and voice. *Jane, Interlinear* may at first seem a demanding book. Its pleasures are of a high order, and best enjoyed by those prepared to match, in the effort of their reading, the poet's intellectual rigour, and by those willing to participate in a poetic and spiritual adventure.

Placing this new book in the context of Harris's work as a whole, it is remarkable how truly he has followed his course. Just like Francis Webb before him, he remains a poet of the 'sublime ordinary' and of the 'ordinary sublime'. Harris may have rejected approaches, and various influences, but never his ultimate touchstone. As David Malouf notes, Harris is a poet "who understands that poetry is one of our last remaining activities in which reverence is paid, in which the holiness of things is recognised in a way that may be essential to the fullest expression of what we are".

None of this, however, seems to have been premeditated. Harris's poems often evoke ordinary experience; the feel of being improvised, of originating in a dialogue with something essentially hazardous. Of course they have been strenuously crafted, but the impression of freshness is vital when we look back at what has been celebrated and revealed: the hard-won dignity of ordinary men and women; their difficult lives touched with pain and splendor; and places and things illumined by our effort to understand them. To achieve this openness of response, and yet shape it with sure aplomb, is of the utmost difficulty.

Harris's emotional consistency has also allowed him an intellectual curiosity, the freedom to explore a range of styles, and a poise necessary to the refinement of his poetics. A ranging intelligence – one,

indeed, adamant of its freedom – is again evidenced in the tougher, intellectually demanding pages of *Jane, Interlinear*.

The book consists of five broad parts. The first, 'Seven Songs of Sydney', was written in 1990, about fifty years after the Australian warship *Sydney* was sunk, with all hands lost, by the German raider *Kormoran*. This seven-part poem tell us that "we are here on the anniversary / not of the battle / but of the search." That word "search" is a clue to the poet's regard for history. What he would like to salvage from that sea of forgetting is the vividness of lived experience, the tremor and heartbeat of bodily existence within the actual lived moment:

The sprawled, dark, heedless shore – it sang.  
The loom that was seen from the light on  
Cape Inscription,  
the machinery crashing in darkness,  
turning over,

torn loose, sang. The steel bound in  
giggling atoms  
sang. The nickel, the brass, the steam,  
they sang.  
And the armourer's grainy treasuries, disposed

in falling to shift and blow.  
The stars spread out in navigable beauty.  
The universe sang. It sang. The night,  
superb and physical, sang  
The waves sang with unforeseen vehemence.  
(From Part 5, *Everything Sang*)

The 'Sydney' poem has a dramatic structure, with the poet speaking on behalf of the captain, chief officers, the crew's loved ones and of idle story tellers who pass down tales of the *Sydney* to their grandchildren; and there's even a chorus of rumored survivors: "Then, had I lived, however imperfectly, / the last and only... / and I struck down, when it finally came, / whom / would I crawl across broken glass to phone?".





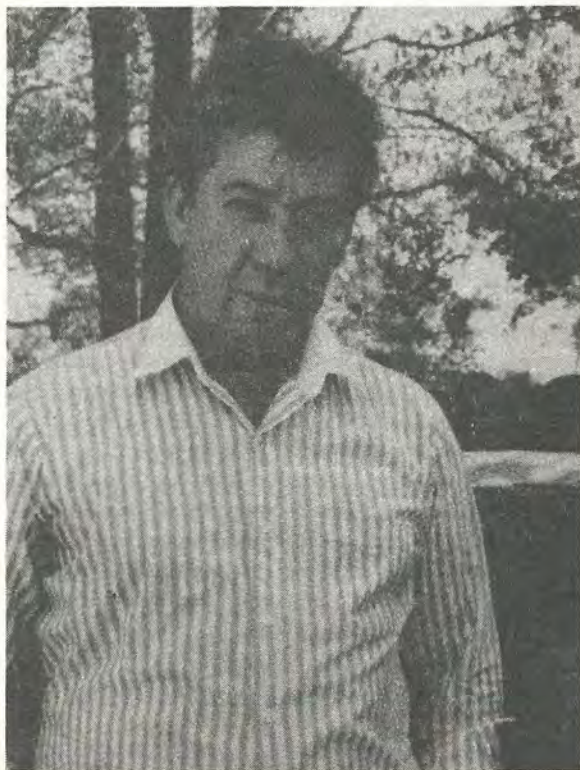
The poem's search for the *Sydney* and her crew is an extended metaphor. Harris's poetic view of history, and his Christian theological perspective, allow him, like Blake, to grandly affirm that time is in love with eternity, and that every moment of being and particle of matter mysteriously takes part in their love affair. History, then, becomes a vast theatre of loss and recovery; the *Sydney* can indeed, be brought up to the surface of the poem, and her crew found: "Hear the redeemed? They are already singing, / but *Sydney's* songs have gathered against / sea fury and cold, deep silences, / as ascent to the sunlit layer of life through steadily / falling nutrients, not any life-buoy / surfacing, but fifty years of the elegy, belated..."

This spiritual recovery takes place on every level – in terms of the collective cultural memory we call history, and through anecdotes, apocryphal stories, conjecture and rumor, even in the text of the poem itself. All of these are theatres of recovery, and are seen as charged with meaning, as having authenticity and value. The writing, itself, is a sort of final stage in a process of manifestation; instead of 'representing' the world, it is the last stage of a world's coming-to-be. This universe of evolving, vital being

is self-determining; that is, also a moral and ethical one. For every loss or recovery (of value and of meaning) some person, group of people or institution must bear the responsibility, must 'carry the can'. Even Carnarvon, where the German survivors were held: "At the pub they are saying, / 'Lynch them.' / 'Lynch their captain.' / And you, Carnarvon, you have to find, / unlock and expend the last resource; / you only, the smallest town on earth / must fight into civilization."

The central and title poem of the book, 'Jane, Interlinear', continues and deepens Harris's task of poetic recovery announced in 'Seven Songs'. A beautifully wrought and thoroughly researched poem in thirty parts, and the most delicately musical and intervowen of all Harris's poems, 'Jane' tells the story of Lady Jane Grey, the seventeen-year-old monarch who was installed on the British throne and reigned for just nine days before she was beheaded in 1554. According to Harris, Jane was the victim of a plot hatched by John Dudley, Earl of Northumberland, who, with the complicity of Jane's parents, forced her into a marriage with his son, and hoped to rule through her, as "every person [is] someone's / satellite" (*Part VIII*).

The 'Jane' poem is, again, itself a rich and extended metaphor, capable of many readings: as a parable of trust and betrayal, of sacrificed innocence,





and of the hijacking of poetry itself (and of the 'spirit') by the cynical legislators and ideologues, the credential peddlers, of this world. It may even be partly directed towards church hierarchies: a plea for women not to be excluded from the ministry. This quotation, from *Part v*, addressed to Jane during her music practice, also translates the poet's own ideas about time and history into musical terms: "Time/ held the notes/ apart and in relation,/ was medium/ and not an intervention./ What was your/ music, scholar,/ if not this, a/ play that sought/ a freedom launched/ by skill, in which,/ as sounds present and/ dispel crisis, to be/ at large in time/ at interval? Viol/ and the dulcimer,/ traps for time,/ so sound your pleasure/ past appeal/ to minds lost to/ conspiracies and/ alliance..." Yet, the primary value of this poem lies outside metaphor. To appreciate how this is so, and how Harris's concerns cohere in *Jane, Inter-linear* allowing his familiar themes to be strengthened, we can look back at some of his earlier poems.

'Concerning Shearers Playing For The Bride', subtitled "after a painting by Arthur Boyd", appeared in the 1973 book, *Localities*. The shearers are similar to the sad battlers, the underdogs, the poor and the destitute, who are championed in so many of Harris's poems of this period. The 'bride' is both the game they are playing and its prize. They are literally playing for their lives, and everything in the poem persuades you of the urgency of the game. The vivid but gorgeous language of its first stanzas becomes passionate and desperate, as not everyone can win: "... a wild faced loser who suddenly understood/ as he stood best dressed, triumphant, dark hair/ curled and waved and carefully slicked,/ that her bouquet had died/ as soon as it had been picked."

Like the shearers, Lady Jane Grey in the latest book is also dealt a rum hand, is equally compelled to play. "Grasp!", the poet exhorts in 'Shearers', "grasp now/ because life is a vapour,/ an irretrievable dreaming time/ composed of one point/ ever moving/ over beyond denuded trees/ where the frosts gather/ and damp winds lick at grass." This theme of the hazardous nature of history, of being compelled to wrest something of value from the contingency of experience, is restated in the *Jane* poems, this time with a radiating moral urgency that springs from the conviction that forms of redemption are now possible.

Harris followed *Localities* with *Translations From The Albatross* (Outback Press, 1976), a book that explored, with great energy, the possibilities for his poetry offered by various strands of European modernism. A poem from *Translations*, 'Port Melbourne The Fifth Of December' had an enigmatic quality, as if an unspoken secret hovered behind the

poem. A similar sense of mystery pervades 'Jane Inter-linear'. Likewise, the new book recaptures qualities found in two other poems from *Translations*: the uncomfortably intimate and barely contained sense of menace of 'Two Children'; and much of the elegant, lyrical poise and heartfelt emotion of 'Three Sonnets To Jennifer At The End Of A Second Year'.

Next, *The Abandoned* (Senor Press, 1979), saw Harris explore a denser, highly charged and expressionistic imagery. In this period of his work, his diction became less orotund, his line sinewy and passionate. In earlier Harris poems, a sudden flight of emotion was signaled and carried by soaring and rhapsodic lines that lengthened and gathered rhetorical force as they carried his themes: whether familiar plea for justice and dignity on behalf of the oppressed; the urgency of moral choice; or some recognition of a sublime or divine afflatus able to confer value on lived experience. This rhapsodic rush was preserved in *The Abandoned*, but with much greater pressure of emotion placed on individual words, phrases and tropes. Sometimes the over-loaded line of this period buckled and fractured, or it crackled with a sensual intensity, spitting sparks along a short fuse. There was also a touch of Rimbaud, in which "the dawns are pale wire flames"; bitter waters in which "the dead float back clothed in glamour/ no-one can wear".

Perhaps aptly enough, Harris went on to abandon his French influences in *The Abandoned*, but its best poems remain vivid and exciting. They include the extraordinary 'Going To See The Elephant', a poem about the mystery and terror of existence and the utter strangeness of individual consciousness – a poem that is also a plea for compassion and mercy in the face of universal suffering.

*The Cloud Passes Over* (Angus & Robertson, 1986), Harris's penultimate collection, documented his conversation to Christianity. To this reader, it came as no surprise: there had been many hints along the way. Harris has always been of a deeply religious temperament, although it did not initially mean faith or belief, nor subscription to any particular theology. Poets like Paul Celan or Edmund Jabes (both of whom often seem to mourn God as an absence or an impossibility) may be 'religious' in this sense, yet remain atheists. *Cloud* witnessed a crucial emotional transition: intimation became certainty, doubt was banished. In it, Harris said goodbye, without too much regret, to "the blue and white days/ like a grave in a senseless universe".

Even the most secular of readers, including atheists and those who, like myself, are members of the C. of E. (Church of Elvis!), should find the *Cloud* poems offer some striking insights into the



emotional basis of *any* sort of belief. Furthermore, Harris has never been a tedious bigot or narrow sermoniser. (In 'Passage' from *Cloud*, he reminds us: "I know some of the sizes / days are shrunk to".) His targets in this book were not those who had not received or achieved the gift of faith. Where you did sense a welling indignation behind the lines, it was directed at a sort of Australian nihilism, the insensitivity and knee-jerk reductionism, or poverty of response, that lies behind phrases like 'so what', 'stiff shit', 'big deal', 'who cares' and the ilk: "a territory / a language / by no means rich in slang / a tired out vernacular / reducing / things, / so as to / cope." *Cloud* also contained outstanding individual poems, including the scathing 'Literary Excellence', and the two most flawlessly turned sonnets, 'The Ambition' and 'Riding Over Belmore Park'.

Returning to the 'Jane' poem (now that my own brief journey of recovery is complete), something really does occur within its woven silvery filigrees that is beyond metaphor. There is the sense of a living female presence, "a spider-agile child", elusive and yet vividly present, inhabiting this poem. The poet even anticipates how this 'presence' (and she is no mere Shade of Grey) will be dismissed by sceptics: "They'll say of / me, too, I wrote / a costume drama, / took her for symbol, / as abstract, / as eidetic; unborn / daughter, missing / wife, lost sister."

What is it that distinguishes a 'living' portrait from a 'dead' one, the poet asks in *Part XVII*: "When a person had died / their photographs / lose / a projection, / Something less / intervenes, a / flatness. Call it / a misattribution, / the portraits / have not relinquished / this. As / though they / could attract / and keep a / life, nothing / contra naturam, / but a pleasure, / green, / not aware of itself, / spills forward, still to all / that is to be?"

This is followed, a little later, by lines of piercing tenderness in *Part XXV*: "Elicit music, stay / awake an hour, / last church in / one frail body's / pale flower. February / keeps warm fires / in the Tower. / Great opposites / are fading from her / grasp, only the drug, / joy, frightens, on / its hasp an axe / will swing their / limits and eclipse... / Even the silver / where she's / prisoner / cries from the table, / look, it will / shine for ever..."

This leads on to the cry of outrage in *Part XXVII*: "And she, in her one life, / and her one life splintered! / And the butchery of it..." And although we know what must come, it is still a shock, in *Part XXVIII*: "All poems try / but none undoes / her final exile... [she] Speaks / as if, awake / and wakeful, she / struggles again / to waken, 'Good / people, I am / come here to die...' / Does so in linen. / A long / jet

of / blood splashes onlookers." Then comes the moving reflections of *Part XXIX*: "it is she, alone, not wanting to die, / great heart resolved in the utmost frost / and she alone gropes blindfold for the block." Yet there is the teasing hope of *Part XXX*: "From one of / a thousand faces / Love brings you here. / It isn't anyone's / business. The summer, / from the first hour, tinkles for you. / The leaves dance, too, / as if metal. The earth / says: vole. / Entertains you / with: badger. Teases: / you never have been away."

After the effort of concentration required for the opening long poems, the shorter poems of the final two sections of *Jane*, *Interlinear* present a welcome change of pace. And they include some fine poems: 'Forests & Rivers' (about the poet's pride in, and despair of, his 'Greenie' niece); 'The Day' (about another betrayal and hijacking, this time of the Whitlam government); 'Cane Field Sunday, 1959' (the refusal of whites to share their lives with Aboriginal Australians); 'The Sculpture 'Vault' in Batman Park' (art, literally, as a refuge for the homeless); 'The Poetry Cats of Twenty Years' (the poet's feline companions, who shared his lonely radiator in various writing rooms); 'Cage' (about dangling high above the ground in an iron cage, working on construction sites); also 'Silver Buckle', 'You Will Thicken' and 'More Than Sex', from the sequences of erotic/love poems towards the end of the book.

At this stage of his poetic development, it is time to applaud Harris's achievements. My only caution is to say, as it so often happens with working-class intellectuals, that there is no reason for him to become defensive about his scholarship (as if it had ever been put in question!) It is a chore to keep reaching for the dictionary; and, as that ancient Chinese tutor of writers, Lu Chi, wrote 1,700 years ago: "Language speaks from its essence, from its reason, and verbosity is never a virtue." Lu also cautions: "Searching for a subject, the poet may indulge in the needlessly obscure." So far, Harris has only flirted with these faults; but he may one day feel tempted to indulge them, which would be a pity. Quibbles aside, this book is an impressive testimony to a unique talent. Harris has yet to receive the widespread acclaim and support that is rightly his due, and now seems sorely belated – while we have seen much lesser poets and their work feted. However, his latest book should now cure this imbalance, by placing Harris firmly in the front rank of Australian poetry, where he belongs.

*John Jenkins' last two books of poems are The Wild White Sea (Little Esther Books) and Days Like Air (Modern Writing Press). He is the author of 22 Australian Contemporary Composers (NMA).*



# on the line

Our cover, a collage by Rick Amor of ALP images, with a proper touch of nostalgia, is to mark 100 years of the ALP, as do the articles by Lindsay Tanner, Vida Horn and Ross McMullin. The nostalgia seems appropriate. I said to a friend recently that the only cheerful signs from Labor recently were the election of Barry Jones as federal president of the ALP and the election of Phil Cleary as independent member for Coburg (Vic.). The friend accepted the first of these enthusiastically but was rather shocked, I think, by my pleasure about Cleary. For my money it was just what the ALP needed, a good kick in the bum, and a reminder of the good sense of working people who resent the adoption by the Prime Minister and Cabinet of economic rationalist policies often without any attempt to debate the policies fully with the public, ordinary branch members, even the federal party caucus.

On some major issues, such as the Button plan for the automobile industry, full prior notice and extensive discussion were provided. On a vast range of smaller issues the economic rationalist bandwagon rolls on, threatening thousands of jobs in manufacturing, without the general public being aware of what is happening precisely. Reducing, and rationalising car production, was one thing. Now the hundreds of small factories manufacturing automotive components, replacement parts etc. are under threat as the Japanese argue for removal of protection for Australian manufacturers. Talk about a level playing-field. What a joke. There never was such a thing. Australia can produce rice much more cheaply than the Japanese but just let us try to sell it in Japan! It takes Malcom Fraser, of all people, not

any ALP minister or ex-minister, to point out that our primary industries, such as the sugar industry, as well as some manufacturing industries need to be protected against dumping.

"In the long run, Australia will not sit by and watch its great agricultural industries being destroyed one by one. Policies just announced and supported by the Government and the Opposition will, however, have that effect. Rational people would wonder how anyone has given them a moment's consideration... How long will it be before common sense and pragmatic policies replace such blind dogma?" (Malcom Fraser the *Sunday Age*).

Because of the Keating Government's economic policies, including rapid tariff cuts, there has been, as reported by the Bureau of Statistics on 19 June, a loss between 1989 and 1991 of 133,000 jobs in manufacturing, one job in eight. At 30 June, 1991, 963,900 worked in factories compared with 1,096,800 two years earlier. That was what the voters of Coburg, with its textile, clothing and footwear factories, protested about. And where are the plans for replacement jobs for those dumped by 're-structure' and 'rationalisation'? Training courses in hospitality and tourism! What a joke. And, even so, the Japanese are pressing for temporary work permits so they can bring their own tour guides with them. Australians fluent in Japanese, and who know the country, cannot persuade the Japanese tour companies to employ them. And who wants a workforce of waiters and tour guides anyway?

The Bureau of Statistics figures are for the year ending 30 June, 1991. We lost 785 food factories, 630 metal plants, 473 clothing factories, 776 brickworks

and building materials plants, 516 machinery factories and 1,146 sawmills and furniture works. Thousands more will have gone by 30 June this year.

Amongst those threatened are our book printers. The Printing and Allied Trade Employers' Federation is concerned that the current Industry Commission Inquiry Into Book Production will recommend the abolition of the book bounty.

In the mid-1960s two major Japanese book printers, Dai Nippon and Toppan, established works in Hong Kong and then Singapore and sought orders from Australian book publishers. The companies were technologically advanced and had cheap labour. By 1967 the outflow of orders from Australian book publishers to Asian printers had increased substantially. The Australian government introduced a book bounty, to assist Australian printers, from 1 June, 1967. First fixed at 25 per cent of production costs the bounty was later raised, by the Tariff Board recommendation, to 33½ per cent. By 1978 bounty payments had grown to \$8 million and local printers had secured a share of the book market of 60 per cent to 64 per cent. The Industries Assistance Commission recommended that the bounty be maintained at 33½ per cent until December, 1981, and then be reduced to 25 per cent. It was reduced to 20 per cent in 1985. In February, 1987, the Commission recommended that the bounty rate be reduced in four stages to 13½ per cent. In 1990/91 there were 670 bounty claimants who received, in all, \$24.2 million. A similar expenditure is expected for 1991/92. The bounty is working inasmuch as Australian book printers are maintaining a static share of the market. It is developing export



markets. The Australian book printing industry employs about 3,500 people; production this year is worth approximately \$200 million. The printers will purchase \$80 million of materials, largely paper, of which \$30–\$40 million is produced locally.

The abolition of the book bounty could mean the loss of most of this Australian production, the closure of printers, the loss of jobs by skilled workers and the flow of more Australian dollars to cheap-labour factories in Asia. The contribution to our literary culture, to the nation's literacy, by skilled printers is, these days, not as widely understood as it once was. The compositor is part of the cultural process as many an editor could testify. If we lose this capacity to manufacture the bulk of our own books we lose a deeply valuable part of our culture. The fifty or so major book printers in Australia, are a highly-efficient group with substantial investment in new technology. They purchase Australian goods and services, they add to our exports. Their workers contribute to our culture. Is all this to be lost to cheap labour in Asia? The Printing and Allied Trades Employers' Federation believes our book printing industry can survive, compete and grow, provided that a bounty be maintained: it proposes 11¼ per cent for 1994 and a slow reduction until the end of the decade. Surely this is a modest and reasonable proposal? I know Phil Cleary will think so. What will your local Federal Member think?

In the last issue I ran in our Comment section a small piece on the J.F.K. film by Max Teichmann. This was deliberate stirring but none of you rose to the bait except for a few brief comments in letters, too brief and unargued to publish. The film is remarkable and deserved to draw the huge crowds it did. It was also a very foolish mish-mash of facts and fantasy. Oliver Stone said that some fiction was necessary, arguing artistic licence. A pity, those facts not disputed and in the public domain because of various investigations and legal trials, are dramatic enough. Mark Lane, the lawyer who wrote *Rush to Judgement*, was an adviser in the early stages of writing the film. A media campaign, led by the *Washington Post*, against the film described it as "Mark Lane's muddled stew of fact and fiction". Actually Dalton Trumbo, Donald Freed and Mark Lane had collaborated on the

first draft of the screenplay. Lane writes "It was my first foray into Hollywood and I soon learned that entertainment concerns occupy a higher priority than fact... Stone was interested in my work; unfortunately, he also reserved the right to alter or modify the events to make the film entertaining. I withdrew from discussions with his company and declined to meet with him further." The huge media attempt to smear the film also included attacks on Lane even though the principal journalists knew the true position.

Lane, fortunately, got a chance to test in court his argument that the CIA was involved in the Kennedy assassination. Hunt sued Liberty Lobby publisher of a right-wing newsletter for libel. The newsletter had said that Howard Hunt, a long-time employee of the office of Strategic Services and the CIA was in Dallas on the day J.F.K. was shot. Despite his reservations about Liberty Lobby, Mark Lane saw his chance to explore Hunt's role and agreed to act as defense attorney. On February 6, 1985, in the US District Court for the Southern District in Florida, he won a verdict from a jury that Hunt was indeed in Dallas. The amount of detail about the Kennedy killing he managed to get the court to accept and admit into the record is astonishing. *Quadrant* has recently reprinted an article attacking the J.F.K. film and ridiculing the assertion that the US military, industrial, spy establishment had Kennedy assassinated. The article is typical of the US media campaign. The extraordinary facts to be read in the court record of the *Hunt v. Liberty Lobby* case have not been reported by any of the major US news media. The case, as far as the media are concerned, did not happen. We do well to be wary of conspiracy theories; we do well also to acknowledge facts when thorough proof is properly and laboriously established. We do well to be sceptics; we would also do well to read Mark Lane's meticulous and compelling account of the Hunt libel case in his new book *Plausible Denial* (Bookman Press, \$19.95).

Beatrice Davis has been much in our thoughts. We wrote about her in this column in the last two issues. She died in Sydney on 24 May at the age of 83. She was born in Bendigo in 1909, went to the University of Sydney, worked on the *Medical Journal of Australia* and then joined Angus & Robertson in 1937,

working as its first full-time general editor. The authors she worked with are legion, including Thea Astley, Xavier Herbert, Hal Porter, Billy Hughes, Norman Lindsay. Beatrice became a legendary editor working, with Thomas Nelson, until 1983. She was a judge of the Miles Franklin Award from 1954 until her death. I'm pleased to see that a Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship has been established and that the first award, of \$30,000, has been made to Roseanne Fitzgibbons, fiction and senior editor of UQP.

Bruce Dawe, we've long suspected, is a brave man. That view is reinforced by the announcement that he has accepted an appointment as poetry editor of the *Brisbane Courier-Mail*. With considerable generosity – or total delusion – he has allowed this fact to be well publicised and seems actually to be welcoming contributions even though he acknowledges that an unprecedented rash of 'poetry' writing is raging from coast to coast. Ah well, he'll learn – and may prove to be one of the few poetry editors not too brain damaged by the process. Dr Bruce Dawe AO is Associate Professor in Literary Studies at the University of Southern Queensland. More to the point his books of poetry are not only acclaimed but actually sell very well. In an interview in the *Courier-Mail* he said that the recent trend towards making poetry more readily available to the public has been a turning point. "There are more public readings and more opportunities to present work to the public than there's ever been. When I was a kid writing it was very rare to have readings at all. Now there're around fifty regular venues for poetry readings in Australia." More, Bruce, much more. In fact one has to be stealthy to avoid them at night during a quiet walk in the suburbs, a call to a coffee shop, a drink in a pub. And now he's encouraging a lush growth in Queensland and fondly reminiscing of Bob Dylan and the Sixties. He likes Dylan Thomas, too, and John Donne, George Zbigniew, Judith Wright and Emily Dickinson. Tolerant, eh. Wide-ranging, warm-hearted. The man's a sitting duck. Take aim, all those who send this magazine upwards of two thousand 'poems' per issue.

Barrett Reid



ROBIN GERSTER

*Herouvim and Seizures of Youth*

I swore I'd never do this. As a reviewer myself, I know what a beguiling occupation book reviewing can be; great is the temptation for unproductive writers to try to make a name for themselves through the mockery of other people's work. And as the co-author (with Jan Bassett) of a trenchant critique of the cultural legacy of the 1960s, *Seizures of Youth: 'The Sixties' and Australia*, I also know the good sense of copping it sweet. Fighting back looks defensive and humorless, invokes the image of the proverbial 'glass jaw', and risks repeating the very sins perceived to be committed by the reviewer. Nevertheless, because it did no justice at all to the book and the issues it raises, I'm going to break my rule and briefly answer John Herouvim's 'discussion' of *Seizures of Youth*, which appeared in the pages of *Overland*, no. 126.

Firstly, I have to thank Mr Herouvim for taking the time to produce a six-page essay on a book which so obviously got on his goat. As one of those lecturers in English he finds it so hard to cope with, I must admit he's done his research thoroughly – to the point of consulting a "text specialist" friend who dutifully "nodded" her head in response to his various queries about the book. I'm glad he was able to tell readers of *Overland* that "literary language... is artifice". And if he hadn't said that "the book I am reviewing and the review I am writing are made of words", I'd never have guessed. Thankfully there are still reviewers who are bold enough to inform as well as bleat.

About Mr Herouvim's objections to our argument concerning 'the sixties', well, I suppose it's up to readers to make up their own minds. One of the major themes of the book suggests how personally possessive people are of that decade – everybody seems to have his or her version of what happened and

what it all meant. Moreover, the critical response to *Seizures of Youth* has cut sharply along ideological lines. Some veteran 'radicals' with a personal investment in the period's activism have been annoyed by it. (I received similar responses from angry war veterans a few years ago to my book *Big-noting*, which critically analysed the Australian war mythology. Maybe the so-called 'anti-war generation' and the RSL have got something in common.) Their disagreement with the book's sceptical appraisal of the sixties mythology is fair enough, if pretty predictable. More disconcerting has been the praise heaped on the book by 'right-wing' commentators who have somehow seen it as God's gift to conservatism.

But I feel I must question both the tone of the review and Mr Herouvim's bizarre methodology (nodding acquaintance included). I don't wish to fuel his irritation with 'postmodernism', but the review offers any 'deconstructionist' worth his/her salt a delicious prospect. I'll limit myself, however, to a few specific reactions against... (1) The use of selective, decontextualised quotation as evidence of the book's "meanness of spirit and nastiness of tone". Having read the review with as much objectivity and patience as I can muster, I'll take this criticism as coming from the pen of an expert. (2) The criticism of the text's "hyperbole": there are some things in the book, Mr Herouvim thinks, which are too difficult to say "with a mouthful of poststructuralist marbles". (Say again?) "Let no noun go forth unchaperoned by an adjective," he blusters, "let no verb's prayer for an adverb go unanswered." (Oh for a 'chaperoned noun' – or for a 'praying verb.')

A man who never confuses a noun with an adjective, he further admonishes what he sees as an adjectival style by bemoaning "stumbly, tangled-up rigmarole sen-

tences". Never mind, I'll defer yet again. Mr Herouvim who begins the third section of the review with, "In the cultural kaleidoscope that is postmodern society..." is obviously a master of understatement. (A lecturer in English Lit couldn't wish for better from a first year student.) I apologise for the hyperbole, and also sincerely regret those "academic" sentences which caused such a headache. (3) The objection to a "grossly" English method of reading printed texts set during or about the 1960s alongside a "swanky" French method of analysing photographs. It seems we confused what happens in novels with what happens in the 'real world'. What a silly thing to do in a book which examines the mythologisation / fictionalisation of that historical period! (4) The complaint about Dr Bassett and I "reading" to much (or is it too little?) into the photographs selected for inclusion in the book. Mr Herouvim is the first reviewer I know how has analysed the jacket photographs of authors to support his argument, albeit in a labored way to show he too knows the meaning of the word irony. Elaborating upon our "Olympian" comments about the incorporation of sixties radicalism into the political mainstream, he says how surprised he was to see a smiling Jan and myself wearing pearls and a tie. (I'm the one in the tie; I'm smiling only a bit.) Such are "the pitfalls of iconophilia". And what a pity John couldn't have supplied a photo of himself to go with his review: I'd like to see if there's any resemblance to Jacques Derrida, that "ruggedly handsome Frenchman" whose theory of deconstruction is grappled with during the course of the discussion.

My several other objections I'll let go – as I said, it's up to readers to form their own opinion of our handling of a slippery historical subject. Mr Herouvim has expressed his. He boasts in his



review of his “direct experience” and of his research into the period, which formed part of a project “since abandoned”. What a pity he wasn’t up to finishing the job and giving us the benefit of his wisdom; I, for one, would await the fruits of his forsaken labors with bated breath. In the meantime, his career as “a stand-up comedian...[who] writes comedy for the Seven Network” seems assured.

[John Herouvim responds:

Now this is tricky. I can’t defend my arguments – Dr Gerster didn’t say anything about them. I can’t engage in an insult-trading competition – hecklers often miss the joke and shutting them up is both business and pleasure, so I have an unfair advantage. And I can’t send a recent photo – I’ve only got one from about four years ago, before I quit teaching English to write for a living. So, I suppose he wins.]

## Jas H. Duke

### Π.ο

On Friday the 19th of June 1992 Jas H. Duke, one of Australia’s most respected and influential Anarchist poets, died at St Vincent’s Hospital in Melbourne of complications sustained by a broken leg when he slipped and fell. He was aged 52. Or, as he put it in one of his poems:

I was born in 1939  
I was very young then  
but the times were very old

He was known to many on stage, screen and radio as the Dadaist with the bald head, long beard and stutter. Hearing Jas Duke launch into a rendition of his ‘sound’ poem ‘Dada!’ was an unforgettable experience that helped revolutionise our notions of what poetry (in Australia) could be like. His visual and concrete poetry (using letraset, comics and freehand drawings) which appeared in magazines both here and overseas, and graced the covers of such journals as *Overland*, were his trademark. He was an avid contributor to exhibitions throughout the world and his interest in chess (up to 100 games per month by correspondence) was awesome.

His ‘straight’ poems, dealing with topics as diverse as Australian (or world) economy, World Wars I and II, the Metropolitan Board of Works (where he



worked as a draughtsman and later as a research officer, for twenty years) and characters like Captain Nemo, created a portrait of the man himself which Australian letters has yet to fully appreciate...or comprehend. ‘The Shit Poem’ written about his work in the Sewerage Department, provoked the wrath of the establishment when read on the ABC and went on to become a Performance poetry classic!

Jas H. Duke will be remembered in Australia as one of the founders of the Poets’ Union, Performance Poetry, and as one of the associate editors of the magazine *925*, Australia’s largest poetry journal for WORKERS’ poetry during the final years of the Fraser Government.

In 1965 Jas left Australia for Europe to get an ‘Education’ (as most Australians were wont to do) and he quickly became involved in the psychedelic-hippy-anarchist-bohemia of London and Brighton, working at Freedom Press, where he met the likes of Cohen-Bendit (of May ’68 Paris fame) and Jeff Keen, with whom he made a number of influential underground movies. While overseas he sought out and met the old men and women of the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, and was a keen enthusiast of the work of the Russian Constructivists.

His arrival back in Australia in 1972 signalled the revival of that ‘poetry

renaissance in Australia which eventually became known, throughout Australia, as Performance Poetry. He produced a magazine in 1973 entitled *Atlantis* (of which 200 copies were made) all hand-drawn in multi-colored text-colors, defying and sneering at the authority of the “linear line” in poetry. His book *Destiny Wood*, published in 1978 by Whole Earth remains one of the unread classics of Australian literature. In 1987 his selected poems, brought out by Collective Effort Press and entitled *Poems of War and Peace* was runner-up in the Victorian Premier’s Award for Poetry and he was made one of the judges for the prize the following year.

His championing of the workers’ struggle and the role of the poet in the workers’ ranks, gives him a special place in the annals of Australian history; and for those of us who were lucky enough to have known or worked with him, he will always be remembered for his generosity, clarity of vision, support and encouragement. Although Jas Duke was very much in the public eye, he remained a very private man, who scorned the pretensions of the Academy and of the political establishment. He hated the iconisation and deification of the rich and famous, and he (as he put it): “...never heard of anything being attacked without wanting to defend it or anything being defended without wanting to attack it”. He was a modest man throughout his life and once wrote a concrete poem that said: “Lets call it an average life”. His last public poetry reading was at St Vincent’s Hospital (just hours before his death). Thalia told the nurses (who were about to take him away) to take care of “this man” because he was one of Australia’s greatest poets...and the nurse asked him to recite one of his poems. Although in great pain, he mustered enough strength and in his usual LOUD voice (so that all the other patients and nurses in the ward could hear) he read:

#### Solidarity Explained

When the axe first came into  
the forest  
the trees said to each other  
the handle is one of us.

At 5.30 pm Friday the 19th of June 1992 while all the office workers were going home Jas H. Duke clocked-off. R.I.P. Jas, R.I.P., may the soil they use to cover you be light.







## WRITING A LETTER TO MY MOTHER

In my hands, excuses are like telephone cords,  
sprung-twist.

If you leave them to their own device, they  
will shorten everything  
to an impossible knot, curling your ear  
as close as possible to your mouth, shouting  
down the line.

I have rung you, but now I need to write you  
a letter.

Compose myself into visible, chewable words  
for you, allowing  
the power of syllable & line. Add the next chapter  
of myself.

Sitting as I must, at a table, as I must, smiling,  
knowing I know  
where you will be when you read this, I pass into  
the first vagueness of creation. I am becoming  
transparent

as everywhere around me whispers, threads  
of possibilities  
float like spider-web. What love-journey will  
we take?

Down what road? I think of where I will have to  
leave you,  
standing beside my spent pages, wondering  
where you are.

A letter hangs me on the farce hooks  
of questions  
powerless to hold me to themselves, &  
resolution mocks me  
in a world unfolding, still being written upside-  
down. You & I  
send love that tugs at our separation, glows  
with our trying.  
This is a place where, anyday, you can receive  
word that  
part of you has come to an end,  
acknowledgement suffices, choice  
reduced to the difference between *yours sincerely*  
& *yours faithfully*.

Your son. I am of course writing you a letter.

The writing of my hand,  
with all it has learnt to strut & circularise,  
drawing shapes  
out of the mind like spider-web. It loves to sprawl.  
It bends in the wind.

Loves dew. Loves even what it catches. My  
mother-heart cannot find you  
with binary computation, coarse word-crunches  
that would leave you  
jarred & wondering what kind of man you have  
given birth to.  
I am yours truly.

As it has always been, my letters are rare &  
smell off-white.

They strive to be a journey worth the while  
of your reading.

Your eyes are older now, but not dimmed – you  
can still pick  
the fake – the missive driven by the stiff index  
finger of guilt.

I know I must slow down & bend & slope it for you  
so that

it is my face you see. The paragraphs must turn  
upon themselves,  
live on – & yet, you know it too, when I ramble  
carelessly,

show off with my loose tongue & pulpy fillings.

You will smile.

Perhaps you will reflect, in one of your long twists  
of diversion,  
about my childhood. You will spin out silk like  
spider-web,  
not caring where it will land you, until it does.

You have taught me  
from birth about the risk of a sentence & the worth  
of its taking.

It is because of you I know not to fear the  
absence of ending,  
the hard-nosed jaw-jutting throat-tense way we  
have of saying goodbye.

TERRY HARRINGTON



## WHEN MAD TRAKL DIED

*Sleep and death, the dusty eagles  
Around my head swoop all night long...*

—Georg Trakl, 'Lament', 1914

When mad Trakl died, his gaunt head,  
hairless and fizzing with dreamscapes,  
shattered with the shrapnel of cocaine,  
luminous eagles shredding the sky,  
the afternoon golden, the carnage near.  
He wafted like an angel above a corpse  
of blitzed branches taut as rope,  
the fresh corpses of young deserters  
bunting on the inert air.  
Ninety wounded in his care,  
torn post-cards scattered on the wind.  
At night, the stars drew their bayonets,  
teasing ribs with their steely ice.  
He saw the arching constellations  
as the silver arms of soldiers falling.  
Forlornly wrote with cramped hands  
the only living things are silhouettes;  
they exhale air white as death,  
wander the night's black maze of water.  
In a fitful dream he warned himself:  
your poems evaporate like fog  
at the Dead Letter Office.  
Trakl returned, a day after dying,  
to set the censored record straight.  
Why, when the world conjures madness,  
do they assert the poets die insane?  
I was lucid as anyone on that day,  
(I recall singing like a riff of birds) —  
anyone who had drunk purple mud,  
anyone who had eaten carrion,  
fighting off the swoop of sleep and eagles.

ROD MORAN

*Georg Trakl, the brilliant young German surrealist poet, served with the Medical Corps on the Eastern Front. His experiences were horrific and he suicided, allegedly insane, in 1914. He was 27 years old.*

## POEM

Thales foretelling the sun's eclipse  
was god-demeaning and terrible;  
but the relieved world slapped its hips and laughed  
when the old spastic fell  
and drowned in his own well.

Intent on his equations,  
Archimedes neither saw nor heard  
the common soldier with a common sword  
kill his calculations.  
And we smiled happily again,  
for uppity physics and smart-arse engines  
are not for ordinary men;  
and ordinary men will take their vengeance.

JOHN PHILIP

## GIFT-GIVING

The trick of gift-giving seemed  
A bounden thing, a stranger to any  
Close exaction at either's hand.  
But where it proved most free,  
There, it taxed harder than anything  
Not given so cruelly gratis.

The imposture, these lover's airs,  
Add them to the proud-mute  
Pity shown my ignorance —  
Surely this was a bargain  
Like all the rest, one-sided,  
Unthinking, to the loser's gain.

Now that my hands are emptied  
And your countering of no force,  
Is either's interest set at one?  
And can we meet at last  
In pure emptiness of heart;  
Suddenly all else thrown by?

JOHN LEONARD



## TWO POEMS BY DANIEL NEUMANN

### GOING TO VISIT THE GRAVE

*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus...*

Despite the formal purpose, he would travel  
with feast and dancing; curious to unravel  
those ethnic fairytales and rituals he  
took vivid notes and bought a wide variety  
of artefacts. A badly-worded bribe  
at someone's border cost him, but the tribe  
had gorgeous boys...As always, he dined out  
on local wits whose morals were in doubt.

But still, the object. *Ave atque vale*  
the poet said, and published it, the way  
his brother might have said *Cast a cold eye*  
*on life, on death*, if able to reply.

On his return there were no souvenirs;  
nor any fit to check him at frontiers.

### LAST OF THEIR KIND

Leans on a patch of wall  
outside the chemist  
scuffs the arcade floor  
sleeps here all night  
on the mosaic

Or hunched under a stairwell  
slowly coughs when you give  
*20c gets yer to Homebush, pal*  
don't waste it  
more won't go farther

Red Phones with smokers' breath  
ex-jovial round-shouldered jockeys  
are losing their turf  
can't make the long distances  
– never could  
Some crouch in old booths,  
pretend they still can.

### SEPTEMBER 5 AND THE NATURE STRIP IS ON PAROLE

Another slurred ten-thirty dawn  
as baby-photo-blutacked swoons and  
China Youth News decrees Doris the dog  
a bourgeois tendency.  
The Judge from No 6 cruises by  
on Miss Marple's bicycle and  
casts a freemason's wink at the grass  
before passing me The Victa.  
Gorbachev's wife tells of torment yet  
the cactus tilts to hear of  
mother convicted in US Cheerleader Plot.  
Jasmine flirts  
with an epileptic streetlight  
and tells me I'm a flower  
that's better left neglected.

STEVE WOMERSLEY



KEVIN HART

## After Poetry 13 A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry

### LIKE A PROCESSION OF ANGELS

One of the most significant moves in modern literary criticism has been a radical shift in what constitutes its proper object of study: no longer the poem but rather 'poetic language'. The benefits of this change are obvious. All too often poems are not read well – that is, slowly – because they are primarily regarded as cultural objects. Infinitely valuable, these expressions of genius, wit and passion can be seen, with their original polish, all safely preserved and neatly arranged in those museums of literature, the big anthologies. Each of them is presented in a glass case, and they can readily be identified by their titles: 'The Knight's Tale', 'The Rape of the Lock', 'The Prelude', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'. No-one can approach them without knowing in advance that they are masterpieces, that they calmly await our homage – often no more than, and no different from, a touristic gesture – and, in return, they will make us feel a little more civilised. To read them well, taking time about it, would doubtless smack of the excessive (only the expert opens the glass case and examines the exhibit) and might even break a taboo (the expert, we know, has become immune to its magic). By the same token, no-one can read May Leaper's 'An Essay on Women' or A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* without being aware that these are not featured in the main collection. They are tagged as minor verse: a designation as complex, both critically and culturally, as its opposite. One of the aims in shifting our attention from 'poem' to 'poetic language', then, is to make us dwell longer on the text as process rather than as product. This move gives a provisional priority to reading over evaluation. Talk of value is not dismissed forever, no more than is relevant biographical and historical information, but their use in foreclosing art in favor of culture is recognised and given due weight.

The concept of poetic language was developed by

a relatively coherent group of Russian critics – including Jacobson, Shklovski and Tomashevsky – in the teens of this century. There is no particular lexicon of words which is inherently 'poetic', they argue, yet in poetry we find that language is as much a sensuous object as a means of communication. Once we see poetry from this viewpoint, matters of phonics (how words, phrases and sentences sound) and graphics (how they look on the page) become of great interest. Far from being external to the artwork, mere decorations to make its message more attractive or memorable, phonics and graphics are integral to any literary text. One of the supremely valuable things these critics did was to stress that poetry cannot be reduced to other sorts of writings. A poem is not a bit of biography, economics, history, politics or theology; it is poetry, and its principles of composition should be elucidated and respected. Yet when orthodox Marxist critics dubbed the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the Petrograd Society for the Study of Poetic Language (or *Opayaz* as it was known), 'formalist', they rightly drew attention to a weakness in the theory: poems are not merely formal mechanisms, and they do not have a 'literariness' abiding deep within; they are composed by social beings, and they serve complex social ends. Put generously, the critics of the Russian Formalists insisted that it was high time to re-introduce biography, ethics, history and politics, some of the contexts that had been laid aside while poetic language was being intently examined just by itself. These contexts – and those they occluded, such as theology – are not external to the artwork; they come to frame it because they are already involved in it, whether by virtue of being evoked in the poem or by dint of its silences and reserves.

Although some of the Formalists tried to incorporate this critique into their practice, the energies of the movement had dissipated. Yet the concept of poetic language did not disappear entirely; it influen-



ced other groups, most notably the Prague Linguistic Circle, the French structuralists and the American New Critics. In recent years the challenge has been to think intrinsic and extrinsic criticism together, to combine the art of reading poetry very closely with a keen awareness of its many and varied contexts. At times the task can seem too much for any one person: after all, who can claim to know all the relevant contexts that a poem solicits and confesses? In a strong poem each word hatches a brood of concerns and questions. Yet the high aim is not a complete mastery of a text, or even a careful balancing of internal and external pressures, but a convincing demonstration that the borders between its apparent inside and outside are divided and equivocal.

Julia Kristeva is one critic who has tried to do just this. In her magisterial *La révolution du langage poétique* (partly translated as *Revolution in Poetic Language*), she attempts to tie the notion of poetic language to post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Her crucial move is to recognise that the speaking subject is divided: your conscious self is forever shadowed by the unconscious. There are accordingly two dispositions at work in the production of meaning. One of these, the semiotic, derives from the unconscious. It is an economy of instinctual drives and primary processes which precedes sentential meaning but which nonetheless affects language. This is the realm of condensation and displacement, the placeless place where metaphor and metonymy appear, not as abstract principles but as fundamental human drives. It is the realm to which our bodily desire for all dance and music can be traced. The symbolic disposition, by contrast, answers to the conscious mind: it is the domain of constraint – of grammar, critical judgement and law. Where the semiotic is linked with the maternal, the natural and the id, the symbolic meshes with the paternal, the social and the superego.

Poetic language, Kristeva argues, occurs when the semiotic is introduced into the symbolic. Quite clearly, 'poetic language' has a far wider scope than 'poem' or even 'poetry'; it includes all writing, whether canonical or non-canonical, and it crosses even the most tightly patrolled borders between genres. There is no text in which either disposition appears purely and simply. Those compositions in which the semiotic predominates approach what Kristeva calls the *genotext*, while those which are turned resolutely toward the symbolic move towards its opposite, the *phenotext*. Kristeva's case is that in the late nineteenth century, the age of Lautréamont and Mallarmé, we see a revolution in poetic language: their poems are regulated by a genotext more surely than by a phenotext. To understand them we

have to attend closely to the strange logics of the unconscious, its fierce defences and odd slippages.

It is important to point out that Kristeva's account is not solely descriptive; she assumes certain values and urges us to accept them. The poetic revolution, she thinks, was a thoroughly good thing. For, even though they have no explicit political agenda, the new poetries reject the bourgeois consumer society and in their very different ways, affirm freedom and joy. Lautréamont and Mallarmé indicate the path that modern poets were well advised to follow; and, accordingly, the writers who should command our full attention today are Artaud, Bataille, Joyce and Sollers. That was circa 1968; but the argument is of broad interest since it, or something very like it, is often used to support the myth of the avant-garde, namely that experimental writing is naturally the vehicle of literary development and hence of literary value. A full study would seek to expose and analyse the mystifications in those three words 'naturally', 'development' and 'hence'. In lieu of that, let me simply point out four difficulties with the argument. First, it is far from obvious that placing a heavy accent on the genotext makes any poem more compelling, interesting, heartbreaking – or almost any adjective you may care to choose – than those which work otherwise. Much of the greatest modern writing is lucid sentence by sentence while its vision is intensely demanding (think of Beckett, Blanchot, Kafka). Nor is it evident that promoting the genotext accords more readily with a politics of liberation: clarity, not obscurity, empowers the reader. Second, the crucial question with regard to literature is strength: sometimes it comes through formal experiment, sometimes not. (Cowley was the much-esteemed 'experimental poet' of his time, but who reads him now?) Third, it is always possible to show by careful reading how even those texts most cherished for their artlessness and verisimilitude are in fact far more complex and elusive than we have thought. And fourth, the myth of the avant-garde relies on taking a highly selective narrative of literary history to be the whole story. But literary history is not a narrative; it is a field of conflicting energies, one that cannot be reduced to a stylised fight between those strained caricatures, the avant-garde and the *derrière-garde*.

It is perfectly possible to make good use of Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic without presuming a belief in the value of avant-garde writing. The two things are quite distinct, though Kristeva allows them to become confused. More than that, the confusion is general in talk about Australian poetry and threatens to obscure the importance of some writers and falsely



elevate others. John Forbes's sparkling *New and Selected Poems* provides a good opportunity to talk about this. All the clichés about contemporary Australian poetry repeat one thing: that it divides, fairly evenly, between two groups. The nomenclature varies a little, but it certainly includes the following terms: traditional v. (post-) modernist, national v. international, conservative v. experimental, Boeotian v. Athenian. The first thing to say about this split is that it distracts criticism. It is sheer polemic; and when it gravitates, as it tends to do, around particular individuals, it does harm to everyone but those writers, and it will hardly benefit them in the long run. The writers I have in mind are Les Murray (whose verse works extremely hard, on one level, to present its author as embodying positive features of conservatism, traditionalism, nationalism and bush values) and – well, who? Several years ago I would have named Robert Adamson, though now I have to say John Tranter. A cultural icon, 'Les Murray', has been a long time in the making, and can now be proudly presented for public consumption on 'A Big Country'; while over the last decade we have seen the self-construction of an aspiring specular figure, a 'John Tranter' who quietly claims to incarnate the alternative set of values: (post-) modernism, internationalism, experimentalism and Athenianism.

Little reflection is necessary to recognise that, in fact, the situation of Australian poetry is very far from specular: not because the dualism is utterly false, a matter of laissez-faire cultural economics rather than critical thought, but also because Australian poetry is far more varied and interesting than the model suggests. In terms of poetic value, in my opinion the best younger writers who came to poetry in the late sixties (and who consciously drew from the energies of 1968) are John Forbes and John Scott. Although Forbes has considerable technical skill, he seldom uses it to produce a 'good poem', a neatly turned art object composed to advance him in the world of letters. Rather, this *New and Selected Poems* is a sustained meditation on poetic language, its losses and redemptions, its deceits and lustres. Needless to say, that meditation is sparked and nurtured by individuals and occasions – TV, the beach, drugs, travel, Paul Keating – yet Forbes is not primarily interested in representing these or in expressing himself. He is fascinated, instead, by the ways in which writing deflects us from the world: and while he does not abandon himself to a drift of surreal play (he is perhaps our most scrupulous writer), he is too rigorous a poet to offer us verse which hopes or pretends that language hooks onto experience neatly and surely. Hence the relatively small size of this book,

and hence some of its most acclaimed moments. There is 'TV', for instance, which interlaces two narratives, one to do with a series of representations about an anthropologist in the field and another which reflects on representation and its modes. The reader is told to describe the "curved screen its strip of white stillness like / beach sand at pools where the animals come / down to drink", and the whole poem is a questioning and an appreciation of that "like". Then there is 'Four Heads & how to do them', a witty exercise – in the very best sense of the word – that shows and tells us about competing attitudes to poetic language, from Classicism to Conceptualism. If this poem is a little museum of poetic history, it is a museum beautifully fitted with distorting mirrors.

John Forbes is one of those rare poets (like Bonnefoy and Popa) whose work is marked by exacting coherence. He responds to a calling, a vision of poetry, and does not quarrel with it. Far from being an experimentalist, someone who puts language on trial, he is an adventurer: he comes to language with an openness, albeit one that is heavily salted with suspicion. If this openness allows him a fair degree of eclecticism and exuberance, things he has learned from Frank O'Hara, the suspicion serves to distinguish his writings from the Americans. O'Hara's openness to experience and language led to a few memorable poems amidst a broad scattering of charming ephemera, while Forbes has written fewer weak poems than perhaps anyone who came of age while reading the New Yorkers. Certainly he is uninterested in the possibilities of self-mythologising that some writers love to find in O'Hara. In this he differs completely from a kindred spirit, Tomaz Salamun. Thus 'Drums' from *The Selected Poems of Tomaz Salamun*:

I am the people's point of view, a cow,  
the tropical wind, I sleep under the surface.  
I am the aristocratic carnivore, I eat form.  
I drum on cook's white caps...

The Slovene comes much closer to the Australian, though, in a lyric such as 'Charles d'Orléans':

Even if I take off

a genre of sadness, a rhythm of color,  
material sizzles in the pan, it is  
a kiss of eyes. Socrates falls down,  
is tripped. Therefore: *Nonchaloir*, not blood.  
And turquoise of course, not the legality  
of barbarians. Listen: Scythians are edible.

A poetry that prizes the semiotic over the



symbolic? Yes, for one of its aims is to pierce the realm of properly constituted meaning, which, for Salamun, includes the Marxist scansion of history, and to affirm whatever exceeds the State and its laws.

In answering the same question with respect to Forbes one would have to be more circumspect and say "Yes...but". On the one hand there are pieces like 'Love Poem' and 'Blonde & Aussie' (a weave, on the surface, of quotations and parodies) which give the impression of being regulated almost wholly by the genotext; while, on the other hand, this is a poet who enjoys control, who almost despite himself is drawn to the dictates of grammar and the law of genre. He is a poet of games rather than of free play. Thus those poems which work with, against and around specific genres: 'Drugs', 'Europe: a guide for Ken Searle', the later 'Love Poem' and, most impressive of all, the three odes: 'Ode/Goodbye Memory', 'Death, an Ode' and 'Ode to Doubt'. From the last of them:

You keep us modest  
like the stones I used to shift around as a kid  
assuming they needed a change of view. That  
was the closest I got to playing God,  
as if each brick had a message wrapped  
around it  
or, vice-versa, the world was a fake parcel  
with each layer of tissue  
gauzy, ornate & gorgeous, keeping us  
from you.  
Blanchot says, 'at the moment of death  
we each experience our life as a lie'; so  
no wonder dying is more important to  
believers.  
With you that shade is always there  
& we become  
a happy extension of rocks & trees,  
no longer certain  
but a part of what we know.

Blanchot also says that the poet "keeps the question open in his work", and he could have had John Forbes in mind.

Or James Tate, whose recent *Selected Poems* enables us to bring other aspects of Forbes's writing into focus while noting the American's own achievement. Tate often works in a surrealist – or, better, post-surrealist – register: "I don't know about the cold./I am sad without hands./I can't speak for the wind/which chips away at me". For all the spin of 'Rose Selavy', say, Forbes never writes like that: his language does not give the effect of systematic deranging of the senses; and illumination, when it comes, tends to be linked to a diagnosis of the self

or culture. What I find more engaging in Tate, though, is the delicious madness of lyrics like 'A Radical Departure':

Bye!

I'm going to a place so thoroughly remote  
you'll never hear from me again.

No train ship plane or automobile  
has ever pierced its interior

I'm not even certain it's still there  
or ever was  
the maps are very vague about it  
some say here some say there  
but most have let the matter drop

Yes of course it requires courage  
I'll need two bottles of vintage champagne  
everyday  
to keep the morale high

and do you mind if I take your wife?  
Well, I guess this is it  
we'll see ourselves to the door

Where are we...?

There is wit in Forbes, and sometimes humor too, but his poetic never embraces this zaniness. His concerns and excellence are elsewhere. At heart he is a poet of melancholia whose verbal brilliance can hide only partly a sense of overwhelming loss. Traces of the lost beloved (a person, a time, a world) are glimpsed here and there in the verse, and at least part of the peculiar force of the writing is given in the ambivalence it elicits from the poem's speakers.

On the face of it Alan Gould's verse might seem to prize the symbolic high above the semiotic. Looking over his selected poems, *Formerlight*, one finds a strong interest in the Law: in preserving form, metre and genre, of course, but also in affirming the social world of men. As Kristeva would say, it is a poetry written in the Name of the Father. Similarly, reading quickly – too quickly – through the volume, one might think that these poems are tilted sharply toward the phenotext, that they desire to transfer their messages from author to reader and then quietly withdraw, their labor done. A closer reading, though, reveals a poet entranced by the struggles between energy and limit. Thus 'Wagram 1809', a lyric which pictures Napoleon's most pyrrhic victory. All the noise of battle is "Mere energy",



– yet your thought becomes the  
 drumbeat,  
 while somewhere behind you, at a window  
 or the edge of a wood,  
 morose, theatrical, the one they call The Word,  
 who is already the The Process, trains his  
 spyglass out  
 across the sleepy farms to where the dead,  
 spectral  
 and lovely in the silver forests of Austria, still  
 tender him their mute acclaim...

Tell on, for your dream  
 stands angel to the cottages, though the  
 girding drum  
 engulfs your accidie, though your fancy moves  
 joyful, murderous, amidst these orders, boots  
 and hooves.

One could read much of *Formerlight* in terms of that dash between “Mere energy” and “yet”. Sometimes it bespeaks a quest for order; sometimes, as here it is an index of fascination and involvement, not curtailment. Storms, violence, war: in his early poems especially, Gould watches grand forces repeatedly clash and reform. In one lyric a wind passes through the streets “whispering/to the weak, the unprepared; ‘Perish./Perish. Perish.’”, and the speaker calls it “brother”; while in another “weathers everywhere cry, ‘You we use,/where the metaphors

tremble beyond the little gate/of what is” and no judgement is made. There could be none, for this is a world beyond good and evil.

The semiotic world of dance and music, of drives and compulsive repetition, is much in evidence in Gould’s early writing. There is an air of excess in the verse, and even when it is not highly (or overtly) rhetorical it is not always pellucidly grammatical either. “Tell on”, we are instructed in ‘Wagram 1809’, “for your dream/stands angel to the cottages”: and the urgency of the rhythm gives us no time to inspect the scope, strength and status of that “for”, to ask which individuals or groups are hailed as “you”, and to wonder how a dream stands “angel” to the cottages. These are amongst the pleasures reserved for re-reading the poem, for savoring the ways in which the semiotic disrupts the symbolic. It would be mistaken to see Gould’s interest in fixed verbal patterns as a determined attempt to place Apollonian constraint over Dionysian ecstasy. The forms he favors, principally early on – the canzone and the sestina – are generative rather than urbanely moderating. They are forms which engage the imagination by supplying it with a range of obstacles, and Gould is interested in them precisely for that. (He does not have or aspire to the nice sense of design one finds in Anthony Hecht, John Hollander or Richard Wilbur.) Nordic mythology and European history serve him in much the same way. His imagination seldom creates *ex nihilo*; it needs to work on something apparently outside the self, and, in doing so, to link it with the self.

Gould’s father figures have been Ted Hughes, W. H. Auden and Les Murray, but none of them has informed his many poems about the sea. That is a passion of his own. The very first lyric preserved here, ‘Homage to Joseph Conrad’, pinpoints what is central to both their visions of the sea, fiction’s “freight of solitariness”: their different lonelinesses, their homosocial customs, but also their meditations. ‘A Limb of God: 1938’ records a sailor brooding on sharks. They have a kind of innocence, the sailor concedes, but there is:

Richer study sawing through their bellies –  
 once the head and forelegs of a dog,  
 the lead was still around his neck.  
 Mere beasts?  
 They’re more. They are a limb of God that we  
 can sever or become; they nag the rip  
 we’ve opened in decorum...

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It is characteristic, not vintage, Gould. An obvious comparison would be with Ted Hughes' 'Pike'; yet a contrast with Norman Talbot's 'The Seafolding of Harri Jones', is more revealing:

These compound edges must haunt the  
great gurgling maw –  
cliffs it has eaten... To speak of the sea  
makes me keep thinking of animal teeth.

Or worse –  
once I saw

a dog fall from a cliff-top, get caught by a  
seatongue  
& flipped from wave to wave with gay shapes  
& splashes.

When it had drowned, the nations of greed in  
the ocean purred & sang.

Forget about sharks – the mere diatoms lust  
for blood  
& soil & air & light. Everything there is  
Steps up the sea's appetites. This morning  
after, placidly,  
the sea chews its cud.

This elegy is Talbot's finest poem, not only in *The Four Zoas of Australia* but anywhere. Where Gould's mariner muses "Yes, were I God..."; Talbot's narrator speaks in a world where that possibility can never properly, or decently, be thought: he respects the infinite qualitative distinction between any human and God. Where Gould's speaker develops a rhetoric to make sense of the imagined equation between himself and the deity, Talbot's has to be equally, though differently, rhetorical to make sense of God's otherness. The poem concludes,

The trembling whaleheart wet upon the fluke  
streaks black then shiny where again the  
sealust  
hardens to that heaped white malevolence...

The wrathless welt is repeated again & again,  
maiming the shore & scarring all the wind  
with perpetual arms on the mutual stroke  
of death –

O brute Majesty that shouts in the sea's  
garden!

If the elegy glances over its shoulder toward Lowell, Melville and Blake, it also looks straight ahead for longer than most.

Elizabeth Riddell is at once like and unlike Gould

and Talbot. Like them insofar as she values communication (though not considered solely as message); unlike them in that she has increasingly favored a plain style, more and more stripped of overt rhetoric. This is not a recipe for minor verse – if it were, we could not value George Herbert or Elizabeth Bishop – though its lack of pretension has allowed people to bypass it all too readily. Nor is it a slighting of rhetoric: Riddell, like many others, prefers a style which eschews large effects, even the possibility of anything grand. Having recently talked in this spot of the many virtues of her verse in *From the Midnight Courtyard*, a less generous version of this admirable *Selected Poems*, I will be brief and comparative. Consider these lines from 'Thursday':

If there is to be a particular end,  
why not now?  
Never a more suitable day and hour,  
Thor's Day and a sunset  
burning out the blue, impending red.  
The waterhens tread apprehensively  
over the lily-pads and there's a wagtail,  
trivial bird.  
Shall we go out together, first glowing,  
then charred?

The stanza both reveals and conceals; it reveals pathos by concealing every impulse to state it directly. Another way of going about this – and what is 'this' but the business of poetry? – is to try to state directly what conceals itself. So Alan Gould in lines from possibly his finest lyric, 'Day':

And if it recognised  
the workmen sawing yellow wood, the woman  
peeling yellow fruit

we could not tell. If it had knowledge where  
yesterday's wind had gone –  
that child slamming doors  
and loud with news – or if it could explain  
why our lives seemed joyous

as we raked the windfall apples, again  
it kept its wisdom hidden.

No great verbal difficulty, no genotext, here, only a lyric which points in calm (or maybe calmed) wonder to conceptual and emotional plains which cannot be described positively.

All essays on poetry are displaced essays on reading. But what is reading? One writer whose name has



appeared here, all too fleetingly, gives us several haunting images of it. "Reading gives to the book the abrupt existence which the statue 'seems' to get from the chisel alone", he writes in *The Space of Literature*. "From its reading the book acquires the isolation which withholds the statue from the eyes that see it – the haughty remove, the orphan wisdom which dismisses the sculptor along with the gaze wishing to sculpt it. Somehow the book needs the reader in order to become a statue." If this makes us think of the poem in the museum of culture (and it should not, not when understood properly), then the narrator's remarks on reading in Blanchot's celebrated *récit*, *Thomas the Obscure*, should recall poetic language to mind. Let us end by overhearing Thomas as he reads: "The pleasure in fact became very great. It became so great, so pitiless that he bore it with a sort of terror, and in the intolerable moment when he had stood forward without receiving from his interlocutor any sign of complicity, he perceived all the strangeness there was in being observed by a word as if by a living being, and not simply by one word,

but by all the words that were in that word, by all those that went with it and in turn contained other words, like a procession of angels opening out into the infinite to the very eye of the absolute."

*Kevin Hart's A. D. Hope is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. He is currently writing a study of Samuel Johnson, Economic Acts, and editing an anthology of Australian religious verse for Oxford University Press.*

*Maurice Blanchot: Thomas the Obscure (Station Hill Press, \$17.00).*

*Alan Gould: Formerlight: Selected Poems (Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).*

*John Forbes: New and Selected Poems (Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).*

*Julia Kristeva: Revolution in Poetic Language (Columbia Univ. Press, \$35.00).*

*Elizabeth Riddell: Selected Poems (Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).*

*Charles Simic, ed.: The Selected Poems of Tomaz Salamun. Introd. by Robert Hass (The Eco Press, \$22.95).*

*James Tate: Selected Poems (Wesleyan University Press, \$21.95).*

*Norman Talbot: Four Zoas of Australia (Paper Bark Press, \$15.00).*





I watched Kat the first time she and her husband made love. I watched as he sweated above her, flogged himself to all those heights because he loved her, and I watched Kat push, want, and be denied.

Kat cried when I told her this was all there was, and he thought the tears were for him. He held her tighter than he had ever held anyone and he laughed, not quite the fool but full of himself, Kat full of him too, and he with no idea.

Kat is a waitress, in that part of any city where people go because people go. In Kat's bar there are gay newspapers to be read at the window, another waitress who happens to be a lesbian, and a bunch of regulars who are also regulars at other bars along the street. The lesbian waitress, whose name is Paula, once kissed Kat in that bar. She did it in front of everyone, but mostly it was in front of me.

On Friday nights Kat's husband comes in. He sits with his gay friends and feels genuinely embarrassed at being served by Kat. She says it's fine and really means it, and after all where else would he go. She smiles and serves. When she can she joins them.

For some time now, since that very public kiss, I've wondered about Paula. She and Kat have been hiding together, around secrets.

I see them link arms and walk along the river. To say which river really wouldn't make any difference, but not to say it was a place for lovers would. Kat and Paula slept together once. This was some time ago and while I don't imagine it will happen again, they are still friends.

"He said," Kat says. "That what I've got is all there is."

Kat is twenty-six, short and attractive. This is my choice for Kat, but with Paula you are truly free to create your own picture.

Consider her a gift, one given like any other by a writer, only this one is both less blatant and more demanding at the same time. If you want Paula you will have to draw her yourself. She is nothing to do

with me, she is not mine to give. I'm really only interested in Kat.

It was at precisely this moment in the writing of Kat that the friend it was being written for phoned me. He had been reading the manuscript and it was ludicrous, he said, to allow so dangerous a character as Paula so close to Kat. Didn't I recognise, he said, what an influence Paula was?

I did of course, but I tried to explain that Paula was more Kat's than mine, that what happens between them is up to Kat entirely and out of my control. My friend sighed with impatience. He had heard all this before. Months ago, when Kat was still an anonymous idea he wanted me to try, I told him something like this would happen, that the Paulas of this world were inevitable, even in fiction. He never did believe me.

"Impossible!" he said now. "Who is writing this story? Who is in charge?" But as the answer to the last was something my friend could not accept, there was little point in giving it. Instead, I asked back, "Why do you think Paula kissed Kat?" There was a pause and then my friend said, "I've no idea. You explained nothing. You simply stated it."

"That," I said, "is because I knew I would be explaining it now, at this stage of the story, to you. Structure and form," I went on. "When and how to tell something, these are the things I can control in a piece of writing. Not the characters, as you so dearly wish I could. You do want me to have total control over Kat, don't you?"

"Is that what you think? Why should I care?"

"Because you're desperate to know that it's possible. Even though I keep telling you it's not."

"This is all bullshit!" my friend said.

"Ah, that's exactly what Paula said to me as she started to kiss Kat."

"What are you talking about? None of that was written."

"But it is now. I just wrote it as we said it." My friend sighed loudly and demanded to know, since



I'd put the idea into his head, exactly why Paula did what she did.

"The more I write about Kat," I said. "The more I realise she actually wants to be taller, more attractive. Did you know that about her?"

"No."

"Do you want her to change?"

"No! I want her exactly as she is. This is the whole point."

"So you admit you do want total control over Kat?"

"Alright! For heaven's sake, I admit it."

"Then tell me how you would have me write it. How would you stop this desire in Kat?" My friend needed no time for this answer.

"Simply don't write her desire into it at all," he said.

"And I agree that would stop it being so, but how could you stop her wanting it? Wouldn't the suppression of actual desire be more indicative of total control than the mere removal of possibility?"

For a long moment there was nothing, and then my friend's frustration burst through at me.

"You're driving me mad with all this! You're the writer and she's the character. You can make anything happen! Don't write it in! Tell her it's impossible, that what she has is all there is."

"Sure," I said. "This is what I was doing when Paula kissed her. She and Paula were stacking plates. You know how they store them in the overhead shelves above the cakes?"

"I know. I know. Get on with it," my friend said impatiently.

"As Kat stretched up to those shelves, a very tall and beautiful woman came in and walked past. Kat was hung there, like a limp doll, and she was staring at this other woman. She actually said to Paula, God I wish I was taller, more attractive. This," I said to my friend, "was the first I knew of Kat's desire for something other than what she has."

"Which does not," my friend pointed out sarcastically, "tell me why Paula was kissing her."

"Well," I said, "I did exactly what you've wanted all along. As Kat stared at this woman I simply told her again that it was impossible, that what she has is all there is. Paula heard this, said 'bullshit' so loudly that everyone there was forced to look, and then she kissed Kat and told her there could always be more."

At the end of his tether and grasping none of it, my friend said, "See what an influence Paula is! You should never have written any of that."

I told my friend that I hadn't, invited him to look back through Kat and see for himself that none of it was written until this very point in the story.

"It still happened though," I said, and with that my friend slammed down the phone. He rang back almost immediately.

"I don't even know what Paula looks like," he said angrily. "She's ruining everything and I don't even know what she looks like."

"Is that important?"

"Of course it is!"

"Well I don't know what she looks like either?" I explained that it was Kat who created Paula, out of her desire for something more. This is human nature, I said. If we feel our lives are lacking we all create something. Usually it's just a situation, previously unconsidered, that we feel or hope could lead to that something more we desire. Invariably this 'something more' involves another person. Paula is Kat's 'situation', I said.

As usual, my friend closed his mind and wailed, "Impossible!" This is fiction, he insisted, my fiction. I had to know.

So in the end, being flippant, I admitted to indeed seeing something of Paula, and I could almost hear my friend's sigh of relief as his long-held views of art, and literature, and the makings of a 'story', were propped up.

"Paula has long, slim fingers," I said, and then I dropped Paula immediately, thought back to Kat, and quite happily listened to the hiss and curl of distant conversations on the line.

For my friend, this pause was time enough for expectation to build, be ignored. He finally asked "And?" and I sighed into the phone.

"What strikes me most about Paula is the way she holds a cigarette in those long, slim fingers. Wouldn't you agree there is nothing about her so memorable as her hands?" My friend had no idea what I was talking about, but what else could I say? So often, Paula was hidden from me. I tried to explain.

"This is of no consequence," I said, "but still, it's how I see Paula. It's all I see of Paula," I insisted. "And even this is tenuous. Other than holding a cigarette, the only time I have ever really noticed those fingers was watching Kat lick them tenderly as she and Paula made love."

"But she is such an influence?"

"I agree."

"Then you will have to re-write parts of your story. Turn Kat against her and nullify that influence." My friend said this quite matter-of-factly, and I explained that it was my intention to do exactly this in the next section of the story. This is not in the hope of achieving what he wants, rather to show him how hopeless it is to attempt total control, even in fiction.



My friend rings off and Paula says back to Kat, still while they are walking by the river, "Now which 'he' are you talking about?" and Kat huffs and pulls away which makes Paula grab her and apologise. I see those slim fingers again now, despite them being unimportant. This time they're turning out sorrys in the air as she says, "It's bullshit no matter which one said it. Of course there's more."

Because my friend doesn't want Kat trusting someone like this, and because he thinks it may help, I ask Paula what attitude she carries with her into a relationship? She sticks out her tongue as far as it will go, wags the very tip of it and laughs.

Kat blushes at this answer. My friend sees this, is reading it now and smiling to himself. I'm certain he thinks this is a step towards lessening Paula's influence. He doesn't see that Kat clings to her arm even more though.

For weeks now, most nights, one particular man has been coming into the bar.

I watch Kat with this man and suddenly realise that she hides him amongst those same secrets she and Paula have always been able to hide around. I see that Kat seems different somehow, a little taller perhaps, a little more attractive, definitely happier. I know this can't be coincidence.

Considering the implications of the last few sentences, I expect to hear from my friend very soon. To pre-empt his attack on me, I should state now that given all that's been written so far, this new man in Kat's life was inevitable. I know my friend won't accept this, but can only hope that he waits and reads on before he calls to disturb me. I am soon to re-write that portion of Kat's life he was so desperate to have changed.

I hear Paula whispering, "You're mad if you don't. Absolutely fucking mad!" She slides flat whites across the bar, but holds onto them so that she and Kat are standing there stretched over the glass from opposite sides. "You can't live in porridge for the rest of your life, even if he does say that's all there is. You should fuck this guy at least twice. Find out." Tonight is Friday and Paula kicks her head in the direction of Kat's husband and his gay friends. "I'll tell him you did anyway, so you might as well."

Kat says, "Don't be stupid," and goes about her serving. When at last she sits with her husband, Paula's words are still with her, even this long after they were spoken. This is exactly what my friend wishes to control, what he insisted I circumvent with a slash of the pen.

So picture this. Four years ago Kat thinks she is in love with Paula. Paula's hands, those slim fingers, are hours gone, yet Kat still moves beneath the

memory of them as they walk.

They've been to a stand-up venue, and from a single string of one-liners, Kat has learnt more about sex and men, PMT and her period, than she has ever known before. She leans into Paula, letting herself be held hard and burying her face in her scarf because she's still embarrassed about so many of the jokes going past, or at best, dropping in late. Kat feels vulnerable, naive, but at least she has Paula now. I think she would kiss those fingers as they walk.

They go to a party. People from the club are there. Paula seems to know everyone and disappears a lot.

Kat smokes a little dope, watches some couples doing lines, others doing each other. She hovers around Paula when she can.

At about three in the morning Paula is gone again, only this time it's been ages. She's in the back of a car, flung there with a woman she's only just met, and of course in this picture, our new picture, Kat would find them.

Surely she would never trust Paula again? Surely she wouldn't sleep with this new man on Paula's say so four years later?

Having read this 'should-have-been', see Kat again as she takes the coffees from the bar on that Friday night, ignoring any advice from Paula (as she's done now for the last four years), and goes to sit with her husband and his gay friends. She still says, "Don't be stupid," Paula still says and does exactly the same things in exactly the same way. In fact, wouldn't the whole scene look and sound exactly the same if it weren't for me having told you, and Kat, of that one party incident, and of her hurt?

Somewhere, that very fine line that divides ostensibly identical incidents has been exposed. It only took a few simple paragraphs, but now this story of Kat should be very different. Everything before has become a momentary traipse along a fantasy tangent, one I have reluctantly chosen to erase.

Kat's husband began to speak but was interrupted by another phone call from my friend.

"Now you're on the track," he said to me.

"Do you think so?" I said. "I have to tell you, I really don't imagine it will change much." Convinced as I was that all of this was nothing more than unnecessary hurt, I was quite sad about doing this to Kat. Full of sudden good humor, my friend said,

"Rubbish! How can she ever listen to that bitch again?"

"There will always be someone else then," I said. "Kat was just becoming something of her own?"

"That's exactly why we did it, isn't it. The point to the whole exercise?"

"Perhaps," I said, and my friend replied quickly,



"What else? Let's change the subject now you have her sorted out. When are you going to write the final draft?"

I told him this was the final draft and we then proceeded to argue structure and expectation. How, he demanded to know, could I change things so totally by backtracking through a story and going off at a tangent, but at the same time leave in all of what went before this new direction?

I asked my friend why he thought a story needed to be a unidirectional racetrack, devoid of options other than those limited offerings of the jockey's urgings (which can, after all, only be used as throttle or brake) and then leading to an inevitable end?

"It doesn't," he said cheerfully, "But it's expected."

"We all have expectations," I said, and then rather rudely I hung up.

After this phone call, which happened to be on a Friday night, I went to Kat's bar and sat alone in a corner. My friend came in too, but he sat apart from me, with his own friends. With great interest we watched Paula whisper, "You should fuck this guy at least twice," and Kat say, "Don't be stupid." On the surface of it nothing had changed and I pointed this out to my friend who had finally come over.

"But it is different," he insisted. "Before she might have listened to that bitch and actually done it."

"And you think that now she won't?" I shrugged and left it at that, paid for the coffee I'd had and left. From the door I saw my friend return to his friends, Kat take flat-whites and go to sit with her husband.

Some days after this I was visited by my friend. Tearful and morose and begging a drink, he proceeded to tell me how certain he was of losing his wife. She's on the verge of an affair, he said. If not already having one. He was determined not to let it

happen though and he got quickly drunk, as if that might help in the defence.

"What can you do that will stop it?" I asked, and at this my friend tossed his arms, shook his head in helpless self-pity and cried,

"I have to do something! She thinks her life is empty, for God's sake. She wants more."

"Of what?"

"I don't know," he snapped. "Just more?"

"Then couldn't you give it to her? Or better yet let her discover this 'more' for herself?"

My friend looked at me as if I'd spoken to him in some foreign language. Finally, with the emotion and conviction only a drunk can offer, he said, "It's impossible. What she has is all there is."

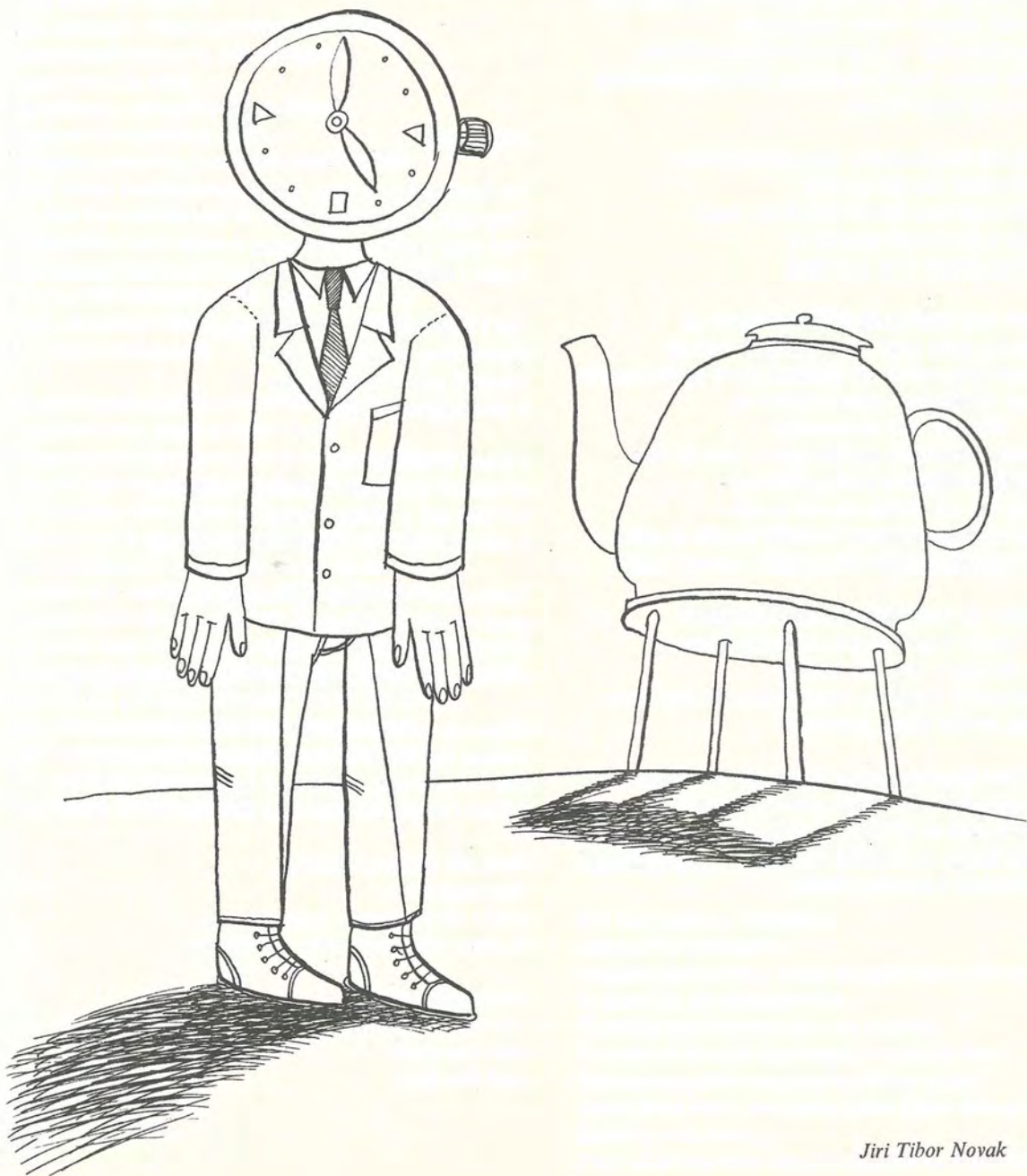
My friend and I went for a walk, along the river near my house. Couples strolled, despite the winter, and caught up as I was in my friend's mood, I still spotted Kat and her new man walking the far bank. My reaction must have been obvious, for my friend looked across the water to where I was staring.

"What is it?" my friend said. He looked from them to me and back, but they were too far off and he didn't recognise her from there. By now we were both simply standing in the middle of the path, me held by Kat, my friend by me.

"I tried to tell you this would happen," I said. "That what you wanted was impossible." I ignored the question he was asking and simply watched. She was so much taller, more attractive.

On this smarmy day of wet squalls and tufted gulls, Kat buries herself under the arm of her lover. As they pass, on the far bank, she looks up only once, across here to where I'm standing with her husband. It's as she looks up that my friend recognises his wife too, and for perhaps the first time ever, he really hears Kat when she says that there has to be more.





*Jiri Tibor Novak*



## COUNTRIES

While I'm playing Countries on the bare sand  
with his daughter, who has Australia, France and  
reluctantly, Japan – he's lying there  
with his dilemma. As I take the United States  
I long for some fate to dissipate the thundercloud  
that palls his love for me.

As the stick flies beyond our wonky world  
and she takes the Milky Way  
I want to tear that threat out of his head  
and cast it into outer space, or  
Antarctica, which I've just won.

And now he's sitting up and watching us  
I feel all my pros and cons being tallied up  
As though this odd man is Zeus there at his bench  
Deciding whether or not to let me in.

She hesitates over new land, and runs to him  
Returns and writes a perfect Turkey  
Laments her countries are so small –  
her legs and arms being half the length of mine –  
I take Afghanistan, of which she's never heard.

Yet could I fill that place were it vacated?  
Could I claim it as I've just claimed Greece?  
(to her dismay – she wanted it)  
Isn't another's mind as treacherous as the Horn  
of Africa, which she's just won?

I would not anyway arrive brash as Columbus  
with some new name and colonising plan  
A visitor's visa is all that I desire, possession  
being for kings and children's games.  
Nevertheless, I acquire Spain.

## THE DEAL

It's kind of like a deal, isn't it  
This lack of intensity –  
You said you wouldn't have it  
I said I didn't want it.

Yet I find myself wanting to say  
Open Your Eyes. See Me.  
Instead you stay shut like  
a small jewelled box.

I tower over you like  
A fecund goddess – all flesh and lust  
Or you are a pliable dough  
I pummel with fat black cook's hands.

Exhaustion is just a sigh away from  
post-coital depression  
a wordless trough wherein creeps  
memory of others, a bit of dream, a shopping list.

It comes and goes that one intimate shiver  
before the holland blind flaps white light in  
and smells and sounds of Saigon.  
I think I might be beautiful like this

And still you say nothing.  
You stay shut.  
And I don't want to open you up  
in case there's worms and vipers

and bad news I don't need.  
I'd rather take my chances  
with the quiet  
and the dark.



## HEARTLOAD

Now I'm thinking darling  
Your heart's not in it  
Something's missing from this pudding  
Some keen spice or rising agent  
Some crucial fruit.  
We miss it, as we lie there silent  
against the scratchy static  
between stations, our dials stuck, again  
Your head turned away  
so that I know the plane of your cheek  
better than your eyes.  
It's the position you begin to move away in  
as you drift towards your painful privacy  
That chamber where at least you know  
the horrors well.

I could break the spell and tell you  
I would never have a cruel word  
There are no barbs or burrs to fear from me  
I would not take back this heartload  
of kindness and good will  
I have made an altar at where I found you  
And am devout there like some stubborn nun  
I would not worship false gods before you  
Or have you any way other than you are  
My love may not be stronger or better than the rest  
But it is my firm new place where hauntings cease.  
I could tell you you are safe too at this place  
But wish for you to find that for yourself  
And can only wait and watch your perfect  
profiled mouth  
For those good words.

## NOOSA INLET

Today  
the water is like lead.  
Sometimes it is like silk  
sometimes like beaten silver  
or it glows and gleams like gold.

What it rarely looks like  
is simple water.

NANCY CATO

## VISITATION

On the balcony lorikeets  
clamor for attention.  
Begging alms they have brought their show  
to town as an inducement.  
Exhibits themselves: on the palette  
the paints freshly squeezed, ready to mix.  
Dazzled by color we proffer them bread.  
More than food, we have given them occupation.  
Bowling and rising,  
they alternate like woodchoppers at their work.

GREG JOHNS



## TWO POEMS BY BA PHILLIPPS

### BEAUTIFUL BUILDERS

Builders are beautiful and bright and brown  
like toffee or copper.  
They have obvious teeth because they show  
the sweet ungrief  
of health. They sleep well  
and eat thick sandwiches at lunch.  
They often yell  
at aproned women bunched  
at Hills hoists.  
They gulp their life of air and sun  
like naked mermen in a sea of joists  
the site a coral honeycomb.  
Structure is rapture to them  
a wood poem.  
If you go with them  
you will be gilded with builder sweat,  
and like two swimmers in an airy blue sea,  
willingly wet.

### TWO OLD DOGS

Two old dogs  
thought they could smell cat  
old cat concealed behind curtains.  
They whined in Old Dog  
remembering the chase  
but not chasing.  
I am old chook  
in immaculate hen house  
laying no eggs  
but remembering the nest.  
You are old cock  
crowing in the dark,  
straining for light-time  
remembering nothing.

Old dogs are precious and wise;  
they wag their tails in the sun.  
They do not tell lies  
and they know when their day is done.

### WHY THE MOON CHANGES COLOR

Before anything the long hold  
almost silent almost still.

How many salt-lines on your sleeve?

A submarine blue  
the last color in the windows,  
between the chimney pots.

No hurry to tell the story  
of either of our lives,  
we will pick out of the same saucepan.

Laces, zips and buttons swapped  
for the one large linen pocket,  
we will both go off to sleep  
in the smell of the same candle blown out,

convection currents running down  
in half a cup of tea  
as it goes stone cold  
beside the clock.

The lobes of wax will cloud over.

C. S. ANDREWS



## A WREATH OF BRICKS FOR THE DEAD

*For Kevin Connor*

A line of palms, blasted back to stumps,  
signals a swathe of fertile land beside  
the dark Euphrates. A sweeping dust storm  
veiling Nejef, lifts slowly to reveal  
piles of rubble and the battered mosque.  
War has savaged this sacred place,  
leaving a wreath of bricks for the dead.  
Now, caught up in swirls of heavy paint,  
I'm trapped on canvas in a weeping city.  
The blue enamelled sky is pressing down,  
a cold counterpoint to the ochre ruins.  
The martyr's red silk flag stirs softly  
above the shell scarred golden dome.

ANNE FAIRBAIRN

*Kevin Connor has been awarded the 1992 Sulman Prize  
for his painting of Nejef.*

## TWO POEMS BY GRAHAM HENDERSON

### THE WOMAN AT THE WINDOW

Each day she is there, the woman  
at the high window,  
This woman who has cried more than most  
At not being more loved, even at noon –  
Her special time, her most beautiful hour –  
When the boys below gather the  
mirror white shells  
On the dazzling beach, the cripple boys  
who dance falling  
In the soft grey shallows, and gather her shells  
To hang in the afternoon breeze of her window;  
But only those who sail their little boats  
Late into the calm blue bay  
Will see her shadow then, deep in the  
shadowed room,  
Hear the shells across her window singing,  
And beckon her long through the fading to appear.

### THE DENUNCIATION

Pavel – if that is his name – has been denounced.  
I remember nothing of the dream  
Just a desperate recollection of squandered names  
Names no-one has ever possessed this side  
of sleep.

Somehow Pavel's guilt is carried in these syllables  
But Arvi was the name he went under in that  
other life  
Convalescing by the sea in the city of...  
In the seaside city of...

His inquisitors are weary of his explanations.  
He tries to remember the woman he loved  
In the city by the sea  
But he is lost now in the harrowing mystery  
of names.

### A NOTE ON DONALD FRIEND

A late developer:  
all that charm stuff from Sofala  
and the touch of surrealism – comic visions  
of heaven operated by porkers –  
forty years  
to hit the right pitch; to let out what  
it seems nobody's capable of anymore:  
a sense, in the late still-lives,  
of what sunlight and latitude mean:  
moisture carried in the air,  
not clinging damp a breeze can't move,  
and an open question:  
what would he have done with Melbourne  
or the west coast of Tasmania?

LAURIE DUGGAN



For me Brawgathney is a frothing grey sky – a memory of water, bone cold.

With me on the Corp's bus was a middle-aged man with arms all knots and sinews below check-flannel sleeves. A hard man. I huddled in a wool-lined oilskin and still froze. He had smiled perfunctorily, without welcome. No talk between us – but that signified nothing for no-one spoke – each with his own misgivings, as I suppose, brooded in silence.

We passed the Corp's checkpoint and here, to all intents, was a new country, an aggressive corporate sovereignty. To its everlasting glory we were to construct a monument in concrete. Pharaohs built pyramids. Premiers build dams.

The bus windows steamed and dripped. Flat frames of sodden forest were proffered and snatched away, and when we reached the saddle over The Tapers a damp cloth of mist slapped down. Nothing but the bleakness of slashed quartz, furrowed wake for the scar of road new-hewn across the mountains. The 'settled districts' slipped beyond belief.

We were clearing the clouds when, abruptly, my companion spoke. "That bump there. What do you think that was?"

"Pardon?"

"That bump. There. Again. What do you think it is?"

I caught up. "Don't know. Holes in the road?"

"Ah no no. The Corp would not be having holes in its nice road. No. They are wallabies." The over-precise English of the mid-European.

"Wallabies?"

"At night many is killed. Workers with cars, they have their three days' leave, race each other back to city. Many wallabies is killed this way. It is the day drivers who roll them flat. Please, Corporation asks, squash the dead wallabies, get them flat. See, drive fast at night and bounce over a big fat wallaby on a slippery corner and ssst, off in the bush with wheels in the air."

"Oh. You've worked here before then?"

"Yes yes. Two years with the Corp. This site five months. Before, Mawlenna."

I was raw and stringy, uncertain of my way and fearing the society of men. With what good reason I was soon to see. But here was the conversation of equals. My fear was a thing of shame, the clinging finger of a childhood sliding into the remote past.

"First time, me. I'm Clay."

"Petar. Like you have Peter, only I spell P-E-T-A-R. From Serbia?"

I nodded. Never heard of it.

Petar adopted me. Would he have done that if we had not sat together on the workers' bus? I doubt he made a habit of nursing such fledglings. The other pimply on the bus – there were three – suffered all the torments visited upon the new and the weak. One gave it back with interest and in no time he was co-opted, but the others had a hard go of it, and one went under. You can take only so many snakes in your bunk, so many workboots with acid-burned soles, so much beer doctored with piss. I copped a bit too, but I was spared the routine viciousness dished out to the others. I know I had Petar to thank for this, though I only once saw him intervene on my behalf.

I asked why me? His answer was oblique then, and is only a little less so now. "I would have liked my son to be my friend. And I may need help if I am to go home to Korsova."

We lived in huts, four top-and-bottom bunks, eight men per hut. Ours was an amicable mix as these things go. Below me was Mick McGrath, a thick-set electrician's offsider and a man of staunch and uncritical faith in the union. So far as Petar had a mate Mick was it, and I was kept in my junior's place.

A few days after I arrived there was a card game. I just watched and as well I did – this was not the



two cents prop and cop solo family game I was used to. Two months of pay packets passed back and forth across the table. Petar, Mick, two others from our hut and another two. They drank, argued, overplayed hands, Wildcard Poker first, then a simple but deadly game called Slippery Sam.

It was boisterous enough, but I'd lost interest and was reading a magazine when the trouble started, and I haven't a clue who accused who of what. Voices flared hardedged and violent, the bulb snapped out, the night was a wanging, boiling chaos. I dived for the space below bunks, hurried there by a whack on the arm. Oaths soon gave way to groans, the clamor of devastation subsided, then a last splintering of wood and the heaving of tortured lungs. The light blazed forth, illuminating a frieze of ruin.

One of the strangers, big, young, slumped battered, breath rasping, by the light switch. Petar lay beneath the window, festooned with the ruins of the deal table. Mick was in the foetal position, swearing quietly. Two were prone, one bleeding from a pulped face. Above and beneath them, the money which had sat in untidy piles on the table lay.

The big fellow lurched upright, began to move through the hut, stuffing notes into pockets. Satisfied, he reeled into the night, leaving those attracted by the noise to help the wounded. Two were removed to the medical officer's hut. We never saw them again. The Corp was not amused and we received A Visit, a tricky affair met with lies and bogus contrition.

Petar had concussion. Mick copped a boot in the balls. But they turned out to work next morning. Petar sullenly worked the day away, and we returned to the hut in silence. "What sort of a low bastard," said Mick as we entered, "would kick his best mate in the cods?"

"Me?"

"It was you alright. I could tell by the shit on your boot."

Petar smiled for the first time that day. "Yes. I thought you the big bloody threat. Get you out and she all be apples. That Midgley though. Strong, eh? Hit me with the table."

"What a come down. Done over by a bit of kid?" Mick turned to me. "He wouldn't've been worth a pinch of shit at work, I'll bet."

"Sulked all day," I said, and wished I'd bit my tongue. I hadn't stopped to think, swept along by the gentle banter. But Petar laughed and called me a cheeky young turd. I was in.

Later he explained. "My fault you got involved. I should have told you. Someone reckons cheat. The lights off. All into it, everyone, not just those calling cheat. Light stays off until one left standing. He gets

the money. Most cards end this way. Only rule, no knives. One rule. So. Camp justice. A sort of justice alright."

I've got no proof, but I know who it's down to. Five of them, and they kept pretty much to themselves, not saying that much even to each other. But they had it in for Petar, no disguising that. And Petar, well he went to a lot of trouble to keep out of their way. He didn't seem afraid exactly. By my reading – perhaps I'm being a bit romantic – common old garden-shed fear just never registered with him. But he took on a sort of grimness whenever that five were anywhere around. And there were little provocations. A jarred elbow in The Grill with a mug of scalding tea. Other little incidents I used to think were accidents. He just let them slide past. They were pretty infrequent after all, as the five were tradesmen's offsidiers on the dam site, and we didn't see them much during shift. But off shift, in the chaos of camp and scrub...

Petar was at the top of the tree. Too hard. Untouchable. So the hostility of the five seemed detached from the established pattern of camp aggro, and it puzzled me. This is probably why I kept one little incident to myself. I was walking back to the hut one night when two of the five were suddenly there. Chance perhaps. And there is really not much to it. Just that one of them slagged full and green in my face. And not a word said.

There's no doubt in my mind. I know who it's down to.

I did not work on the dam itself. Petar was a surveyor's mate, and he had enough pull to get me attached to his crew. I became a sort of offsider's offsider. Instead of sweat and concrete we had the tranquillity of the bush, a plum job.

There was a day when we lunched near a generator hut where Mick's gang was working. Around us a sea of buttongrass, a bitter breeze, ridgeline horizons with a sharp weight of snow. Through my boots clamps of ice gripped by toes. This was the day I briefly penetrated Petar's closed world.

Ham and mustard, and Petar absorbed in nature study. There was a little gossamer-stemmed flower that abounded in quartz puddles. The petals fell awning-like, with a largish eye mooning up. Reminded me of melodrama orphans in ragged purple cloaks.

"It deserves better," Petar said.

"Not this crap again."

"This is not for our moulding. We are not God."

"But we are," said Mick. "As good as. Why bloody not? God is it? That little flower? More important



than my job, mate, is it? You're a funny bastard sometimes. Christ, it's bloody obvious. There's just us. Just people after some comfort at the other end."

I didn't know what to make of this. Enigmatic, yes, but deep? – not how I'd come to see Petar at all. Then it occurred to me that here was an old tune they'd played many times before.

Petar abruptly emerged from his otherworld: "All of you frightened, Mick. You all want tame and ordinary. Suit your tame and ordinary lives. Only chains you got rid of were on your legs, and they nothing compared with those that lock your soul. Those you never crack."

There might have been some ritual in all this, but it was still dinkum. They were ablaze, livid, both of them. Fearing what was to come I plunged into the electricity of Mick's speechlessness.

"Were you in the war Petar?"

When he spoke he was back in his hidden world. "My son would have been your age, about. The Nazis, our own village Nazis, they took him and Hasha on a night I was monitoring some troop movements. That was the last I saw them. I hid but it was not safe and I left the district. I was just a boy myself.

After the war I went back, but too late to get Simic, the bastard. They put him against the wall in the liberation. Nothing to do but smash the cross, piss on the grave." This was new to Mick too. "Who's this Simic?"

"Ustasha man. His doing that I was betrayed." Petar's face was winter-bleak; taut as catgut.

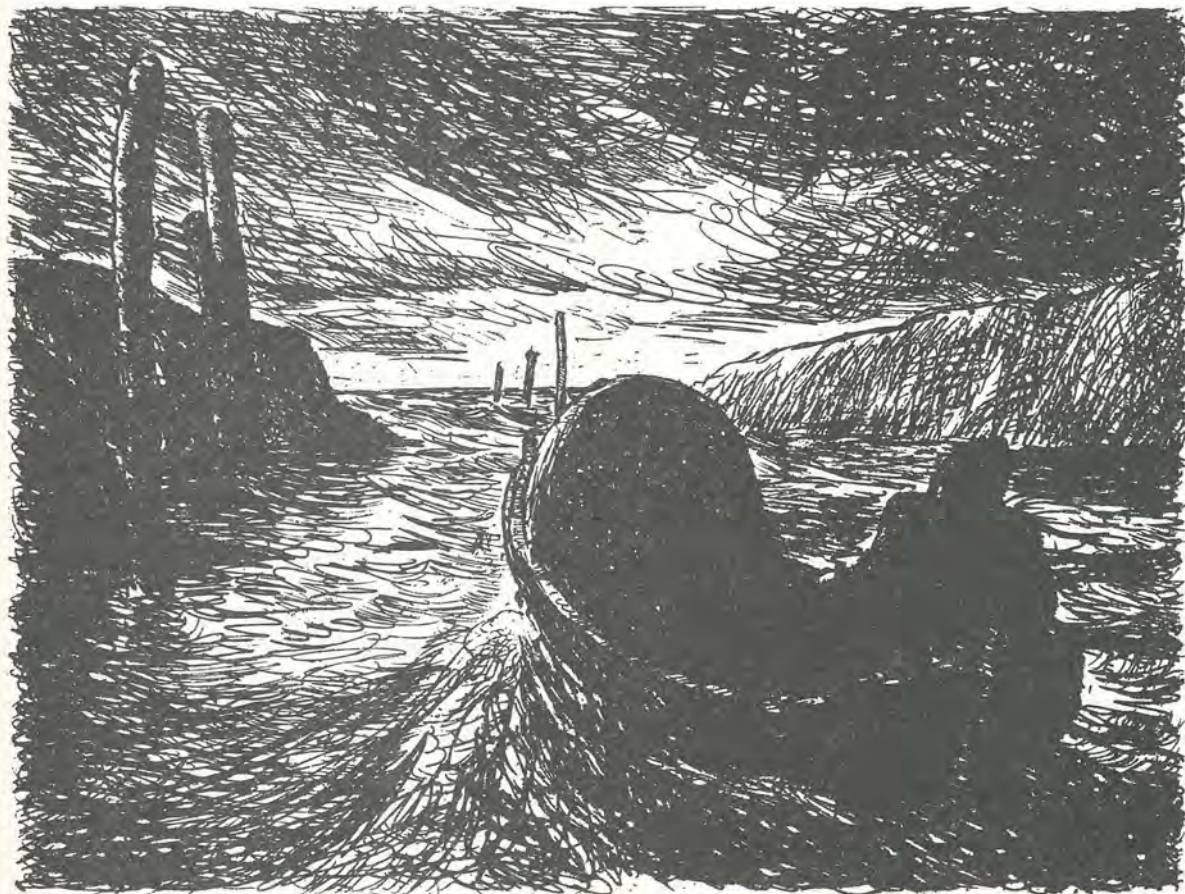
But I was lost. I asked about this 'Ustasha'.

"Nazi bum-boys. Collaborators. You got them here, don't worry." Then quietly, "You got them here on site."

This time I let the silence run. We huddled from the wind, cradling thoughts and mugs of tea. "Sorry mate," said Mick at last. "A man can be a prick."

And Petar grinned. We were back in a sea of buttongrass. "You know Mick, a bad age, forty. Look into the face of a man of forty. You can see back through his baby lines to the cradle. Look through his other lines and – snap – you have him at ninety. A bad age you have Mick. Your whole life in your face for every nosy turd to read!"

We tossed the tea-slops aside and went off to the line of survey pegs.



Rick Amor: *Out to Sea*. Etching



Winter on the thaw. Not so cold, but more rain than ever. Most days off Petar went bush, striding out for the distant razorbacks, returning with the twilight. Too much for me. I couldn't see the point.

One day he didn't come back. "I knew he'd cut it too bloody fine one day," said Mick. "Well, he knows what to do, he'll survive, but Christ he'll be bloody cold."

Dawn rolled up, and two hours of daylight slipped by. Mick was worried, and we were due to go on shift. "No choice now," he said. "We'll have to report it."

Management was not pleased. "He'd better have a broken leg," one of the bigshots said, "because if we find him wandering lonely as a cloud with a daisy behind his ear he won't even get time to pack."

They found the body around noon, just a brisk half hour from the camp. I assumed that night had found him short and the cold had finished him. Mick set me to rights about a week later. I was packing my gear, getting out. Mick was smoking on his bunk.

"You still don't know, do you? Only bastard that doesn't know."

"Know what?"

"He was done in, for Christsake. They brought him in with a bloody great knife between his ribs."

I sat down. "How could it? There's been no fuss, no nothing."

"No cops you mean? No, no cops. Not how the Corporation works boy. Industrial accident, the report'll be. Gather the poor sod's things, send them home with a very nice letter – we are sorry about your husband, son, brother, cross out what's not applicable, but he's sadly fallen under a truck, here's his toothbrush."

I went off somewhere, but I sought Mick again just before the bus was due to leave. I had questions. "Once Petar said he hoped I'd be able to help him. What would he have meant by that, d'y'reckon?"

"God knows. Help with the blackshirts? Probably didn't know himself. Well, it's a shit of thing, but that's how it is mate."

That's how it is. A shit of a thing. Probably right. He probably hadn't thought it out, what he wanted from me, all the rest of it. And I was just a kid, I couldn't help, couldn't even think what help was needed.

In my eyes there was a greatness in this man who steered me into manhood. But I have painted him flat and monotone. And that is how it must be, because one dimension was all he shared with me. It's sad, because he deserves more than my incompetence. And the uncomfortable fact is, I think, that he also expected more.

### COMING IN OVERLAND 128 SPRING 1992

Alex Miller on the Art of Fiction.

Geoffrey Serle writes on Some Stirrers and Shakers of the 1950s and 1960s (the inaugural Stephen Murray-Smith Memorial Lecture).

Peter Cochrane: To Hide the Man. How writers have distorted a national hero.

Roslyn Pesman Cooper discovers an Italian woman immigrant novelist.

David M. Martin on Mary Martin who founded the famous bookshop.

Poems by Barbara Giles, Eric Beach, Andrea Sherwood, John Kinsella and many others.

Stories by Stephanie Green, Michael McGirr and others.





*Rick Amor: Study for The Runner. Pencil*



## GARTH MCLEOD BROODING

"We are, I suppose, about 30% wrong,"  
the bloke in my daydream said,  
dozed over paper piles on a mucky desk.  
Consciousness turns around and snaps me back  
to the next sub-committee concerning committees  
and the living dead.

Nescafe, a Marie biscuit, the mail  
which never turns out nice  
but is merely expressive of people making  
demands,  
confirming my bitter view of human nature...  
the hopes for human improvement held when  
young  
will not come twice.

The fax and the xerox are humming a duet  
in their paperhearted Dreaming.  
I feel as old as a beanbag or a Beatle,  
some force having emptied me out of my life,  
dumping me here to dry, in rank spite  
of all my scheming.

We have to make a submission to the Commission  
by the fourteenth of June.  
Did Louis Quatorze have to live like this?  
Did Sir Keith Murdoch? Or Sarah Bernhardt?  
I could be a dog shut in a small backyard  
howling for the moon.

Our marketing policy feels the hammer of God.  
Our legs in Perth  
are walking unknowing into a golden handshake,  
having dropped the bundle like a hot potato.  
And the Tassie account has gone right down the  
gurgler,  
no cause for mirth.

Over my Too Hard Basket the golden motes  
are in fine array,  
my cufflink clunks; collar's a whisker tight;  
I am not really what I am,  
but a lumpish teenager whose contemporaries  
have suddenly turned grey.

Slowfoxing at Power House when I was eighteen  
I fancied my zest  
would maintain its voltage more or less for ever  
but every optimist is a dunderhead...  
We must get minutes out to Jenkins and Diorno;  
right now is best.

A baffled blowfly bats against the glass.  
Soft elms beyond  
are wearing a snood of sunlight on their hair  
while I niggle at the budget. Two weeks hence  
we'll be struggling through an Annual General  
Meeting  
like a mud-choked pond.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE



## THREE PROSE POEMS BY GARY CATALANO

### WATER

Two rocks flowing in the middle of the creek. In flowing over the one on the left, which is the taller of the two, the water pretends that it is a mass of ringlets bobbing about on the head of a running girl. Now turn to the one on the right and ask yourself just what we see. Is this really water, this flat sheet which bends – crisply, and on cue – and then falls down in stiff and regimented pleats?

### STONE

The stone is about three inches in length and looks just like a finger. I, who found it in the cold waters of a mountain stream, can tell you little about it. But I do know this: if you cradle it in your hand and allow it to be permeated by the warmth of your blood, at some indeterminate moment it will curl back and tickle you with its tip, the texture of which is remarkably similar to that of a cat's tongue. In view of this, there is no reason for me to repeat the stone is about three inches in length and looks just like a finger.

### EVENING

*For Rick*

The sun had just begun to pull its dark blue blanket over its head when I stepped onto the verandah and looked down at the footpath which ran before the hotel. It was deserted but for a dog, which had taken up its position next to a 'No Parking' sign and was gazing at the front door in which its master, it hoped, would soon appear.

The scene across the bay was equally pedestrian. As night had fallen by now, the headlands had nudged their pillows closer to the sea and were preparing to drift off to sleep. Should I mention the rhythmic music of the waves? Or should I turn once more to that lonely dog, which was still sitting beside the 'No Parking' sign and had not yet begun to howl?



## TWO POEMS BY DEBBIE WESTBURY

### AFTER-IMAGE

Coming out of a corner  
near Foxground  
my vision filled with red,  
then searing blindness  
of sun on chrome – a Mercedes  
trailing a jet-stream of blonde hair.  
I tilted my rear-view mirror  
and her number-plate screamed  
TA DAD.

In the garage restroom,  
the doors were concrete slabs  
embedded with splinters of stone,  
impervious to scribes.  
But some hand, with key or file  
had carved, in monumental letters  
HELP.

On the road closer to home,  
something long and gleaming:  
crimson entrails,  
still inflated, discoloring fast.  
I aimed the wheels carefully.

### WINTER FLAGSONG – MASSACHUSETTS

After Papa Gino's Pizza and Subs  
we walked  
beside the granite beach,  
past boarded-up summer houses  
to the Backshore Motor Lodge.

While we were gone  
someone had hoisted 'Old Glory'  
and, as we rounded the point,  
the sky was full of stars and stripes.

But when it was dark  
the moon outshone them;  
lighting the stark weatherboards of the motel,  
and, through French windows,  
a dining room  
with all the tables set  
waiting for the summer crowd.

We were the only guests,  
kept awake that night  
by an unfamiliar moon  
and the flag,  
slapping itself for warmth  
in the empty parking lot.

Before morning the flag had disappeared  
but the wind's bony hand kept playing:  
pizzicato  
with rope and flagpole.



### THREE POEMS BY PETER BAKOWSKI

#### 12 MILES SHORT OF MEXICO

I dry-skated 'round the room,  
I smoked about a hectare.  
I scratched down  
all my thoughts on paper  
but they all flew off to be mosquitoes...  
the case remained  
an iron egg.

I went down to where  
all the bathing suits are broken,  
flicking silver.  
The newsboy told me he'd never seen  
so much lightning in a dress.

A hawk's beak between piano keys,  
a weather vane in the collection box  
and a pair of wide-awake shoes  
were the only clues around.

And the captain's  
never been sober since he's been in dry dock  
and says  
that whiskey is just the devil's tears  
and it's always been that way.

The troopers got her just  
12 miles short of Mexico;  
She looked like just so much pigmeat in a dish.  
The townsfolk had never seen such a  
pepper rain.

#### THE CHESS OF GREY STREET

I see the prostitutes  
working Grey Street,  
getting into  
the darkened, slinking cars.

Between tricks  
they fidget on the leash  
of their assigned street corner,  
deals and gossip  
punctuated by the dying wand  
of a cigarette;  
but they have  
a certain look in their  
gun-turreted eyes  
and a  
wild, unshod horse dare-spit  
tilt to their heads  
that say,

"Your eyes and hands  
may dirty  
these tattooed limbs  
but there is a small tender land still  
in my heart  
that you'll never own."

And the cars claw the hill;  
men locked in that darkened circus  
of desire and shame.

#### THE BULL

The bull  
gets up  
shaves  
has breakfast  
gets ready for work.

His work is to die.

Animal Jesus  
for the  
bee sting crowd.

So we can  
drink at our  
trough of lust,  
so we can look  
in the barbarian mirror again.

We are throwing a tantrum again,  
pitching the rag doll of history  
across the Spanish sky.

The bull must die.

So we can beat our chests,  
throw our hats in the air,  
bed our women.  
So we can bury our fear  
for just one more day,

under the maggot sun.



# In Praise of Literature

by Lofu



With modern technology, 3 times more fish were caught. Within 2 years all fish were gone.

What a BUMMER!



They caught 3 dead dogs, 5 dead babies, heaps of plastic bottles... tyres... And cholera...

Bad, Bad, Bad...



It didn't work. 5 million dollars were wasted.

Result: UNHAPPINESS



The themes included:  
1. Beauty  
2. Nutritional Value  
3. Symbolism...

Good marks for all!!!!

OH WHAT A SAD PLACE THE WORLD WOULD BE WITHOUT LITERATURE!



# Wild Camilla

CATHERINE CONZATO



Camilla landed in Harbesh six months before the end when the majority of us needed a perk-up. She arrived out of the blue on one of the rare national holidays when most of us were out hunting. I remember the night, or the verandah rather, and still have a wide shot of the crowd casually ganging around her as she danced. They were always dancing parties then. During the week we could hardly sleep or think for the bomb blasts going off like bells.

I had a secret preference in those days for tall mulatto girls as Camilla was, and was convinced she was my type. At the time I frequented an English girl, Ann, or rather she frequented me, but from the moment I saw her I would have given money to run my hands down Camilla's spine.

A few of us had similar hopes. I was a visiting lecturer at the university, supplementing a course while I myself was still studying, substituting for one of our professors who had taken sick leave. Consequently I was younger than the crowd, and totally inexperienced for the post, a point I went to extraordinary lengths to cover up but found that in vast, unscrupulous Africa a trivial thing such as that became absurd. At the outset my dinner discourse championed North-South cooperation and the merits of grassroots projects, growing vehement at the utterance of that word "neo-colonialism". In the modest home I rented I offered my embarrassed cook a place at the table, bought several colored shawls for the girl who washed my clothes, and made the ridiculous purchase of a pair of rubber gloves to protect her hands. My hardened colleagues laughed at me, and as I later learned, took bets

on how long it would take for me to change my tune.

After two months the cleaning girl became my lover and I fired the cook who was stealing rice and flour on the side. I had become frustrated in my post at the university where the power was cut intermittently, my rented car was stolen three times, and most of my students neglected to show up. I was heard to say at a restaurant table, "They should have colonised the place for twenty years longer" in reference to the "pack of thieving schoolboys" I thought fit to call the race. It was a comment which followed me for weeks like the smell of shit on a shoe and for my colleagues and small group of friends, indicated I was ripe for their corruption.

Most of us had 'embassy girls' which meant our white girlfriends such as Ann who worked as secretaries or teachers or even, in the case of a select few, as private consultants. We accompanied them on weekend outings or to rather stiff, flat parties held in elaborate houses. For 'recreation' as we put it, there was an alternative circle of guys of all nationalities, some unattached and pretty rough-cut women, most of whom worked on the various aid projects in and out of town. We made our excuses to the 'embassy girls' when huge parties were put together, and drank and danced until the early hours of the morning. It was uncanny the balance between being a 'decent chap' and a 'bad boy', something I'll admit suited the two parts of me.

That was about the time wild Camilla came onto the scene. You could tell she was an African. Her eyes smouldered over the glass of Fanta she cupped like a mandrake stalking prey. When she danced



her neck seemed to extend three extra inches like a giraffe, or a cobra, or a Masai woman ringed with chokers. The crowd trained a pretty thorough eye over her and when she sat down to rest, gravitated toward her. It was unclear whether or not she was accompanied so none of my group were eager to jump the gun. An excitement rattled in the air. We glanced at each other edgewise, knowing the man who won this beauty had his bread buttered for a life.

It was while we were preening ourselves in this way that Igor came up, in his braggish, comic way. Igor was Venezuelan and shorter than a man should be, though the two are not connected. Whenever a joke was to be cracked it was usually at Igor's expense. Igor worked on the condom-distributing project and was known to have an unprecedented success. We laughed all the more because we had sampled his condoms, which we were proud to complain were tight and prickly. We gaped like clowns when Igor drew from his pocket the sock-size South American brand he preferred.

With Igor another Venezuelan on the project called Jose usually came along. Elegant and dark-eyed as you like to think South Americans might be, he would have been a lady killer, except in that joint we all were.

The two were a highlight of the parties. They instigated salsa marathons, picked us up on our faulty steps, coupled us off should we find ourselves on a limb. They danced superbly. Even Igor with his stocky buttocks and short legs was a feast to watch. He sweated, he crooned, he flexed his hips as a separate part of himself. He released his body in the total way we Westerners can only fabricate.

The night Camilla showed up there was no Jose. Later we speculated as to whether Igor had left him downtown for the night to better his chances, for when Jose loosened his shoulders and closed his eyes to dance there were no contenders. As it were Igor presented himself to Camilla dancing alone on the floor and the two found common ground immediately. We kicked ourselves and tut-tutted at this Grace Jones–Dudley Moore combination as you can well get my drift. We were convinced she was wasted, we were convinced she was the one we wanted to take back from the wilds. But Camilla was loving it. She flashed her tiger's smile, showed that a flankless woman can still have vibrating hips, rotated her two fine bare shoulders we would have kissed to pulps. The room was beseeched by her.

Igor too was kicking up a storm. His hips meeting her thighs made an unencumbered communion. His face cracked smile after smile as he cha-cha-ed back for more. We guessed he couldn't believe his luck.

We had dirty dreams about them all week.

So that was it. Camilla and Igor were a number. Jose, confirming our belief, took the alliance as a gentleman. He retired to a corner table most of the evening and danced politely with a team of local girls. As time went on we noticed with concern that he drank, sometimes showed signs of a temper, and was interested less and less in joining the salsa, or the lambada as was then the rage, or in correcting our jerky distortions of those dances. Camilla and Igor meanwhile never tired. They danced hour after hour like kids, flinging themselves on a couch every so often to canoodle, after which Igor would fetch a glass of Fanta Camilla would drink copiously from his hands. I guess we tried to be happy for them. It was enough that Igor let us watch Camilla's body move non-stop all night. We still cracked jokes about Igor but sorely, for there was a ginger point nobody had the heart to touch.

While all this was going on, naturally, I persevered with my work at the university, much in the way a man addresses a brick wall. The students were poor speakers of English and derived great pleasure from the sort of pranks one would expect from kids, such as placing worm-ridden samples of dung in my drawer and the like. Most of them were rich brats, who returned from jaunts to the States with twangy accents and gadgets, great deliberation over which was the most vital activity on campus.

Until it was forbidden to move around the country I took pleasure in driving along the unsealed pistes of the savannah. These were the only moments I chose to regard myself as being in Africa, corresponding in its images of low acacias showering the flats, stilled gazelle or loping camels, to the place I thought I had come to experience. It was always a shock to drive back to the city, to Ann and Camilla, to Igor and Jose and the boys. Each time I drove back I challenged myself to stay out there, in the cawing rustling dusk, but I knew I was too petrified to attempt that.

Four months after my arrival an event occurred which put a stop to my moments of communion with the vast landscape. I felt shivers over the surface of my skin when I heard that Jose had been knifed outside the gates of his house, hours after we had seen him dance a memorable lambada at Camilla's request. His body was found, still in his car. The murder happened just before daybreak and Jose's watchman said he had heard voices outside prior to that time, and assumed they were hoping to steal the car. He guessed that fearing discovery, the bandits had taken flight without their loot.

We all took the news solidly, for the cities were uncertain volatile places. On second thoughts we



worried if jealousy might have had a hand in it – remembering Jose’s dance – and were relieved to find Igor shattered as a boy. After all we thought quietening our doubts, it wasn’t the first time a white person had been murdered. Our next reaction was to fasten our locks at night, question our watchmen and cooks, and remember we were risking our necks.

In that later period Camilla and Igor danced a lot of slows. It was a sorry sight the way he leaned on her completely, his cheek pressed on her flat chest, her arms crossed around him and black eyes staring above our heads. We all imagined we felt touched by Jose’s death but in truth we were shit-scared for our own skins, and found the parties less of a panacea than before. I who had always thought it a favor of fate that had brought me here began to see murderers in the dark, people hunched under their loads, and flick knives in the pockets of street-kids. I felt a nausea each morning as I shaved in the mirror. I didn’t want to meet Jose’s end. I got to the stage where I didn’t care about a thing so long as I got out quick smart.

Things deteriorated rapidly after that. Camilla and Igor cleared out and we wondered if anyone, anywhere, gave a damn about us. The season turned cold, and on top of the bombs and the power cuts there was no heating. That was when we turned back to our ‘embassy girls’ where things were still good. I wondered out loud one afternoon while Ann was within earshot about Igor the Venezuelan and his consort Camilla, suddenly vanished into thin air.

“She came to see me once at the university. Very tall and quite attractive. Told me her father was an ex-minister and her mother was half-white –”

Ann was quick to strike back.

“That tramp? I can’t imagine what she had to do on campus.”

She looked me over, sharp as a mother who’s found my cache of dirty clothes. With that look she told me she’d known all about my ‘bad boy’ side all along.

But Ann was a good sport, or like many mediocre girls a pragmatist and a masochist rolled into one. She filled me in on what she had heard, namely that Igor had been kicked out of his organisation for dealing chad, the regular weed here, and had been advised to evade arrest.

“He’s filthy rich they say. They married and bought an apartment in Acapulco in June?”

My colleagues had heard conflicting reports from their girlfriends so we were at a loss not knowing what to believe. In case you have never tried, it is most disturbing trying to place a person somewhere on this planet but not having the faintest idea where. Had he been given a new post in Nepal as one

woman had sworn, and tagged Camilla along? Or had he been dished out a boring desk job somewhere within the headquarters in New York? After long nights of hypotheses over restaurant tables about how Camilla might have livened up Katmandu or who might have duped Igor in New York, we gave up. We realised that in our neck of the woods the only thing that mattered was the black hole in the dance floor each Saturday, and how what had kept most of us going through the bombs and power cuts and fuel rationing had slipped into it.

About the time of Camilla’s ‘season’ as we called it came to an end, like many of the others, I started to let myself go in a pretty bad way. I drank to high heaven, had five different girls in a week, didn’t send a letter or make a call back home for months. Something started to happen between the ‘decent chap’ and the ‘bad boy’ parts of me. The ‘decent chap’, I noticed, was getting eaten up. Good-natured Ann had taken about as much as she could and dropped me. I never saw her or even thought of her again.

Quite a few of my friends left when their projects were suspended but I still had a half a term to go, and no instructions as to what I should or shouldn’t do. I felt like a forgotten sod, all the more ridiculous teaching seasonal sweet-potato cropping to kids whose compatriots I knew were seaming the hills with mines. I realised I should have returned to my own study, given I was in such a bad way, and would receive a shock when I returned home to exams. But I couldn’t or didn’t want to, instead I read through volume after volume of Wilbur Smith and the like, which had been left by my predecessor in sacrificial pyres about the house where I lodged, probably driven to madness like myself.

One day thinking it would restore my mental health, I was drunk or crazy enough to head out to the edge of the town. Here a gulf parted the hills, making way for the luminous white savannah. It was normally a spectacular sight. Suddenly soldiers came up in a hacked-off jeep brandishing sub-machine guns. They leapt out and spread round me execution-style, guns cocked at hip height. I braced myself recalling Jose killed in cold blood. When they had toyed with me long enough they urged me off cackling threateningly.

After my mock execution the bomb blasts intensified in town and I stayed at home under lock and key. Many of the houses around me were vacated. The parties continued at half-mast for a while then stopped altogether. I felt an uncomfortable ‘middle man’ growing inside me, since the ‘bad boy’ and ‘decent chap’ had cleared out. The ‘middle man’ was not such good company. He was sober. I sat with him in empty restaurants. Through his eyes



I observed the skeletal dark faces passing outside, the people I had been convinced were killers and thieves. It hadn't taken me long after my affair with the housegirl and the firing of the cook to side with the sceptical whites. I looked harder, realising that through their poverty and war and famine I had been having the wildest time of my life.

In my inner discussions I protested that it wasn't entirely my fault. I wanted to think that in shifty, adept modern Africa my conscience had been pilfered. I wanted to blame someone and struck at Camilla who had blindly made me fall into the trap, and at the same time Ann, who had never pulled me out.

My last weeks passed with less speed and more drama than I might have wished. The cook I had at the time sensed my deep and probably typical quandary and asked for a loan of a thousand bucks. He said his wife had a liver complaint and had to go to Germany. Now I shake my head as I think of how willing I was to oblige. I accompanied the delighted guy to the the rundown affair called a passport office, and unleashed my spiel on the grinning clerks. Meanwhile the cook's nephews (I later found out he had no wife) carefully removed everything of value from my house, a fact we discovered with joint dismay upon our return. The cook parted after that, in haste I might add, leaving in my employ his 'cousin' which meant a man from the same tribe. With this greedy lazy character I tried my best. I overpaid him, in a well of decency of course, and he contracted a series of illnesses so that I found myself virtually waiting on him in my own bed.

The story might have gone on in that fashion – interminably – except that I caught a sizeable dose of typhoid fever myself and was flown out. Had I

not been told I risked an attack of the meningitis epidemic approaching town I might have drugged up and let it pass. I might have still been there in the midst of the carnage going on, the guilt-ridden 'middle man' inside me playing servant to the hypochondriac propped in my bed.

In the period following my own recovery I found myself in a curious limbo. Normal life – that is, work, supermarkets, TV – seemed like an eerie pantomime after the slow, crafty blacks. I felt numb, or I couldn't find any sense in the actions I carried out. There was no haggling, no warfare in the streets; I could walk up my steps free of beggars and streetkids. All seemed to be minding their own business in a fastidious way. Occasionally I would feel like thumping the quiet line of people at a bus stop, or a guy who helpfully handed me my change.

Following my parting experience with my crooked cook's mob I was at loggerheads with the do-gooder 'middle man' and against his will decided to contact the guys from the old group. Most of them made out they were happy to see me. We arranged what turned out like a miserable bucks' night and persisted with a series of these in various capitals, until a couple of the wives got the score and wanted out. The girls in any case had no verve. I'm sure we all took more pleasure in remembering Camilla with lust, and Igor too, dutifully, not forgetting those last cracks about the field he knew best.

The only thing I ever heard about Camilla was quite recent, and while putting my heart at rest is the sort of thing I'd like to hold on to for myself. A chap I met at a seminar knew Igor and remembered Camilla with a smile. He said Igor went down in a plane last year, and left Camilla in Caracas living like a queen.

## floating fund

BARRETT REID writes: thanks, once again, for the winter cheer of your notes of comment and greetings, for re-subscribing and for those so-essential donations, amounting, between March and May, to \$744. Specific thanks to: \$104, J.J.W.; \$100, G.B., N.H., J.H.; \$26, I.E.M.; \$24, J.S., T.M., M.R., L.G., J.K.S., J.B., J.C.; \$20, E.R.; \$14, R.H.B., E.W., C.C.McK.; \$10, D.I.D.; \$4, G.M., G.H., R.B., G.E., P.S., R.J.B., S.D., R.G.S., R.M., J.S., R.G.H., R. & H.N.; \$2, A.W.L.



ROSS McMULLIN

## Commemorating Labor's Centenary

"Freedom's on the Wallaby: Facets of the Australian Labor Party 1891-1991" (National Library exhibition)

"The Light on the Hill: 100 Years of the Labour Movement" (WA Museum exhibition)

June Senyard (ed.), *Labor in Cartoons: Cartoons of the Australian Labor Party in Victoria 1891-1990* (Hyland House, \$14.95)

In May 1931, with many Australians suffering profoundly in the Great Depression, the ill-fated Scullin Labor government disintegrated. Joe Lyons, who had been one of Scullin's senior ministers, confirmed his departure from the ALP by announcing that he had become the leader of Labor's conservative opponents. This defection was a tremendous coup for the Melbourne-based group of plotters who had conspired to achieve it. However, when the labour movement which had elevated Lyons to prominence deluged him with a predictable avalanche of abuse for his traitorous conduct, the conspirators became concerned that his resolve was weakening. One of the plotters, journalist Ambrose Pratt, wrote Lyons a wheedling letter designed to stiffen his resolve.

Pratt told Lyons that he was writing on behalf of "the group of five who like to think of themselves as your special bodyguard", and piled on the flattery with a shovel. He affirmed that "our faith in you is indestructible", praised "the splendid strength and inspiration [of] your leadership", and stressed that "we all entertain towards you feelings of the warmest personal friendship" and "are constantly prepared to do anything and everything that lies within our power to help and serve you".

Even the pep talk that was the main purpose of the letter was prefaced by an ingratiating compliment.

Your sensitiveness to insult is a quality that endears you to us all. But while we are fully aware of its fine spiritual significance and honour you

for it we want you to steel yourself against the suffering that it inflicts and never permit our enemies to realize that it is within the power of their mean malignancy to wound your strong and faithful soul... Never for an instant lose heart, Joe. March on steadily and bravely to the victory that belongs to you...

and Australia will be forever grateful, etc, etc.

This unctuous letter is one of many gems in the National Library's exhibition commemorating the centenary of the ALP. Its librarians have dipped into its abundant documentary and other records relating to the rich history of the ALP, borrowed some items from other repositories, and assembled an engrossing exhibition.

The title of the exhibition, "Freedom's on the Wallaby", comes from a well-known poem by Henry Lawson dealing with momentous events related to Labor's origins in 1891. In that year the gradual progress of the Australian labour movement towards direct parliamentary representation was accelerated by significant developments in a number of colonies - electoral success in NSW and elsewhere, and a bitterly contested strike in Queensland, which was suppressed by that colony's conservative government with such blatant misuse of the parliamentary and judicial machinery that it became a great stimulus to Queensland workers to get their own people into parliament to prevent a repetition.

Lawson's poem, which was published in the *Queensland Worker* at the height of the strikers' fury with the repressive measures used against them, outlined the worthy aspirations of the working class to build a fairer society in Australia, and concluded with a warning:

We'll make the tyrants feel the sting  
O' those that they would throttle;  
They needn't say the fault is ours  
If blood should stain the wattle.



But the Australian labour movement collectively opted for parliamentary democracy rather than the violent revolution implicit in Lawson's concluding threat, and it is the significance of that preference, the commitment to "democracy, that right of all to participate in government", that the National Library exhibition (in its own words) "chiefly celebrates". Sensitive to the need to adopt an even-handed political stance, the library has been at pains to stress that whether one approves of the ALP or not the centenary of Australia's oldest and most important political party is clearly a noteworthy event. It is also pointed out in this exhibition that the library will be assembling major exhibitions in 2001 to mark the centenary of Federation and in 1994 to commemorate both the centenary of Sir Robert Menzies' birth and the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the Liberal Party.

Menzies was one of the plotters involved in the conspiracy to encourage Lyons to defect, and another of the highlights of the "Freedom's on the

Wallaby" exhibition is a little-known three-page memorandum by Menzies following the 1943 federal election. At that election the ALP thrashed its conservative opponents, then led by Menzies, more comprehensively than it had managed at any previous election, and Menzies' appraisal of the results is most interesting. One factor mentioned by him—"the extraordinarily skilful and devoted services of Mr. Curtin's press officer, Mr. D. K. Rodgers"—is particularly notable, since the importance of Don Rodgers' role during the prime ministerships of both Curtin and Chifley has been somewhat under-recognised.

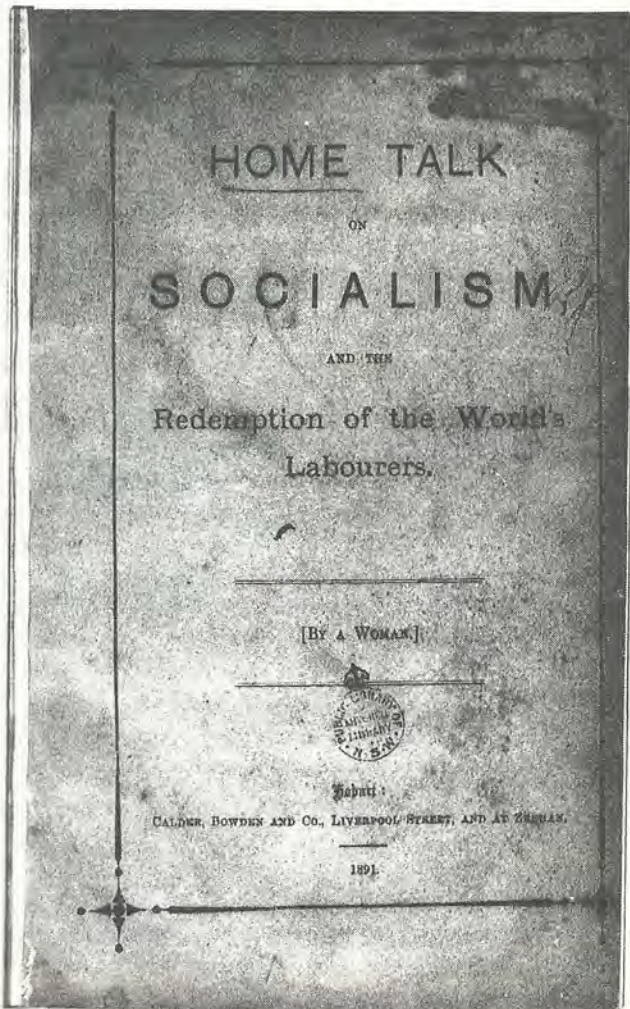
Unlike Pratt's letter and the Menzies memorandum, most of the items in this exhibition originated, not surprisingly, within the labour movement itself. Oral history has enabled the exhibition to connect superbly with the party's very origins. You can actually hear the lilting voice of a participant in the great shearers' strike of 1891, Jack Luscombe, whose recollections were recorded in 1952; he was then aged eighty, but still managed a fetching solo rendition of a multi-verse ballad evocative of the 1890s.

While listening to Jack Luscombe you can gaze at a reproduction of Tom Roberts's well-known 1890 painting 'Shearing the Rams', which is accompanied by an insightful caption linking the individuals depicted in the painting to the background events leading up to the 1891 strike. Nearby is a booklet published in 1891, *Home Talk on Socialism* by Bertha McNamara, the radical activist and bookshop proprietor who became mother-in-law to both Henry Lawson and Jack Lang in 1896.

A different link to the dramatic events of 1891 is a message from William Lane, the brilliant Labor journalist who concluded after the brutal repression of the 1891 Queensland strike that the prospects of a more equal and tolerant society in Australia were negligible. The exhibition features Lane's Christmas greeting in 1893 from Paraguay, where a band of idealists had journeyed to establish a utopian co-operative colony in a remarkable experiment which ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The exhibition traces the Party's hundred years since 1891 chronologically, but coverage of the post-1975 era is limited to the fascinating Film Australia documentary *Democracy*, which illuminates the nitty-gritty of politics by following Labor's 1984 campaign in a marginal Sydney seat from the pre-selection contest through to polling day at the federal election.

The drama and turmoil of Labor's periodic crises are exemplified by samples of the participants' own correspondence. There is the letter Prime Minister Billy Hughes wrote to his predecessor, Andrew









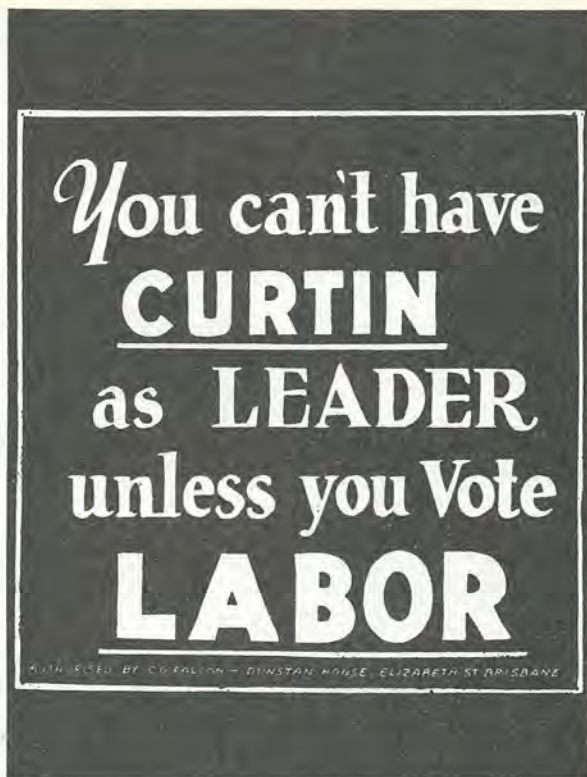
branch activity in the records displayed from Fitzroy and Hunter's Hill branches.

The exhibition was on display for several months in Canberra, and during 1992 and 1993 it will be touring various regions of Australia outside the national capital. Labor supporters and others interested in political history will find much in it to engage them, and those who have had their appetites whetted can pursue some aspects further: to coincide with the exhibition the library has printed nine informative facet sheets on various individuals and themes in Labor's history, and published an impressionistic essay on Labor's centenary by Roger McDonald.

As the author of the ALP's centenary history *The Light on the Hill*, I had long been aware of the the National Library's plans to hold a commemorative exhibition in 1991, but I found out about another such exhibition in very different circumstances. Several months after the launch of *The Light on the Hill* I was undertaking research for a different historical project in the Battye Library in Perth when I adjourned to the Library's coffee shop to recharge the mental batteries. While waiting for my coffee I happened to glance down at the place mat, which informed me that among the cultural events then on in Perth was an exhibition at the State Museum entitled "The Light on the Hill: 100 Years of the Labour Movement". This was intriguing news to me, and my curiosity made an inspection inevitable.

What I saw was another impressive array of exhibits. Although "Freedom's on the Wallaby" was more sophisticated in its presentation, particularly in its range of audio material, the Battye Library in association with the WA ALP had assembled a methodical coverage of Westralian Labor's history. There were sections on ALP women (with appropriate emphasis on remarkable individuals like Jean Beadle), the Labor press, and the activities of younger activists. It was particularly strong in electioneering ephemera—posters, leaflets, buttons, stickers and how-to-vote material. My favorite was a dramatic poster of a large boxing glove accompanying the caption "We Need The Politician Who Never Pulls His Punches: Campbell for Kalgoorlie". There were also trivia items like Carmen Lawrence's spectacles and her 1962 examination certificate.

As in the National Library, huge colorful trade union banners were prominent. Curtin, who was featured in several parts of the Canberra exhibition, was even more prominent in Perth, where he appeared in a collection of interesting photographs. Among other photos on display was one of Kim Beazley junior alongside a fighter plane; the caption pointed out that although national Labor govern-



ments have hardly been common since Federation no fewer than four Westralians—George Pearce, "Texas" Green, Curtin and Beazley—have been Labor Ministers for Defence. There is also a good photo of Charlie Frazer, the dashing young MHR for Kalgoorlie whose sudden death in 1913 at the age of 33 deprived Labor of a possible future leader.

But the most eye-catching exhibit was a desk used by Frazer's mate Jack Scaddan. A breezy former engine driver, "Happy Jack" Scaddan became Labor's second Westralian premier and the first ALP premier anywhere to govern with a substantial parliamentary majority when his party enjoyed a resounding triumph at the 1911 state election. Full of confidence, Scaddan ordered the construction of a new desk for the premier's office. It seems that no expense was spared. Only the finest local timbers were used. The perimeter of the desktop was decorated by painted busts of Scaddan and his seven predecessors as premier of WA, with each portrait bordered by stylised local flora such as wattle, kangaroo paw and banksia. Holding pride of place at the lower centre of the desktop, the image Scaddan would see most often as he sat in his office, was his own face. It was a remarkable desk and a superb exhibit.

Yet another illustrative commemoration of the





ALP's centenary is *Labor in Cartoons*, a collection assembled by June Senyard. From each calendar year of Labor's centenary she has chosen one published cartoon commenting in some way on Victorian Labor's development since 1891. As she concedes, adhering to one cartoon for each year inevitably means that some of the inclusions representing relatively barren years are not as good as others which had to be rejected in favor of an outstanding one published in the same year. While the focus is ostensibly on Victorian Labor, the cartoons frequently deal with issues affecting the labour movement throughout Australia, and sometimes also internationally. In this context I was delighted, as Will Dyson's biographer, to find that he had been given a guernsey, with one of his powerful 1913 contributions to the *London Daily*

*Herald* being included in this book by virtue of its reproduction later that year in the Melbourne *Labor Call*. *Labor in Cartoons* features the work of a variety of talented artists including Claude Marquet, George Finey and Noel Counihan as well as Dyson's brother Ambrose and nephews Amby Dyson and Dick Ovenden; also represented are a number of well-known contemporary cartoonists such as Petty, Tandberg, Cook, Nicholson and Spooner. June Senyard has contributed an interesting introduction and a useful analysis of the historical context of each of the cartoons she has chosen.

*Ross McMullin is the author of Will Dyson: Cartoonist, Etcher and Australia's Finest War Artist and The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991.*



ANNE GUNTER

## Mapping the Unpredictable: the Art of Kate Llewellyn

Selections of Kate Llewellyn's poetry had appeared in the *Friendly Street Poetry Readers* and *Sisters Poets 1* when her first solo collection, *Trader Kate and the Elephants* (1982), shared the 1983 Anne Elder award. Since then, she has published three collections of new verse and, this year, a *Selected Poems*. After publishing several short prose pieces in anthologies such as *Frictions*, she has produced four full-scale prose works: the 'Blue Mountains' trilogy, and a travel journal. In addition, she has co-edited, with Susan Hampton, *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, prodded, she says, by a modern Australian anthology editor's claim that he had "looked for the women but couldn't find them".

The hard slog underpinning ten books in as many years has been interspersed with the usual conferences, reviewing and stints as writer-in-residence. Reprintings of all the prose works and, unusually, of her third verse collection, *Honey*, suggest that this formidable, but not forbidding, body of work has found a reliable readership. It has been, on the whole, sensitively reviewed, but repays more detailed attention. The unique prose genre she has shaped does not conveniently fit current categories of literary analysis, while some will miss a socially conscientious commitment to what she several times calls "the moral high ground". Her pervasive feminism attracts many actively feminist readers. The Penguin anthology and her response to individual women's dilemmas speak louder than slogans.

Her prose is uninfected by contemporary writerly angst: on the surface it is relaxed, fluent, accessible and finished. Her poems, usually short, are honed to a hard-won simplicity, celebrating "without the aid of fireworks, music or champagne" (Introduction to the *Selected Poems*). Llewellyn makes no pretence that the highs and lows of her personal or writing life are world-shattering. The images of her verse are those whose significance has emerged with time from life patterns, responsibilities and surroundings shared by many women. The prose records of her

life are published, however, without allowing time for the "recollection in tranquillity" of most autobiographical writing or letters and journals edited by retrospective wishful thinking. This inevitably risks charges of indigestion, insincerity, callousness, egotism and, most crushingly, lack of imagination. In the poem 'Speaking of' Llewellyn addresses and compares herself with a childhood friend:

I dash around with a butterfly net  
trying to capture everything  
the past the present  
most of it slips through like air

*Honey*: 87

I suspect some identify the poet with the butterfly rather than the lepidopterist.

Llewellyn refers occasionally to such misconceptions. She several times mentions a phenomenon not uncommon among writers: "nothing seems real to me until it is written down"; but publishing is another thing. Toward the end of *Dear You*, the second book of the trilogy, a deceptively simple statement lacks the pretension of more oracular writers but goes to the core of her motivation:

...my life is simply the paddock I plough when I write. I do it, not because it is unique or from a sense of my own importance, but rather because it is held in common with the lives of other women in this place and this time. *It is its commonality that I value.* [my italics] And then, when I write it down, it never seems to me to be anything but a text. Nothing to do with me at all. In my heart, I am a very private person.

*Dear You*: 141

Recently women are rediscovering the pleasures of such commonality often denied us by the 'disappearing' of past women's writing, but to men only under repressive regimes.



Llewellyn's prose records are not primarily versions of a 'writer's journal'. The hazards of writing poetry are at times expressed seriously or wryly in her verse, but the literary life displayed in her journals and letters focuses on others' writing, her reading, contact with living writers and occasionally writing as a lover, a secret vice, a deliciously illicit passion. On entering academia, she was surprised that she was expected to identify some "secret message" in the classics she had read as if "going into the sea to swim". But she adds "if there is no message, there is only in the end style I suppose." The pruning and fine-tuning of reprinted poems indicate the acute sense of style this reading has induced. Katherine Mansfield's quoted statement on feeling "as fastidious as though I wrote with acid" is apt: in Llewellyn's own words, "when description...is needed, I want to bite on a knife." (Introduction to the *Selected Poems*.) The life she presents is not painless, but the painstaking that goes into her writing is a "private business", to be attended to before it goes out in public.

Llewellyn deals out quite ordinary words with the teasing care of a Tarot reader, the configuration as revealing as the face values, to use an image cognate with her own of a solitary card game which ends when: "suddenly, lo, down goes the winning card...It's most especially like this with poetry." But consider this, from her *Angels and Dark Madonnas*:

Yet when I walked with Matthew down the street  
to pick up his ticket I stepped gingerly as a cat  
on a wet floor over the broken paving stones with  
holes below. I was filled with horror. The teeming  
pits of hell might have lain below. Rats and sewers,  
filth and terror, these things, to my mind at least,  
lay there, and how I dodged and pranced,  
avoiding every hole and gap.

*Angels and Dark Madonnas*: 85

This is meticulously punctuated: a long unbroken first sentence moving quickly over unimportant details to the image of the fastidious cat; two generalised shorter sentences; the final sentence with its many commas simulating the picky movement.

In verse, Llewellyn avoids most punctuation marks (except quotations and queries) depending instead on line and stanza breaks. Frequent revision of these suggests more than mere corrections of typographical errors, as in the following, where she breaks down just one of many long lines retained in the later version of the poem:

do you remember the Ritz Cafe?  
with its coleus plants I hated them did you?

which becomes

do you remember the Ritz Cafe?  
with its coleus plants  
I hated them  
did you?

'Speaking Of' (*Overland* 104 and *Honey*)

Llewellyn's skill in precisely placing her emphases revealed itself early in, for instance, the poem already very finished when it appeared in *Sisters Poets 1*, 'Trader Kate':

With a few old silks  
she staggered on in the desert  
between oases

she'd put up a tent at a bazaar  
and wave her coloured silks  
at the passers-by  
pretending they were new  
for they were all she had

and her eyes knew it

occasionally  
a drunk would buy  
and that kept her going

*Trader Kate and the Elephants*: 33

The less colloquial line "for they were all she had" creates a slight hitch before the isolated statement of self-awareness; the last three colloquial, lengthening lines modify the original defiant picture.

This poem also partially predicts what Llewellyn went on to do in her prose. The early short pieces half-fictionalise episodes in her life as child and mother. The longer prose works are maps of journeys, inward and outward, "between oases", "the secret places of the mind where we touch our spirits like keys on a piano". They are not unplanned, and nor are the books unstructured outpourings, though Llewellyn develops greater sureness of touch as she moulds her genre and a persona. *The Waterlily* is the journal of a year's self-imposed semi-isolation, during which her intimacy with the (for us) only elusively descried 'Mr Waterlily' moves to a conclusion. *Dear You*, nominally addresses letters to a departed lover and is labelled, with discretion, "a novel" but the protagonist, her circle and daily living are those of the first book. The first letter predicates the 'story' to follow by ending with a gesture of closure, while the last gives the affair a metaphorical send-off. The choice of correspondent and the predictable outcome shape added elements, the pain



of deprivation and a focus on the meaning of dreams. For the third book of the trilogy, *The Mountain* Llewellyn writes letters to her daughter, while visiting friends, touring Australia's north, taking up a teaching post, then returning home. The planning of the journey and choice of correspondent shape the work, though developments like her daughter's pregnancy were unpredicted. Finally, in *Angels and Dark Madonnas* a return visit to Italy, and a last-minute decision to go to India on the way, provide the shape, while Llewellyn reverts to journal form, eschewing the prop of an identified correspondent. But whereas in *The Waterlily* she might have been speaking to herself, here it is directly to a 'general' audience.

Llewellyn creates a framework to accommodate the unpredictable. In *The Waterlily*, she sets out to avoid twentieth-century ills, but cannot entirely: a storm, a death and, indeed, death threats interrupt the idyllic round of writing, gardening, picnics and bike rides to shops, cafés, friends' homes, sharing simple pleasures. In *Dear You*, the constrained agony of deprivation moves into a new phase when a friend unpredictably reports that 'you' is moping because he cannot have her, "the love of [his] life", to which she retorts that "you have had me on a plate twice and each time you have tipped it on your foot". With her decreasing fragility, acerbic comments about three-cornered relationships appear, as the frequency of the letters decreases, until "I am certain you know what I know now" and she can even add "I recommend you to your future lovers." While aware that the distractions of her life and work will ensure this foregone conclusion, she could not predict the 'how'. This is not a comfortable book, but there is undoubtedly a 'commonality' with how women survive such situations. At least one reviewer, referred to in the next book, possibly found the discomfort too great or the survival incredible.

*The Mountain* follows the writer's travels in often not overly congenial and certainly unpredictable company, giving more play to the rumbustious side of trader Kate, but also at times becoming abrasive: whites who 'know' the only right way to work with Aboriginals; a bus driver who spews sexist/racist jokes (demanding action); bureaucratic rigidity which insists on knocking down old empty dwellings in a national park. This, along with writing to an activist daughter, brings more outward-looking commentary. "Neither a whisperer nor a shouter be" says the Llewellyn we might, unreflectingly, have seen as whispering to herself or her lovers in the two earlier books.

From the start of *The Mountain*, corresponding with her daughter immediately draws the focus

around to Llewellyn's sense of the generations of women, overt in her verse, and hovering at the edges of the earlier prose. A friend's baby brings thoughts on how much truth children can cope with; memories of grandmothers surface; and she can share a mother joke – hers naturally knows best and warns her, "I know you, you will see a bit of water and just jump in and a crocodile will get you."

The differing structural boundaries set for each book of the 'Blue Mountains' trilogy enable Llewellyn, the writer and the persona of the book, to moderate the risks of recording directly from life, even though "excess is my second name". With these restraints, she can maintain the rhythm of life and work and keep a balance based on the past and the people who, she says, have "invented" our world, teaching us how and what to see. She is aware that "the problem is, safety never interested me" and writes of "jumping off a cliff with only a coathanger". Though this was in the context of love affairs, she applies it to her writing when she says, in 'Ropes':

but the poet  
flings herself into space  
with nothing as catchers  
except her pen and the page...  
and she must never fail  
it's too dangerous...

Figs: 93

*Angels and Dark Madonnas*, a travel journal, might seem safer ground, more outward-looking, with less call for intimacy. This is not entirely so. On an obvious level, Llewellyn does not map out a safety-conscious package-tour. She makes new plans as possibilities, such as an Indian camel-fair, crop up. The poet who earlier held back a group of poems derived from earlier travels because no-one would be interested in "one woman's odyssey" now has the confidence that responses with no claim to objectivity will be accepted. She can unashamedly record her bewildered reluctance to leave India which has "wrapped her long dark fingers round my heart and squeezed". But she will walk through the airport gates much as she had earlier walked away from 'dear you'.

While this is intimately personal prose and verse, one should hesitate to identify the persona they reveal with the total 'real' Kate Llewellyn. The conscious artist's "gesture and pose" partially veil the "private person", though without any sense of undue contrivance, since the artist is part of both person and persona. To call her a "liar who knows she lies" as one critic did, because she chooses which elements of her life will structure her books, and selects, even



slants the incidents recorded, is to deny the writer's right to organise her life and work. It does not invalidate her perceptions but can confuse literati who agonise on the razor's edge between fiction and fact in biography: does failing to agonise imply chicanery or naivety? A vignette, in *The Mountain*, describes a woman who came to see Llewellyn's garden and remarked "It's nothing much." Llewellyn comments: "...say what you will, people will invent in their minds exactly what they wish. Then they blame you for deceiving them?" Llewellyn knows the dangers of "ploughing" her life, but having chosen her direction, takes readers with her without insisting they too agonise over the decision. This is not just post-modern enough!

Gossipmongers led by the intimacy and immediacy of Llewellyn's writing to seek live quarry in her work, are barking up the wrong tree. Llewellyn's insights and responses relate to particular, but not particularly 'newsworthy' events such as delight voyeurs. They relate to conversations with friends and fellow artists, students in schools or colleges, strangers met away from home in India or Italy, on bus, boat trip or an Outback anthropologists' dig. Any person or image can find a way into prose or verse: the plant nurseryman, the woodman (inspiring a twist for the poet: "will these words burn"), acrobat or opera singer; food preparation or the art of her friends Peri and Gilly; the double-edged, shattering 'theatre' of childbirth (with the added dimension of the writer's nursing experience), weighing a baby on the kitchen scales, Caro's croup and the gloves Muttee sent her, the white rose given to baby Jack; tearfully riffling through clothes racks in the hope of looking "like a cross between a trollop and an intellectual"; the "red silk kimono" forming "a pool of blood" or the fabulous "Duchess of Queensberry's Petticoat"; the hackwork and glory of gardening; the facetious parent who doesn't want to interfere, "Ha ha, not much I don't. I just don't want to be accused of it," and the tender image of a mother's love as feather cloak which "weighs, I hope, nothing"; music, countryside, conversations about books, physics, feminism or political poetry as well as the "green womb" of an avocado "hanging upside down on a tree".

By observing, reaching for the 'inshape' of things and people, Llewellyn does touch the 'commonalities'. She censures only when others oppress. She rarely intrudes: what we read of those she meets, strangers, friends or family, is what she and they do and talk about together, not conjecture about their separate inner lives.

If that sounds bland, the poems indicate its strength. Writing poetry has to do with "the connect-

edness of the world" and is "like pulling a thread on a garment and watching with a mild appalled thrill" (Introduction to *Selected Poems*). A major thread, the generations of family, produces images of dying aunts whose hands "pleat the past/into the edges/of their sheets" (*Trader Kate*); of the mirror which reflects aunts and mother, "every little wrinkle/is being polished up/for Father" (*Luxury*); of a three-year-old son who would "never take my hand" and is now "[e]ighteen with an earring/six foot three and strong/as a brand new door" (*Trader Kate*); of a mother who once weighed a baby "like a lump of butter/half-ounce anxious" (*Trader Kate*), and is now offered a chair "made from Darwin Woolly-butt" (*Figs*), the specificity befitting one who planted many trees for future generations as much as for herself; and most recently, of Jack, (*Figs*) "I'll watch you learn to walk and talk/as you will watch me cease to do these things."

An early group of poems seeks commonality with women of the distant past who, if mythical, are real enough in the stories of men. In 'Penelope' (*Honey*), soliloquy is finely controlled to combine seamlessly the maturity and mild disillusion of both the character and the modern woman, who can say "let's face it when we rebel/we all do what we wish/and make up the reasons later" and, having been so "hot to trot" that Odysseus "only just came home in time", can glance across as "now smugly he drinks his wine/and understands nothing". In 'Apples' (*Honey*) the viewpoint shifts from Adam and Eve wearing "each other/like handcuffs", to Eve, driven to end the "thralldom", while the snake has the last word, watching "fascinated/knowing now/all hell/would break loose". Such poems were variably successful in *Luxury*, at their best when dialogue was implied ('Persephone to Demeter': daughters are impelled to explain themselves to their mothers though Llewellyn gave up trying after the first book of poems shocked hers). In the two 'Helen' poems in the same set, the character speaks only after the poet has placed her: "watching while they loaded/in the furniture", coming to the conclusion, "so I suppose I'll just have to bear/the blame/...they could hardly say/the furniture that launched/a thousand ships".

Llewellyn has also adopted other voices or viewpoints, those of parts of her body or the poem itself, but this has mainly given way to direct focus or personification: the "cold hard/obdurate" lemon is "the acerbic aunt/of the orchard", preferred to "those cloying salesgirls/the soft stone fruits" in *Figs*. But there are changes in the way images are juxtaposed in this book. Extended analogy or personification can be less economical than metaphor or direct shifts, just taking on another's voice



may require explanatory longueurs which directly addressing the reader does not. "I have always loved backs" she writes, watching a rooster, "turquoise/blue/green/the sea in a feather" then, after a stanza break, "Consuelo Guinness wore such a frock" starts a succinct description of frock and gesture seen in an "exquisite illustration", before an enhanced focus returns to the rooster.

From the start of *Trader Kate* ('Poetry') and *Luxury* ('The Selected Poems' and 'Hands') Llewellyn has explored, in poetry, the 'being' of poet and poem, personifying the latter in 'The Poem Gets a Go' and 'The Poem's Last Night in Paris' (in *Honey*): "it's not only relatives one cannot choose —/ poems get the writers they were born with", "it's a mercy they can't hear our talk or quarrels". While these are amusing and by no means superficial, it is in 'He' that Llewellyn best images the living poem as intruder, one of those admirably fierce animals which inhabit all four books:

The poem  
is not a polite husband  
  
arriving  
when you're sitting in bed  
  
in your best nightdress  
no it strikes like a shark  
  
it prods your dreams  
with its snout  
  
it won't wait  
it wants to come  
  
right now  
in the middle of lunch  
  
or kissing  
it's a brute

*Honey*: 56

*Figs* further demonstrates Llewellyn's struggles to include in poetry all her experience, not least her experience as a poet, a fascinating task akin to the study of the workings of the human brain. If the Reebok-janty cliché of 'The Nun' and 'The Muse' is unconvincing, the trapeze-artist image of 'Ropes' neatly captures the risk of writing.

Analysis of longer poems would illustrate not only the apparently inexhaustible variety of surprise cards Llewellyn hides up her silk kimono sleeve, but her structural skill. The complex, medium length 'Cafe

Santorini' (*Honey*) also suggests much about the content and stance of her prose work. Cultivating the impression of immediate, unstructured observation, "I am waiting — I never make anything up —", it interweaves color and music: "these coloured jottings like the notes on a page/wait only for the cello to begin to play". Color is gradually applied: cool whites and dusty blues, then bright reds and pinks, deeper blues. The ordinary 'I' of the poem's beginning, emphasised by a repeated line, submerges, to reappear as the waiting poet 'I', observing herself as well as the scene. A broad, free panorama is reined in to a close still-life: "baskets of small red tomatoes/sit in the sun posing for photographs", just as the poet has posed herself in the picture. An old, "once-elegant" cupboard in the middle distance looks "as if it might fly off/sprouted with wings" or bear "a new Icarus/one more wild boy hell bent on going faster than Dad" in contrast with the dutiful small boy with ears white from lugging a bag of cement, or the tourist-laden donkey sweating up the cliff. A turning ship, a "girl in a bright pink T-shirt", and a line of "many coloured plastic pegs" attend to their quotidian affairs before the eyes of the 'static' observer. The observer/poet is watching and listening, not only for the cello to "begin to play/all these colours" but for the poem to gell, the final card to be thrown on the table, but that card is the waiting itself, a "gesture and a pose" recaptured when the poem is written.

Llewellyn writes of the need for solitude, of solving a problem by waiting for the image that will be the solution. She will wait for the poem to poke its small green shoot through the earth, but she also prepares and weeds the soil. She excludes no part of her present inner and outer experience of self, the world or others from the possibility of becoming poetry, but makes no claim to knowledge of the privacy of other people's lives, even through imagination. This is not solipsism, but a recognition of human limitations. Llewellyn excludes from her writing what is inaccessible to the senses, if among these one includes the social sense of another person's actions and speech. The immediacy and intimacy of Llewellyn's content thus create few difficulties regarding reticence on behalf of her intimates, though clearly pride or desire may work on memory to produce an image (like the tipped plate) others involved might reject.

She is quick to feel the strength of other people's commitment to their art, "the dreadful ease/musicians use for music", "mathematics in its highest form" characterised as it is by an elegance analogous to that of prose and poetry: clarity, precision and concision. She celebrates the art of home-



making, 'womanly' crafts, even, if anxiously, her daughter's art as a speaker at demonstrations. But Llewellyn does weed out any tendency to the high-minded political correctness which stamps on art that does not serve specific causes rather than human commonality. She prefers to "concentrate her gaze" upon the small events which, as much as the large, determine how people can experience their lives, making for herself "a cult...of worshipping the ordinary".

She rejects carelessness with words, drily noting the tautologous sign referring to "race, creed or colour" and becoming more acerbic over meaningless jargon, offensiveness posing as humor, political posturing. She recognises parallel faults in other fields: ugly institutional architecture, destructive administrative rigidity. And she applies the same standards to the maturing poem.

There are two general conscious attitudes to sharing one's writing, both equally respectful of the reader: one, currently in the ascendant, requires our presence in the kitchen, cracking the eggs, chopping raw meat, vegetables and occasionally our fingers; the other sustains the politeness of a host who prefers us to enjoy the finished product. Those who like rolling up their sleeves and risking scorched faces over the barby may feel excluded, but both have their place.

Kate Llewellyn takes the risk of jumping off a cliff with a coathanger to bring us her coloured silks, admittedly not always new but bearing the patina of use, a sense of the lives of those who have used

them. The butterflies netted in the embroidery are evolving, hardy survivors and the handiwork bears repeated and close scrutiny.

#### *Works of Kate Llewellyn*

In *Sisters Poets* 1 ed. Rosemary Dobson. Sisters Publishing Ltd. 1979. (Original price \$5.25)

*Trader Kate and the Elephants*. Friendly Street Poets. 1982. (Original price \$6.00)

'The Balts', 'Gone' and 'I Am My Own Companion', in Anna Gibbs & Alison Tilson [eds.]. 1982. *Frictions*. Sybilla Cooperative Press and Publications. (Original price \$7.50)

*Luxury*. Redress Press. 1985. (Original price \$6.95)

'Croup' in Suzanne Falkiner [ed.]. 1985. *Room to Move*. Unwin Paperbacks. (Original price \$9.95)

*The Waterlily*. Hudson Publishing. 1987. Paperback reprint, 1989 \$14.95

*Honey*. Hudson Publishing. 1988. Paperback, \$14.95

*Dear You*. Hudson Publishing. 1988. Paperback, \$14.95

*The Mountain*. Hudson Publishing. 1989. Paperback, \$14.95

*Figs*. Hudson Publishing. 1990. Paperback, \$14.95

*Angels and Dark Madonnas*. Hudson Publishing. 1991. Paperback, \$16.95

*Selected Poems*. Hudson Publishing. 1992. Paperback, \$19.95

Edited, with Susan Hampton. *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*. Penguin Books Australia. 1986. (Includes poems from *Luxury*.) Paperback, \$17.99

Uncollected poems, and different versions of poems later collected considered for this article are published in the prose works and in: 1977 *Number Two Friendly Street Poetry Reader*, edited by Andrew Taylor and Ian Reid; *Luna* 15, 1982; and *Overland*, Nos. 83, 85, 96, 99, 104, 107, 114, 116 and 118.

*Anne Gunter's activities revolve around literature, mainly Australian, writing, education, feminism and a fair go for all, lately called 'social justice'.*

## **5** NATIONAL FOLKLIFE CONFERENCE

### **TRADITIONS/TRANSITIONS/VISIONS**

Folklife in Multicultural Australia  
Melbourne 6-8 November 1992

This conference will focus on folkloric practice, performance and research in Australia and on the preservation and change of folklore and traditional cultures. There will be a major plenary session on ideas and directions for the future.

A key document for discussion at the conference will be the 1989 UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore to which the Australian government is a signatory.

The keynote speaker at the conference will be Dr Richard Kurin, Director of the Office of Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Dr Kurin will attend the conference by courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

Suggestions are invited for papers and other presentations at the Conference. These should be sent to the **Australian Folk Trust at PO Box 156 Civic Square ACT 2608 ph 06 249 7722 fax 06 247 7739**

For more information the Conference Organizing Committee can be contacted on **03 387 2506**  
The conference is being presented by the **Australian Folk Trust** and the **Victorian Folklife Association**.





*Rick Amor: Manning Clark. Pencil*



COLIN RODERICK

## Henry Lawson and Albert Lee-Archer On the *Damascus*, 1900

In three articles – the third unfinished – published by Phil Harris in *Aussie* in September, October, and November 1922 under the general title of ‘The Casual Australian’ Lawson sketched events of his voyage to London in the *Damascus* in April–May 1900. These, and another entitled ‘Port Natal’ (Age, 9 and 16 February 1901), were all the world has had by way of evidence of his activities on the voyage.

Lawson, his wife, and two children travelled “third class for’ard”. “We had all the talent or genius for’ard,” he wrote in 1922.

The saloon passengers staged a concert. Lawson didn’t think much of it. “Next,” he wrote, “we gave them a concert. I headed a deputation to the Captain and he told us we could have the piano for’ard if we could get it up the stairs. We got it up all right and fixed it on the fore hatch at the end of our skylight. We reserved a space for the saloon passengers, and brought the ladies’ deck chairs for ’em. Somewhat to the salooners’ surprise, I think, and rather to ours, two of our best Australian ne’er-do-well entertainers turned up in evening dress and were evidently at home in it.”

Lawson went on to speak of the performers. “Two could sing, and one was a good monologue entertainer; and we found a pianist where we least expected him... We also had a flautist, a born comedian or clown, and one or two other things.” (*Aussie*, 14 October 1922.) He did not name any of the performers; but at least one passenger kept a copy of the program:

### Part 1

- |                                      |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Overture                          | J. B. Wall      |
| 2. Coster Song: “Mrs ’Enery ’Awkins” | F. R. Ryan      |
| 3. Song: “Soldiers of the Queen”     | J. Horan        |
| 4. Song: “Killarney”                 | Miss B. Johnson |
| 5. Comic Song: “I Can’t Change It”   | N. Morton       |

- |                                      |               |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| 6. Song: “A Hundred Fathoms Deep”    | F. Heine      |
| 7. Humorous Song: “Nicklebury Brown” | W. Buckeridge |
| 8. Clarinet Solo: “Holy City”        | F. Amadio     |
| 9. Comic Song: “Last Night”          | —             |
| 10. Japanese Song: Selected          | Swuzawuse     |

Five minutes interval

### Part 2

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| 11. Recitation                              | Fred Powderavski |
| 12. Song: Selected                          | N. Morton        |
| 13. Song: “Warriors Bold”                   | J. Godfrey       |
| 14. Song: “Better Bide a Wee”               | Miss Angus       |
| 15. Comic Song: “Sour Apple Tree”           | W. E. Buckeridge |
| 16. Clarinet Solo: Selected                 | F. Amadio        |
| 17. “Song that Reached my Heart”            | Miss B. Johnson  |
| 18. Comic Song: “How they Apologise”        | J. B. Wall       |
| 19. Song: “Mary of Kilmore”                 | All. Williams    |
| 20. Coster Song: “E don’t know w’ere’e are” | F. R. Ryan       |

God Save the Queen

The man who preserved this program, Albert Lee-Archer, was a 29-year-old Australian on his way to join a Signals Corp in a Victorian contingent at the South African war. Lee-Archer was of mixed Anglo-Scottish ancestry, the Archers being English, the Lees Scottish. The first Australian Lee-Archer, Albert’s grandfather, was an engineer and a magistrate in Van Diemen’s Land. Albert’s father migrated to Port Melbourne (Sandridge), where Albert was born on 18 February 1871. His father opened a flour mill at Shepparton, where Albert went to school. At Shepparton he began a friendship with Joseph Furphy celebrated in his memoir *Tom Collins (Joseph Furphy) As I Knew Him* (Bread and Cheese Club, Melbourne, 1941).



The boy passed the entrance examination for the Victorian public service and became a postal officer. The man gave rein to his roving disposition and within four months of the outbreak of war found himself with Lawson on the *Damascus* en route to South Africa. There they parted, never to meet again. Lee-Archer was one of the many who remained in South Africa after the war. Report had him working on the railways and in the diamond mines. On returning later to Australia he followed a variety of occupations, settling down after marriage as a carpenter in Melbourne. Like many such wanderers, he often put pen to paper, mainly in verse.

He was interested in the Melbourne Henry Lawson Memorial and Literary Society until his death, which occurred at Glen Iris on 26 June 1951. His memoir of Lawson on the *Damascus* arose from a suggestion by Ted Turner, a Lawson stalwart. On

Turner's death it came into the possession of Harry H. Pearce of Footscray, who in 1971 charged me with the task of getting it into print. This the late Walter Stone had contemplated but rejected in the belief, probably well founded, that as a separate booklet, however fine, it would not pay its way. At that point the copy prepared for printing was mislaid and has only now surfaced.

Although Walter Stone's commercial judgement was probably right, printing Lee-Archer's recollection of the voyage needs no apology. It not only expands Lawson's brief treatment of events but adds to our knowledge of Lawson's activities and our understanding of his personality. If any reader possesses other first-hand, fresh, authentic evidence of Lawson's activities he could do no better than make it available for scrutiny and possible publication.

## Lee-Archer's Memoir

I sailed for South Africa by the S. S. *Damascus* on Wednesday, 25th April 1900. Owing to an attack of sea sickness, I was not aware, until a few days had passed, that we had as a fellow passenger Henry Lawson. Henry was on his way to London, to take up literary work there. I was sorry at the time, for I thought there was a danger of his being submerged, of losing touch with Australia and drifting into a literary hack.

We soon became acquainted on board and talked upon various subjects, subsequently leading round to his own life – of his early days on the farm at Eurunderee, in the Mudjee district – how he loved to spend his time with the old fossickers and teamsters. Then of his own tramps through New South Wales, following all manner of occupations, interspersed with house-painting, at which, it would seem, he spent more time mixing metaphors than paint. Of his factory life, his trip to New Zealand, where for a time he taught at a Maori school. It had, indeed, been a hard and varied life, served in a bitter school of experience. With him, however, every lesson learned was stored for the future enrichment of Australian literature. I formed the opinion that he was a most observant man without appearing to

notice anything, a passing glance being sufficient to store any detail in his mind. His weakness at this time had been kept in check after a hard fight for two years.

At the time of our meeting, Henry was about 33 or 34 years of age. I can see him now, a tall gaunt figure, whose long slender hands seemed to be ever merging from a super-abundance of shirt cuff. He had a heavy drooping moustache and liquid brown eyes, whose gaze followed one with a deep dreamy expression. This was particularly noticeable when his wife was near – a neat attractive woman, somewhat reserved. Henry appeared to be devoted to her and lived his own lines:

You must banish the old hope and sorrow  
That make the sad pleasures of life;  
You must live for today and tomorrow  
If you want to be just to the wife.

She seemed to be the dominant spirit. However, they were a very happy family. Henry was kept busy attending to their various wants. One of his daily tasks was hanging out a variety of small garments to dry on a line he had stretched from the ship's rail.



For some time he was not at all well. His deafness was a great drawback to him, and made him loathe to enter into conversation with strangers. Hence he would often seek some quiet corner and, with his pipe for company, gaze contemplatively over the rail at the ever restless waters. No doubt his apparent moroseness was only an effect of deafness upon a highly sensitive nature. Once you knew him and his reserve was broken down, he was anything but standoffish and was most interesting to talk to. It was a great disappointment for him when he learned that Joseph Furphy had bid me farewell in Melbourne. To think that he had missed him. He would have loved meeting him. He regarded his contributions to the *Bulletin* highly.

It was not long before Henry had summed up many of our fellow passengers, who, by the way, were a very mixed and interesting crowd. A Sydney University boy being shipped to South Africa for the same reason that we have remittance men here. Bushies from the out back, counterjumpers, tradesmen of all sorts: one bushie was there swag and all, with the idea of tramping up country, after stopping overnight in Durban. His was the heart of a lion. One figure in particular struck our notice – khaki clad in an old uniform. We learned that he was the son of an English colonel. He had been sent abroad for the benefit of his brains; but his travels had had but little effect in that direction. He was late from Mexico, where he had been mixed up in some of their troubles. Naturally he was soon dubbed with the name of Texas Jack. I might mention here that he acted the part of the Good Samaritan to me whilst I was a victim of *mal-de-mer*.

We had on board a cousin of Sir John Madden; also one named F. Amadio, a player of the clarinet – whether he was any relative of John Amadio I never learned. These all were a source of interest to Henry.

As the voyage proceeded and each gained his or her normal health, preparations were made to hold a concert, to be followed by sports on deck. This was arranged by several of the live wires. Henry was prevailed upon to have his name placed upon the committee list. He worked hard to ensure its success, entering into it with his usual spirit of mateship.

The concert was held upon the saloon deck. The proceeds were devoted to a fund for a prize list for the deck sports. The night of the concert produced the proverbial fool, from an unexpected quarter, no less than one of the chief committee men. He was obsessed with the idea that he was something special in the vocal line, whereas he did not know the first thing about singing. Needless to say he was encored vociferously, Henry joining in and enjoying the joke immensely, realizing how dense the musical would-

be often is. Fortunately the concert was retrieved by the creditable performance of some of the other artists.

The day of the sports dawned bright and clear. What a time we had, the good-humoured banter and barracking adding to the enjoyment. I never saw Henry laugh so much as he did at some of the predicaments that competitors got into, especially Texas Jack and another poor simpleton who was called Buffalo Bill. In the obstacle race they were hopelessly out of the running, but were egged on to greater efforts with the assurance that they were easily leading. Eventually some disciple of “The Giraffe” passed round the hat, the result realizing more than the prize money. This was divided between the two, much to their mutual satisfaction. There was a globe trotter from the saloon, who got tied up so hopelessly in a wind sail that the aid of the boatswain had to be procured to release him. The sports continued for three days. There were events for the ladies, which often caused some merriment, particularly when a rather boisterous roller upset their equilibrium.

A few days later the Captain invited a few from the third class to an entertainment by Mr Moulton, the lightning calculator, Henry and I being included amongst the favoured ones. Then, the following week, the saloon passengers staged a concert, to which we all went, enjoying ourselves very much. During interval the prizes won by the sports competitors were distributed by the captain, who commented favourably upon the sportsmanship of all concerned.

I cannot pass here an amusing incident in which Henry was concerned. It is customary on board to hold church service on a Sunday. Where a clergyman is not available, the service is read by the captain or first mate. This morning the mate had officiated and had just about concluded. I was sitting near an alley way when I espied Henry strolling along. On my beckoning him, he came and sat down beside me, just as the collection was being taken up. He was considerably disconcerted by this unexpected appearance, more so by the fact of being short of small change. But here his initiative rose to the occasion. Placing a half-crown in the plate he promptly retrieved two shillings in change. He laughed over it afterwards, remarking, “I don’t think I had even threepennoth, you should have given me the tip that the plate was in motion.”

And so the usual life on ship-board went on, until we were within sight of the dark and troubled continent. We must have been but a few miles away when we observed what Henry thought was only a bank of blue-black clouds behind the haze. It was about 4 p.m. when the ship dropped anchor well out in the roadstead.



Henry was greatly interested in watching the actions of the skipper, a good-humoured Scot of small proportions, but with a big sandy moustache. He was manipulating a pair of binoculars, which he laid down with a grunt of approval as soon as he was certain of his position. He then lit a large pipe and puffed away contentedly. Henry observed, "He seems well satisfied with himself and looks as if he thought we all should be so too." Well, we do feel respect for a man that can bring us so many thousands of miles to the exact spot he intended to. There's something extra in a man like that.\*

The harbour was filled with shipping. There on our right was pointed out the *Catalonia*, with Boer prisoners on board. Also the hospital ship, waiting to complete her list, several transport vessels, and the Castle liner *Norman*.

It was not long before a launch appeared, nosing her way through. She had the health officer on board. Of course we were all anxious to hear the latest concerning the war. We asked him if Mafeking was relieved. "No!" he said. To the question "How is the war going?" he gave a curt "Nothing doing." We soon saw there was no information to be gained from him.

Shortly afterwards a launch towing two barges loaded with natives in all manner of dress and undress – mostly the latter – appeared: these were to unload the cargo. It was not until 8 p.m. that the passenger launch arrived. Being assured that it would be out again next morning at 8 a.m., we – that is, Henry and I – decided to remain on board for the night and amuse ourselves watching the natives unloading. Henry later described that scene. "It was broad good-humoured plantation farce the whole time."

Henry interviewed one of them, or rather, as he said, "He interviewed me." He was a grinning, rat-tailed-haired Zulu, with bones thrust through his hole-pierced ear lobes. This was something of the dialogue:

"You Australian gentleman?"

"Yes."

"Plenty cow from Australia." (We had a cargo of frozen meat on board.)

"Yes."

"Plenty sheep?"

"Yes."

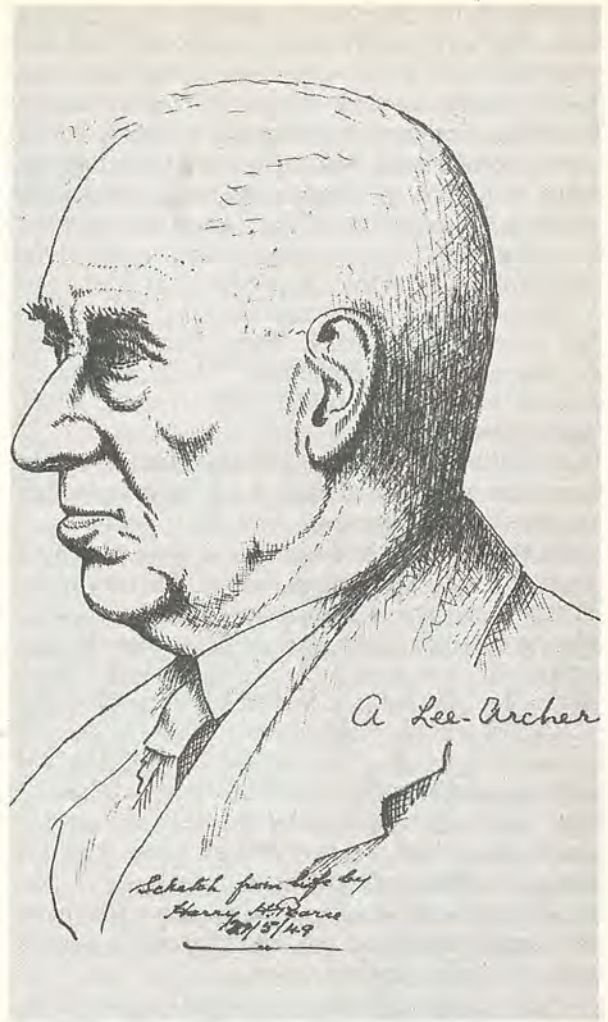
"Plenty money Australia?"

"Yes, I haven't got it."

"You got plenty money; you give me old coat make me happy?"

Henry was sorry that he did not have an old coat, for he was curious to see how much happier he could be than he already appeared without it.

This Zulu was what is termed a Boss boy. He



shouts, chants, gesticulates, as the case may be, directing the others, but refrains from any personal exertion which might lower his dignity. He would in between times go through some fantastic dances for our benefit. He was very energetic in taking up a collection after each performance. The cash was placed in a small mustard tin, tied up in a dirty handkerchief attached to his waist. Henry remarked, "What a chance for an enterprising rival with a sharp knife!" We never found out what he did with these collections, whether they were divided or kept for his sole benefit.

It was amusing the way frozen meat was tackled. When the meat wouldn't "kumup" they called for crowbars, and driving them in in any old place, heaved, three or four of them on a bar. Up would come a leg or a rib. Henry said, "These niggers don't seem to have studied anatomy much. I'm curious to see their ideas of butchering in practice."

Later I happened to see those very ideas put into



practice in the raw. How it would have delighted him. Way up in the Transvaal, a cow had been run over by a train. Like vultures the native descended to the slaughter, armed with knives of divers shapes and sizes, tomahawks, and spears. Presently all fall back; the hide is off. Back again, and in no time the beast is carved up – legs, ribs, body, paunch all mixed in one untidy mess. The women stood around in a ring, with dishes on their heads, receiving the sliced-off bits from their respective lords. There was a constant din of chattering, laughing, quarrelling, but never a blow struck. Every now and again, turning to me, they exclaimed, “Meningie inyama, Inkoos, mooshla! Mooshla!” (Plenty meat, Chief, good! good!).

I shall never forget the indescribable din on the boat that night; but despite it all, we managed to snatch a few hours’ sleep.

In the morning, the launch did not arrive until nearly 10 a.m. Then came the fun. Passengers for Port Natal are transhipped by means of the “basket”. Henry remarked, “It reminds me of our dirty-clothes basket which we used at home, when I was a child. We used to play hide and seek in it.” When filled with fair ladies, it might be likened to a basket of flowers. It was also a basket of squawks and giggles. The stay-aboard passengers made the most of it, shouting, “Look out! take care of the dears! Look out, you’ll dump her! There she goes, souse into the water!” Ending with “What, ho! she bumps.” This was the refrain of an alleged song which was popular on board. And bump she did if the tender rose to meet the basket unexpectedly.

After cruising around the harbour for some time, we reached the pier about noon. There several of the boys who had gone ashore the previous night hailed us. Some of them had enlisted. Amongst these were Texas Jack, Buffalo Bill, Madden and the globe trotter from the saloon. “Five of them,” Henry afterwards wrote. “I thought of those five in the trenches on a stormy night, hailing the event of a shell, with the diminishing chorus of ‘What, ho! she bumps!’ But it was not to be; the war was practically over, as far as they were concerned.”

Here he was wrong; not five, but twenty-five, of that band enlisted. I met some of them afterwards. The saloon passenger, Campbell by name, was killed. It was with regret that I heard the news of his death. He was an interesting, talented personality. He quickly discovered in Henry a kindred spirit. Deserting the saloon company, he spent many hours with him on the third class deck. Buffalo Bill went mad, the bushie was blinded, and of the rest very few survived.

Durban is two miles up from Port Natal. A bus

service operates, and, of course, the rickshaws. We chose the latter. It was the first time either of us had ridden in one. Afterwards, on reflection, Henry said, “I should have been ashamed of being drawn by a human being, but somehow I wasn’t. I’d knocked around too much, and besides I taught in a Maori school once.”

The native police amused him greatly. He thought such things were only possible in American coloured cop cartoons. “But wouldn’t he exasperate a Sydney policeman; because he was such a take-off without being an exaggeration (without the enormous boots) on himself?”

It was a hot day and Henry felt it, for he wore a tweed cap, having discarded a broad-brimmed soft felt hat because he saw some of the English Johnnies staring at him, and when a nigger also stared at that hat with a longing look, that decided him. I had one somewhat similar, but stuck to it, for which I was thankful.

After a hectic day in Durban, exploring even the back streets, we returned to the pier. The boat was to sail at 5 p.m. There all the boys were gathered, supplemented by several others picked up during the day. For

In all the far world corners  
The wanderers are kin.

The moment was fraught with sadness as we bade him good-bye. And I thought of those lines:

The port lights glowed in the morning mist  
That rolled from the waters green,  
And over the railing we grasped his fist

As the dark tide came between.

We cheered the captain and cheered the crew  
And our old mate out of mind.  
We cheered the land he was going to,  
And the land he had left behind.

We roared Lang Syne as a last farewell,  
But my heart seemed out of joint;  
I well remember the hush that fell  
When the steamer had passed the point.

*\*This sentence and others in the Port Natal scene in the memoir occur in Lawson’s ‘At Port Natal’.*

*Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick is the author of Henry Lawson: a Life (Angus & Robertson, 1991) and many other works. He was the founding professor of English at James Cook University and now lives in Townsville.*



# books

## Scholarly, Readable and Entertaining

Lindsay Tanner

Ross McMullin: *The Light on the Hill* (Oxford University Press, \$39.95).

The history of any major political party consists of a great deal more than mere election results, leadership squabbles and policy decisions. When that party is the Australian Labor Party, the sheer magnitude of the historian's task is almost frightening. Labor has clearly dominated the last 100 years of Australian political history: even when in opposition it has been more often than not at the centre of the great controversies of the day, and has been the party around which other parties define themselves.

Ross McMullin's *The Light on the Hill* is scholarly, readable and entertaining. The author clearly achieves his stated goal: "to write the rich, dense history of the Australian Labor Party in one volume comprehensively and accurately while maximising liveliness and readability". (p.ix) The book is well written, balanced, and very thoughtfully illustrated with over 90 black-and-white reproductions. Its structure is helpful: chapters are based on identifiable eras, with specific State Labor histories cleverly interwoven.

The author's aggregation and presentation of factual material is quite exemplary. His detail is often excellent, for example in the description of the bitter internal disputes in the New South Wales ALP in the 1920s and 1930s. Some factual material is very valuable, such as the reminder that the percentage of the vote gained by Victorian Labor in the 1892 elections was almost as high as that gained by New South Wales in its famous triumph in 1891. (p.35) McMullin also fastidiously describes a number of contemporary Labor figures whose considerable potential was cut short by premature death, such as Jack Arthur and Frank Hyett. (p.93) Too often

leading participants in Labor politics have been relegated to an undeserved obscurity by the relative brevity of their time in politics.

However, the book is not without some faults. McMullin generally maintains a studied objectivity, but his description of Menzies as a man who "had never experienced hunger and deprivation but did not allow this to interfere with his wonderful insights into Australia's economic malaise" (p.172) is a little too jaundiced even in a book on the ALP. His summary of late 1940s industrial turbulence is quite sloppy: "It was estimated that between the armistice and the end of 1947 nine Communist-controlled unions representing 26% of the unionists were responsible for 84% of the time lost in strikes". (p.241) The obvious, and unanswered, question is: was this attributable to the fact that the unions were Communist-led, as the author implies, or rather to the fact that they had more militant members, who also incidentally tended to elect Communist leaders? It is also tempting to conclude that the author is a good friend of Frank Crean and dislikes Arthur Calwell. His references to Crean tend to be rather generous, for example he repeats uncritically Crean's *post facto* claim that he warned Gough Whitlam in late 1974 not to "have anything to do with this loan business". (p.356) Calwell, in contrast, is often savaged about behavior characteristic of most politicians.

McMullin does however present the ALP's deficiencies as well as its triumphs. He notes with some embarrassment the Victorian ALP's decision in 1966 to recruit attractive women to serve as Labor "hostesses" in a "feminine flying gang to assist Labor leaders and members where necessary in their contacts with the public". (p.305) He almost gleefully points out the membership of the Tasmanian Animals and Birds Protection Board under the Reece Labor government: hunters, trappers and fur traders, chaired by the president of the Shooting Clubs Association! (p.320)



Perhaps the most endearing feature of *The Light on the Hill* is McMullin's extraordinary ability to convey a compelling description of a notable Labor figure in a few words, and to capture the atmosphere and emotions of the events he describes. We read of Charlie McDonald, Australian Labour Federation president whose "small trim figure and drooping moustache were a familiar sight as he cycled large distances in North Queensland on various missions for the Labor movement". (p.2) McMullin describes

bush unionists riding 200 miles to vote for Labor candidates. (p.23) His pages are littered with vignettes of "vibrant eccentrics like Fred Vosper, the mercurial, impetuous hard-drinking dreamer" (p.41) and excellent portraits of great figures of Labor history like Gil Duthie. (p. 237) McMullin describes a Labor MP's method of supporting striking laundresses by wearing several shirts simultaneously (p.13) and the New South Wales Chief Secretary who banned leg crossing on public transport after stumbling over a woman's legs on a tram! (p.99) His anecdotes encapsulate the humor, pathos and eccentricity for which Labor is famous. McMullin describes a Queensland Attorney-General who defended his habit of spending most of his time at a Surfers Paradise house with no phone by arguing that if the Premier ever needed to contact him urgently he could always get the local police to come around! (p.191) He records Eddie Ward's famous response to an invitation to celebrate Billy Hughes' fifty years in Parliament—"I don't eat cheese!" (p.269) and describes peculiar preselection methods such as the Tasmanian preselection for the Senate where names were drawn from a hat, with one leading candidate's name deliberately stuck in a hat band. (p.261)

The use of quotations in the text is often telling. One quote from a Jack Lang speech during the 1929 miners' dispute sums up the speaker better than a chapter of description and analysis:

Seize the mines...Your government was elected to govern...I do not ask lawyers whether I am right or wrong. I tell them I want to do something. It is then their job to tell me how to do it...Seize your mines and, if necessary, pass your law later. (pp.156-7)

McMullin's analysis is generally perceptive, but perhaps a bit too subservient to the story. He outlines quite effectively the perpetual themes of Labor politics—rank and file disillusionment, leaders rattling, MPs being coopted by the system, pragmatism triumphing over principle, too many lawyers—and the surprising extent to which these themes surfaced very early in Labor's history. (pp.16-19) However, there is virtually no attention paid to the role of party branches in the local community (perhaps a consequence of the unavailability of local branch records) and not much analysis of the ALP's broader role in shaping the society we now live in. There is little attempt to compare the ALP with other equivalent parties in Western industrialised nations, and no analysis of the contemporary crisis which Labor faces as a result of the major changes



PRIME MINISTER CHIFLEY Noel Counihan FIVE TO REMEMBER 1964



in its constituency and Australian society generally.

Nevertheless, *The Light on the Hill* remains a considerable achievement: the limited role of analysis in the book is really inherent in the nature of the project, rather than attributable to any failing on the part of the author. For anyone seriously interested in Australian politics or history, *The Light on the Hill* is definitely compulsory reading. Ultimately the book reflects the best features of its subject: it is powerful, unpretentious, humorous and fascinating. I would recommend it enthusiastically to prospective readers.

*Lindsay Tanner is State Secretary of the Federated Clerks Union (Victorian Branch) and the endorsed ALP candidate for the Federal seat of Melbourne. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Australian History from the University of Melbourne.*

## Child of Chartism, Mother of the ALP

Vida Horn

Pam Young: *Proud to be a Rebel; the Life and Times of Emma Miller* (University of Queensland Press, \$19.95).

Emma Miller was known in her lifetime as "the mother of the Labor Party". Her political descendants may have almost forgotten their radical ancestor, but Pam Young's splendid biography rescues Emma and at the same time chronicles much of Queensland's turbulent political and industrial history from the 1880s to Emma's death in 1917. This well-written, deeply researched and always engrossing book is one of the memorable biographies of recent years.

Emma Miller's early life was that of an ideal socialist heroine, perhaps in a novel by George Gissing. Emma Holmes was born in 1839 in a Derbyshire coal-mining town. From her Chartist parents she derived the political and philosophical principles that guided her throughout her long life. At eighteen she married an indulged university-educated younger son. He was also tubercular. In 1867 they moved to Salford, the "classic slum" described by Engels, later transmuted by J. S. Lowry into the icon of all industrial landscapes.

After her husband's death in 1870 Emma worked as a seamstress and supported their four children by making shirts twelve hours a day, six days a week. In 1874 she married William Calderwood, a stonemason whose lungs were already seriously affected by dust. Four years later the family migrated to Queensland, hoping that the climate might cure

William's tuberculosis. He died in 1880 and Emma returned to making shirts. Her life was, however, easier than before and she found kindred spirits in the emerging labour movement. Among them was her third husband, Andrew Miller; they were married in 1887. It was as though her earlier life had been only a preparation for the real life into which she now entered.

The 1880s were prosperous years in Queensland's history, as a result of gold strikes and flourishing pastoral and sugar industries; but conditions for the working classes were often no better than in Salford. Poor sanitation and drainage caused low standards of public health. Factories were overcrowded, badly lit by gas lamps and unventilated. There was no sick pay, no workers' compensation and no old-age pension.

Women were joining the workforce in increasing numbers. They were completely excluded from some professions and trades, by male workers as well as by employers. They were paid only a quarter to half men's wages, though many of them were family breadwinners. The eight-hour day had been granted to stonemasons as early as 1856 and some male occupations later gained the same conditions. Women, however, frequently worked longer hours than men before going home to do housework. As William Lane, Emma's friend and colleague, scathingly remarked, "Women, of course, were meant to work seventeen hours a day. It is only men who know what to do with the eight hours."

Women and girls fared no better legally than industrially. The age of consent for girls was twelve, though a girl could not legally marry until eighteen. Married women in Queensland could not own property until 1890. Some eccentrics thought women should have the vote, though only Washington Territory, Utah and the Isle of Man had followed the example of Wyoming, which granted the vote to women in 1869.

From the mid-1880s to her death in 1917 Emma Miller played an active role in virtually every progressive movement in Queensland, taking an equal place with her male colleagues but always concentrating on women's issues. She was one of several who worked tirelessly for the formation of a women's section of the Australian Labour Federation. These union campaigns covered the industrial conditions of women working in shops (up to seventy hours per week), as domestic servants (virtually unlimited hours) and in tailoring and dressmaking sweatshops (pay in 1908, 2½d for making a blouse, 1d for finishing a pair of trousers).

As a Chartist Emma, naturally, believed in votes for women and was president of the Women's Equal



Franchise Association from its foundation throughout the period of the women's suffrage movement. Federation hastened the granting of the vote to women and the Federal Electoral Act of 9 April, 1902, was the first in the world to both enfranchise women and allow them to stand for office in national elections. Individual States had not yet all granted the vote, and campaigns dragged on in Queensland until 1905 and Victoria until 1908.

When a film is made about Emma Miller's life, the most exciting scenes will surely be set in the summer of 1912, when management of the British-owned Brisbane Tramway Company dismissed union members. A meeting of thousands of workers from most trades decided on joint action in defence of union rights and on 30 January, 1912, workers throughout Brisbane downed tools in a general strike, the first ever held in Australia. Police Commissioner Cahill refused permission for a march on Friday, 2 February, but on that hot and humid day more than 15,000 people flocked to the Trades Hall and surrounding streets.

Emma had suggested a march of women unionists on Parliament House to interview the Premier. Photographs show about three hundred women and girls, mostly members of the Brisbane Clothing Trade Union, wearing cartwheel hats and long-sleeved, ankle-length dresses. Mounted police with sabres and foot police with bayonet-fitted rifles barred them from entering main streets. After marching ten long blocks the crowd, now numbering more than a thousand, was understandably angry at being turned away from Parliament House: the Premier was not there. They made their way five blocks back and turned into Queen Street, Brisbane's main street.

Here, baton-wielding police on foot tried to turn back the women, whose advance was then met with a violent baton charge by mounted police. The sight of Police Commissioner Cahill, urging on a troop of police who were riding roughshod through the crowd, was too much for Emma's notably volatile temper. She removed one of the pins securing her hat and thrust it into his unfortunate horse. It reared, throwing its rider, who walked with a limp for several days. Emma's son George rushed to protect her but 73-year-old Emma, whose silver hair and diminutive figure concealed a spirit as steely as her hatpin, ignored him and went on with the march. Her action caught the imagination of the crowd and she became even more firmly established in the affections of the labour movement. An admirer later wrote a tribute which ended:

And still she's out to serve, to strive,

In the bitter fray to mix; –  
Emma Miller, five stone five,  
And aged seventy-six.

Over the years Emma made many friends on her speaking tours through Queensland's provincial and Outback towns, which had always given strong support to unionism among both female and male workers. Early in 1917 she went to Toowoomba for several weeks rest from a debilitating illness. She died there on 22 January, in the care of the Quaker parents of her suffragist colleague Margaret Thorp. Emma had given a characteristically lively public speech only two days before her death; it was, again characteristically, a speech against conscription. A memorial bust in the Brisbane Trades Hall carries a quotation adapted from Thomas Paine, which she had made her guiding philosophy:

The world is my country: to do good is my religion.

This book is also a memorial. Emma deserves something more durable than a paperback, but that is a reflection on the Australian book-buying public rather than on the publisher. Pam Young has quoted extensively from contemporary sources, though unfortunately Emma's many speeches were seldom reported in detail. There is also an excellent general bibliography. Photographs and reproductions of newspaper articles and cartoons help to create insights, often surprising, into life in Queensland from 1880 to 1920. Through all this moves one of the foundation members of the ALP and one of its most consistently radical thinkers. Emma Miller was a freethinker, a unionist, a suffragist and an outspoken pacifist; she was a true child of Chartism.

*Vida Horn has worked in public libraries in Queensland, England, New South Wales and Victoria*

## Back of Burke

### Marjorie Tipping

Tim Bonyhady: *Burke and Wills: From Melbourne to Myth* (David Ell Press, 95 Beattie street, Balmain, 2041, \$69.95).

*Set the fact naked against naked space  
And speak to us the truth of what we are—*

*It is the meaning of the poet's trade  
To re-create the fables and revive  
In men the energies by which they live...*



I first heard these words of A. D. Hope in the Library of Congress, Washington, early in 1969. We had shared a carrel in the library where he was a Visiting Fellow lecturing on Australian literature and I was a research scholar. He had invited me to attend readings of his verse which drew quite large and appreciative audiences.

This poem, from *The Wandering Islands*, struck a chord among American intellectuals. Obsession with their own identity (never dormant since the first publication of F. J. Turner's 'frontier theory' in 1893) accelerated as the celebrations for 1776 drew closer. Nor will our own search for identity wane while historians, myth makers and politicians debate our future as an independent nation.

Yet Australia has always been a land of myths and legends, springing from the earth itself, guarded and nurtured in art and oral tradition for thousands of years. Only in recent years have these begun to influence other races, who, since occupying this continent, followed the written traditions of their own forebears. We know the names of most persons who arrived in 1788, the ships in which they sailed, the number of animals and kegs of rum in the cargo. The naked truth is there, often dull but factual. It is for the historians to record and interpret it, the poets and artists to create the mythology.

Thus some of the dramatic events of history have become garnished with half-truths, innuendo and sheer mistakes, all of which, repeated often enough, have given rise to the myths and legends that now help shape our identity as a nation.

The story of the Great Exploring Expedition led by Robert O'Hara Burke from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1860-61 is an example of how truth has become distorted and how even some historians have clung to the legend rather than explored the truth.

Exploration itself commands a strong romantic appeal, in spite of any scientific reason which might have triggered off the initial interest. Artists in all fields have drawn on the emotive and heroic qualities of exploratory themes since the Trojan wars. They have conjured up a Voss to succumb to the beckoning of an unknown land, an ancient mariner enticed into uncharted seas. We need myths to sustain and regenerate us as well as the moments of truth to bind us to our native soil. We also like to believe it was the Irish who have cherished and encouraged the embroideries.

But Tim Bonyhady – and he is not the first to do so – set out in his latest book to highlight the Germans (people far removed in temperament from the Irish – one marvels at how they combined their efforts to fight together at Eureka?) and their contribution at

least to the scientific basis for the Burke and Wills Expedition. They had been trained in the exacting methodology of Alexander von Humboldt, seekers of truth and logic, products of the *Aufklärung* and far removed from the *Sagen-geschichte* that had created their own gods and heroes.

For a while Germans were the most acceptable foreigners who emigrated to the British colony of Victoria. Mostly refugees from principalities such as those that had produced the British monarch and her consort, they were well-educated and multilingual, many with scientific training. They quickly became an integral part of a community where attitudes were fast changing in relation to land, class, race, culture and nationhood. They frequently generated ideas for which others have received the accolades, those same members of the Establishment who were quick to disparage them in times of failures. One suspects that underlying the veneer of respectable society there did exist an anti-German feeling long before Kaiser Wilhelm's militancy kindled such hatred in Britain and its Empire. The appointment of Burke as leader of the Expedition rather than the more appropriate choice of the explorer whom the Germans favored, Major Warburton, supports this thesis. Dilettante members of the Royal Society ignored the more reasoned recommendations of Ferdinand von Mueller and Ludwig Becker, both of whom understood not only the scientific purpose of the Expedition but also the arduousness of the task.

Bonyhady's is a lively study of the society in which these Germans and other learned persons found themselves thrust together with some who obviously used the Royal Society for personal *éclat*. What began with altruistic motives in the cause of science became a search for the honor and glory of Victoria to upstage South Australia's exploratory efforts and to strengthen the wealth, power and position of individuals as a result. Many would not wish to be associated with failure when the deaths of Burke, Wills and the loved member of their own Society, Becker, became known, hence the beginnings of the promotion of the heroic myth. For it wasn't just another expedition. It was an extraordinary manifestation of a colony's social, cultural and political aspirations. Everyone was caught up with the euphoria from the time of its conception.

It was therefore surprising to discover that Bonyhady, in his preface, states that since the State Library of Victoria acquired the Expedition papers from the Royal Society in 1874 "no one writing about Burke and Wills had worked their way through the 14 boxes of manuscripts...no one had made more than a cursory dip into the contemporary press..."



We-e-ll! At least four persons still living could, to my knowledge, argue against this assertion. Some who worked for years on them were deterred from the immense task of preparing a definitive work when Alan Moorehead produced a very readable book quite quickly, with considerable help and encouragement not then available to more serious scholars. While his book has remained in print others, exasperated with his interpretation, turned to less ambitious projects. What might Kathleen Fitzpatrick, for example, have written had there been no Moorehead? Her published oration to the Royal Society, in August 1960, gives an inkling of the depth of her research and the fresh ideas it had engendered. Ian McLaren tabulated most of the known bibliographical details following on his extensive research for the commemoration of the centenary of Wills' death at Totnes in 1961.

However, the author, who has produced some of the best researched art history this country has seen, has given us a truly professional work of which other *aficionados* of the Burke and Wills exploit might be proud, if not envious. The work is monumental, as solid a monument as Charles Summers' bronze sculpture of the explorers that continues to stand incongruously beside a fountain in Melbourne's City Square. The sixty pages of tightly constructed reference notes bear witness to the breadth of his research. Yet one wishes that he might have abridged some of these to allow space for further annotation and comment. But he does write with clarity and ease, free from jargon. His work is always a pleasure to read, informative, authoritative and never labored. Moreover, only an art historian with the dedication of Bonyhady could have done justice to the subject, a combination of narrative and pictorial representation.

The figures of the explorers, whether depicted as heroic, tragic, despairing or mystical have leapt from the canvases of artists and the pages of poets. Actors have recreated them as characters, displayed their emotions. Yet in 130 years there have been surprisingly few writers or historians who might have analysed the known facts and produced texts free from prejudice.

While early artists such as William Strutt studied plants in Melbourne's Botanic Gardens to create a true picture of Cooper's Creek, contemporary artists tend to strip the explorers of all their impedimenta except for the camel. Thus the white man and the alien animal have come to personify those who invaded and eroded this ancient continent. This strong impact of visual images of the lone explorer in the desert has also become a symbol of an Australian's journey in search of identity. The fate of early

explorers can no longer be judged purely as history. It is the scenario to questions of social morality, of cultural and political motivation. Like the jungle in other lands, it has also become a commodity. Commercial artists know that the desert can sell anything from a car to a can of beer. It is the ultimate backdrop for advertising, bereft of everything but the product for sale.

The artist Sidney Nolan, fresh from his sojourn in Africa and starting to create myths in the manner of his Ned Kelly series, had understood this magnetism of the Australian outback. He revived interest in the painterly qualities of the figures and animals associated with the Burke and Wills Expedition. How mortified the upperclass Irishman Burke, nurtured in the turreted castle St Cleran's, his family home on a bleak hill in County Galway, would have been to find his name linked with Kelly, who has ironically become the symbol of courage in Australian myth-making. But Burke was the flawed anti-hero whose class and racial prejudices contributed just as much to the failure of the Expedition as his inexperienced leadership and temperament.

Bonyhady, by recording the numerous projects, artistic and otherwise, based on the travail of the explorers, has placed the metamorphosis from fact to legend in some historical context and the work goes nearest towards questioning the psychological make-up of Burke. Is there a biographer who can, now that the facts have been so well coordinated, explore the complexities of this restless person whose dreams of conquest were so beyond his power to accomplish that he had to vent his anger on his companions? He could never have been the tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense. His flaws and failures were too pedestrian. He never had the qualities of which heroes are made. He fell, but never from any great height. It is hard to understand megalomania, hard to forgive stupidity. It is also difficult to understand the stupidity of those who appointed him to a position for which he was quite unsuitable.

For the tragedy of the Expedition was a personal tragedy for Burke. The tragedy for Wills was that his name has inevitably been linked to that of Burke for all time. Poor Wills had little opportunity to seek the meaning of life itself, whereas Burke had that opportunity but no sensitivity, no respect for the land and its people. Nor did he understand himself and his own shortcomings. He sought personal glory: failure to him would be ruin.

Patrick White, in creating Voss, understood how the relationship with an unexplored continent could transform the identity of a person and ultimately absorb him into itself. It is a belief basic to the understanding of Aboriginal culture. To Aborigines



the land denies sustenance to those who refuse to acknowledge its power. So the remains of Burke could never have been left to moulder in terrain that was foreign to his nature. They had to return to Melbourne, along with the mangled bones of Wills, to participate in a public parade as ostentatious as the plans for the Expedition. Burke had to be made the hero in death that he had yearned to become in life. It would be some justification for the whole unhappy affair. The others who died (except Wills) were barely remembered. Becker rated a mention on one of the many monuments, that in Ballarat, to commemorate the explorers, while a recently installed plaque at Bulloo marks Becker's isolated Queensland grave. Becker, who had wandered in Europe with the renowned Louis Agassiz, in the Scottish Highlands, in the ranges of Gippsland with Mueller, was of this earth, earthy, and rightly lies in the soil of his beloved and adopted land.

There is little to criticise in Bonyhady's book. The production on the whole is excellent. There are some minor misspellings and literals and some illustrations might have been closer in color to the originals. The captions of Plates One and Two have unfortunately been transposed. But we have here a long overdue addition to Australian history, to mythology, to our own addiction to soul searching. What *is* the naked truth? What *is* the fable? We need them both.

*Dr Marjorie Tipping's latest book is Convicts Unbound (Viking O'Neil). Among her many books is Ludwig Becker; Artist and Naturalist with the Burke and Wills Expedition. She is the first woman to receive a Doctorate of Letters from the University of Melbourne.*

## Ourselves and Asia

Joan Grant

Alison Broinowski: *The Yellow Lady; Australian Impressions of Asia* (Oxford University Press, \$39.95).

Alison Broinowski expected and wanted, she writes, to reach a more optimistic conclusion about the involvement of Australians with Asia as a result of her research. However, she almost undermines the rationale for her stated disappointment by the breathtaking comprehensiveness of her survey of "impressions of Asia in Australia, and of how they have been formed, reflected and changed throughout Australia's history by the arts". For example, it is a surprise to learn that between 1965 and 1985 more than fifty Australian novels set in Asia and the Pacific were published. Considering the well-known difficulties of publication, how many more must

have been written! And in discussing the Asian influence on postwar painters such as Fairweather, Friend, Nolan, Olsen, Williams and Baldessin, Broinowski describes the change that had occurred in formerly Anglo-dominant Australia as "nothing short of tidal". However, when one reads Steven Fitzgerald's assurance that in 1990 "no permanent head of a government department, or head of the Australian foreign service was fluent in an Asian language, nor was any vice-chancellor, editor of a major paper, magazine or television station, chief of a defence force or chief executive of a major corporation", or Broinowski's that not one Chair of fine arts in an Australian university has ever been held by an Asian specialist, both the importance of this work and the reasons for her negative assessment become clearer. (Both of these comments appear in the Notes at the end of the book which contain a good deal of additional detail, as well as sources.)

It is astonishing enough that a study of this kind has never been made before, and one can imagine the author's concern, over the ten years which it took to collect and collate her material, that someone else would jump the gun. Thankfully, however, the field was left to Broinowski; it is hard to imagine anyone with better qualifications to undertake this pioneering work. An Australian diplomat and a writer, with a published novel and three other books on Southeast Asia, she has worked in Japan, Burma, the Philippines and South Korea, speaks Japanese, and writes English with style. Beginning with the impact of Asia on pre-European Aboriginal Australia and including references as up to date as Dennis O'Rourke's 1992 film, *Woman of Bangkok*, her detailed information can be dazzling, as in her reference to an episode in *Nasho*, Michael Frazer's 1984 novel, as closely resembling "a suppressed flashback in a draft of David Williamson's 1973 play, *Jugglers Three*". In addition, she has opinions, making this far more than a dusty compendium.

Comparisons of attitudes to Asia across generations are dramatised by a series of arresting descriptives, such as the Far East Fallacy—a perpetuation of the Eurocentric view that all of Asia was more distant and exotic than Europe; the Butterfly Phenomenon—the Asian woman as a cheap, replaceable commodity, always supplanted in the end by the European sweetheart; or Illicit Space—the perception of Asia as an Adventure Zone for adults "in which civilised norms of Western male behaviour could be abandoned and taboos breached". The Yellow Lady of the book's title, a Norman Lindsay illustration of Hugh McCrae's poem, implicitly combines all three of these: no "white lady" could be posed in such a "lewd posture".



Although Broinowski traces her theme through all the arts, her emphasis on fine art and literature reflect not only the relative degree of Asian influence, but also, one suspects, her particular preferences, although in each of the artforms she provides illuminations. In the section on architecture, for instance, the photograph of a marvellous courtyard designed by Peter Armstrong in 1976 for the Japanese Studies Department at the University of Western Australia, which uses the elements of Japanese garden design to depict the Swan River landscape, shows what creativity can occur when West meets East with an open mind. The potter Ivan McMeekin describes how a study of the use of local materials in early Chinese ceramics brought him back to Australia to “develop an Australian idiom based on the nature of our Australian materials, and as far as possible on those that were close by”, while what might be the book’s underlying theme is expressed by potter Joan Campbell’s proposal that Australians should not imitate Asian tradition but use it to “get to be ourselves”. Composer Peter Sculthorpe in suggesting that Australians should draw on Asian culture and tradition as England had on European, provides “a new rationale for Australians seeking stimulus from Asia: it replicated the British relationship with the continent of Europe?”

Broinowski’s discussion of post-1945 fiction focuses on novels by journalists, who not only felt as if they were the first Australian writers to travel in Asian countries or to write about them, but whose protagonists are led toward understanding by European or American “old hands”. It is one of Broinowski’s concerns that knowledge of Asia acquired by Australians over 150 years had not effectively been passed on “or only in stereotypical terms”. This is one of the positive changes in the post-journalist 1980s fiction: the new writers no longer find the encounter with Asia “a climactic entry into a new world”. Now, despite writers who can still talk about “some apparently Arabic or Japanese glyphs”, Australian protagonists are “already in place in Asian countries, moving from one capital to another”, put at ease at least in part by the prevalence of “certain manufactured substances” including birth control pills, and the “universal, genderless, classless use of jeans and sneakers”. Nevertheless it is primarily novels by women about Asia and Asians which are not hostile, but amused; optimistic, not fearful”. Included are sections on the writing of Asian Australians, and Australian translators of Asian writing. One of the best of these, playwright Roger Pulvers, left for Japan in 1983 “after having tried for years to gain acceptance for Asia in the Australian theatre”.

Throughout, the book’s illustrations are beautifully chosen and reproduced, and are positioned to illuminate the immediate text in a way which one wishes all such works could manage. In particular, the pages of color photographs cleverly juxtapose Asian originals and the Australian art in which their echoes appear, as in the Hokusai 1812 woodcut ‘A Magician Turning Paper into Cranes’, and Ethel Spowers c.1930 linocut and John Wolseley’s 1987 oil. (Everywhere, even in the ‘captions’ to such illustrations, there is enlightening commentary, such as a Laozi quote in Wolseley’s journal which notes, Broinowski notices, “transmutation familiar to Hokusai”.) Indeed, the generous use of illustration and white space makes the book itself an artwork; one seldom sees a publication these days with such loving design of individual pages.

The book includes a useful glossary and quite extensive index, although the *Yellow Lady* is not listed. Some errors in page references, an occasional lack of specificity in the notes, and the obligatory typos are only minor irritants in a book which is not only original and intelligent, but will remain a reference and a stimulus to further research for many years to come.

*Joan Grant is Executive Officer, Monash Asia Institute, Monash University Victoria.*

## The Adolescent Years of Marvellous Melbourne

Paul de Serville

Michael Cannon: *Old Melbourne Town; Before the Gold Rush* (Loch Haven Books, PO Box 291, Dromana 3936, \$69.95, \$75 posted).

Of all the Australian capital cities, Melbourne has experienced the wildest swings of fortune; nowhere else has the Antipodean cycle of boom and bust operated with such thoroughness. The pattern of its first fifteen years of history was to repeat itself with variations and additions over the next 140 years. At the beginning of 1834 the site of Melbourne was still a tranquil river valley. By 1840 the town was distracted by its first land and share boom. By 1844 it was sunk in the first of the depressions which periodically bankrupted its citizens and destroyed its institutions and companies. By 1851 it had recovered and had gained Separation from the mother colony of New South Wales.

Until the first depression, its occupants – and even visitors from other colonies – regarded its



progress from primeval bush to bustling port as a marvellous development. Melbourne was a triumph of private enterprise and individual initiative. Success justified illegal beginnings, success mocked the shortcomings of the official colonies of South Australia and Western Australia. By 1851, when Melbourne came of age, it was the capital of a rich sheep and cattle colony, and it could look forward to a future of quiet prosperity.

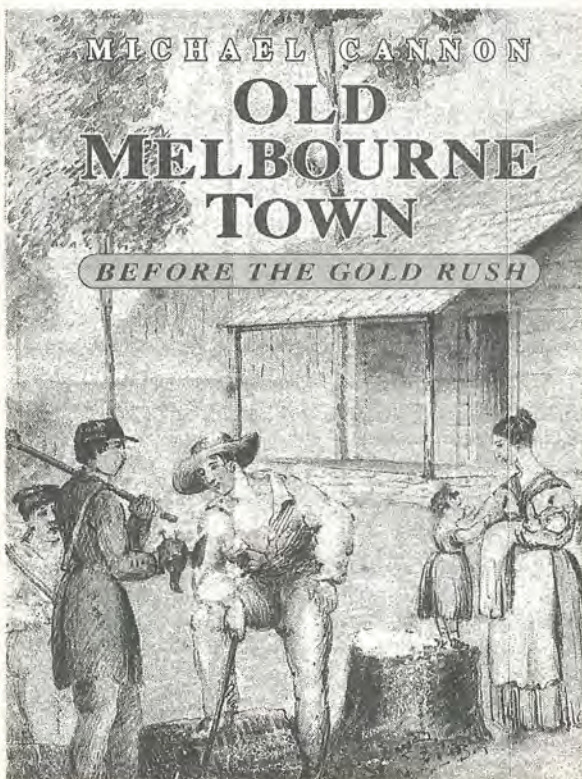
The discovery of gold changed the course of Victorian history and of history writing. The mass of new immigrants effectively swamped the Port Phillip settlers. Most of the newcomers were indifferent to early history (history, they believed, began with their arrival); survivors such as J. P. Fawkner were mocked as quaint oddities. Rivalries between newcomers and survivors were exacerbated by disagreements over use of Crown Land and over the operation of a Constitution. Crudely put, the survivors were dismissed as old-fashioned, conservative and remnants of a primitive era. Until recently this view was also held by modern historians, many of whom were descended from 1850s immigrants and were inheritors of the liberal progressive traditions associated with the gold diggers. It is instructive to compare Margaret Kiddle or Geoffrey Serle with George Rusden. The essentially non-official, private nature of much early Port Phillip history became the preserve of the amateur antiquarians, and their productions (unsystematic, credulous or nit-picking) gave the period a bad name and confirmed the prejudices of professional historians. In their obsession with social geography (who was where first?), the amateurs overlooked the poignancies and tragedies which have filled the annals of pioneer history since the arrival of the Hentys.

It is therefore no surprise to learn that the only full-scale history of Melbourne for the years 1834 to 1851 is the two-volume *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*, published by Garryowen (Edmund Finn) in 1888. A journalist and later a parliamentary official, Finn had arrived in Melbourne in 1841, and consequently he knew most of Melbourne's pioneers. Vast and readable, replete with anecdotes and biographies of early settlers, the fifty-eight chapters of the *Chronicles* remain an important historical source. The tone is genial, the judgements on the whole kindly, and the youthful years of Melbourne are recalled by an old man who had watched many of the pioneers die or drift away, and who had observed the transformation of Melbourne.

Now Michael Cannon has written a modern account of early Melbourne, entitled *Old Melbourne Town*. The title, the chapter divisions and the subject matter recall the earlier work, although there

are significant differences. A freelance historian, Michael Cannon established his name with *The Landboomers* (1966), and confirmed his reputation with the three-volume social history, *Australians in the Victorian Age*. More recently Cannon has edited the first seven volumes of documents held by the Public Record Office of Victoria.

If the arrangement of *Old Melbourne Town* resembles that of the *Chronicles*, the substance and style of the new book could hardly be more different. Cannon's familiarity with the PROV has shaped the choice of evidence and the general matter of what is a large book (with thirty-two chapters). The tone of *Old Melbourne Town* is matter-of-fact, and at times sombre, and the biographical details on pioneers reveal the grimness and suffering of early colonial life. One wonders to what extent this reflects Melbourne's and Victoria's present severe recession, or Cannon's preoccupation with social justice, demonstrated to such effect in the *Landboomers*, or the use of official papers which tend to influence the tone and spirit of an author's writing. It would be interesting to see if a different balance might have been struck, had the author used papers of private individuals in the collections of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria or the La Trobe Library.





Nowhere is the harshness of early Melbourne life so graphically expressed than in Chapter six, devoted to the brief Port Phillip career of the town's co-founder, John Batman, and his unfortunate family. Batman, who at the peak of his energies had been a blacksmith and bushman (and a textbook example of Manning Clark's Dionysian type, destroyed by his fatal flaws), died as a result of syphilis only five years after he had established Melbourne. His estranged ex-convict wife was murdered in 1852 (if the identification is correct). Through mismanagement, the Batman estate was lost. Batman's only son was drowned in the Yarra in 1845, while fishing. Four of his daughters died before they reached forty, and Cannon speculates that the effects of inherited syphilis may have been the cause. Altogether it is a grim story of poverty, disease, incompetence and bad luck.

The careers of Melbourne pioneers followed the swings of the economy and the vagaries of the seasons. Throughout the book are brief sketches of the successful and the failures, the obscure and the well-known, illustrated by some 131 black and white photographs, most of them reproductions from the series taken by Chuck, when the survivors were old men. The graininess of the early photographs adds a further note of sombreness. By far the most poignant photograph is that of the diarist Georgiana McCrae, taken as an old woman. She sits in her widow's white lace cap and black weeds, and her face is a grim record of a life of disappointment and exile.

This is, however, the biography (if that is the correct word) of a town, rather than a social history. It is Melbourne which is the central character, and it is one which Cannon describes in most of its facets: the establishment of the civil service and the erection of the first public buildings; the enforcement of the rule of law and the actions of the judiciary; a survey of early land sales, the emergence of the suburbs, and the planning of parks and gardens; early banking and industry, and the first boom and depression; the history of Melbourne's Town Council, the oldest surviving official institution in the state; and the wharves, roads, punts and bridges which aided the early settlers to travel around Melbourne.

Cannon has taken advantage of recent scholarship in specific areas to present the reader with more factually detailed information than was available to Garryowen. He is also not inhibited by social taboos, and can therefore discuss the contribution made by convicts to the founding of Melbourne. Modern interest in overlooked groups, such as the working class, has enabled him to discuss the

operation of the Masters and Servants Act, not a subject which Garryowen was prepared to raise. Changes in taste have allowed a frank discussion of the seamier side of Melbourne life (such as the brothels) and equally frank statements on the corrupt careers or sordid deaths of some of the early settlers.

A few themes recur in the chapters. One is the meanness of the Home Office, which hampered the growth of necessary amenities in Melbourne; another is the powerlessness of Melbourne to take any important decisions; a third is the way in which Melbourne's early development shaped its subsequent urban history (we live still with some of the consequences); a fourth is the great sadness of much of Australia's history, especially in its private and domestic spheres; a fifth is the operation of fortune's wheel in the career and lives of the early settlers; and a sixth is the emergence of forces and characteristics usually fathered upon the 1850s immigrants.

This book is a *vade mecum* of Melbourne's history in the first, neglected period. It has within the covers of a single volume more illustrations of the period than any other production, of particular value to those who cannot see the originals or visit the La Trobe Library. It will be invaluable to students doing historical projects. It should satisfy the casual questions of the curious, and serve as a part-narrative, part-gazetteer of the first years of a city which, even in its present battered, overdeveloped and miserable state, remains the most ambiguous and contradictory in this continent.

*Paul de Serville is the author of Pounds and Pedigrees; the Upper Class in Victoria, 1850 - 1880 (Oxford University Press) a sequel to Port Phillip Gentlemen.*

## Between Two Worlds

Max Teichmann

Andrew Riemer: *Inside Outside* (Angus & Robertson, \$14.95).

Andrew Riemer has written a vivid and moving book about a child of ten who leaves Budapest in 1946 with his parents to come over the sea to the other end of the earth; which turns out to be Sydney. It is Riemer's own story, and climaxes with his return to Budapest in 1990 with *his* son. The title refers to his dilemma which he shares, he thinks, with many others who have made Australia their second home. Where, if anywhere, do I belong? Am I Australian,



or Hungarian, or Jewish? Or that strange character, a European? You might think that this doesn't matter, none of these answers tell you about *the person*, yet all the *Sturm und Drang* about nationalism, about assimilation, multiculturalism, and the like, indicate that for most of us it *does* matter. Riemer concludes his book by saying that, "[people like me] must acknowledge that we belong nowhere", that "our sense of dislocation is more radical and more disturbing than the characteristic alienation most people experience from time to time in their familiar world. We are essentially rootless."

Strong words, and worrying for those of us who feel that every problem has a solution. I don't think Riemer believes that there *is* a solution for some travellers in time, whether it be called assimilation or multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism. The times can be out of joint, and stay that way—for a person, for a whole sub-culture.

But to his story. His parents had had high expectations of Australia, and Sydney, which they had pictured as perhaps some South Seas Copocabana or Cote D'Azur. Instead of which, the heat, blinding skies, the arid waste of suburbia, housing shortages, the struggle to live with unmarketable skills, and the seeming incomprehensibility of Australian society—an opaque structure with, most likely, nothing inside—was the reality.

*But*, the parents didn't revert to nostalgia about the good ol' days in beautiful Budapest, or Vienna or Kracow, as did so many other Central Europeans. The Riemers don't seem to have liked many of their ethnic peers, the constant denigration of Australia as a dead heart, a cultural desert, by those quite often on the margin of European culture in their former lives. They disliked those who invented a fanciful past and stories of money, property, titles and so on, which bore little resemblance to historical fact. Then there were the financial 'success stories' among the ethnic community, many of whom again disturbed the older Riemers. Too many were shonky or pushy, or into conspicuous display; and this all raised fears of retaliation from the outside world, as had occurred in Europe. So the Riemers sought to become Australians.

Alas, the parents found it hard, and young Riemer thought that the key to all this was language. Thus, his father's inability to communicate emotions such as anger, irony or sarcasm via the new language led to his being thought an amiable but somewhat dull-witted man. "Few had the chance to recognize his ironic relish of the absurdity of life...or the fatalism which generated, as is so often the case, a sombre gaiety—when you finally acknowledge that there is nothing to be done about the awfulness of life, you

realize that you might as well laugh at it". Meantime young Riemer worked to learn English, Oz style, acquire an education, and become a dinky-di Australian—a familiar enough path. There was no enormous trouble about doing the first, initially a great deal achieving the second, and almost a Phyrric victory concerning the third. A dinky-di ocker he never became, he never could. It was only in later years that he discovered that many Old Australians hadn't made it either, and that many hadn't wanted to. In the same way, the experience of a lack of oxygen, and dismay at the arid, complacent dogmatism of Old Australia, was secretly shared by many young Australians of his time; indeed up to this moment. Only the sufferers didn't let on; like America's poor, they thought it was *their* fault.

The escape from this "tyranny of distance", and rigid colonial orthodoxy was for many Europeans...Europe, the Europe of their fantasies: whereas for Riemer and many of us, England. Despite his dissatisfaction with savoring the old style Australian literary education, the author puts in a sustained and passionate plea for the value of English literature, and the English cultural connection generally. It has given meaning and a basis for his life, and it is hard indeed to know what to put in its place in our culture. The media and McDonald's know better, as do the current single-issue purveyors of pre-packaged indignation, but those of us not en route to Fahrenheit 451, or some new Esperanto to match the multicultural flag, come back to English.

As he says, as the years recede he is growing increasingly aware that such a seemingly mindless worship of a distant and arrogant society conferred benefits on Australian life. No matter whether foreign or Australian born, the immersion in England and things English was to put us in touch with emotional and aesthetic possibilities which were sadly lacking in our world. They still are. He quotes Shirley Hazzard in *The Transit of Venus*, to the effect that we were exposed to much nature poetry, speaking of things entirely beyond our experience: none of us having walked through a field of daffodils. Nor had we walked the landscapes described in Russian and Polish nature poetry, and I walked in Peer Gynt's footsteps in the tundra long after I'd read Ibsen's account of him.

Does education *have* to be about the familiar, the already experienced? Does 'relevance' mean recycling the minutely parochial; or exploring, taking wing?

Indeed Riemer, who has gone on to become a distinguished literary critic and academic teacher of literature, believes that adolescence is a time of longing that can greatly benefit from the mixture of gentleness and melancholy which English nature poetry is



perhaps uniquely qualified to provoke. And that such literature and the experiences which flow from it are not now being made available, or else are severely rationed, to the young.

At any rate, young Riemer made it to England and London, where he soon decided that he, with no offence, could never be English. He also ran into another enclave of central European harpies, replete with rings like knuckle dusters, furs and liberal coatings of shellac, ensconced in the Balkan Restaurant, denouncing England as a cultural desert, just as their sisters in Espresso Bars, mountain resorts, and later, Surfer's Paradise regularly wrote off Australia. And all this fifty yards from Covent Garden when London really *was* the cultural capital of the world. After that, the identity problem boiled down to Australian...or Hungarian-European. Riemer finally put it to the test in Budapest in 1990, and returned here minus one Hungarian identity banner, but feeling strangely bereft. He hasn't yet considered the Israeli option. Who knows...ten years hence? Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night asking, could Australia go like Central Europe, is another Holocaust possible? An incurable case?

This is a beautifully written, frank and simultaneously funny and poignant book, to be given to Old and New Australian dogmatists and cultural engineers alike; as compulsory reading.

*Max Teichmann had a German father whose mother was Russian; an Australian mother whose father was a Tommy in the Indian Army. His maternal grandmother was a Parsee. He is Australian, nothing more, nothing less.*

## A Hidden Tale

### Mary Lord

Rodney Hall: *The Second Bridegroom* (McPhee Gribble, \$29.95).

Have you ever wandered through the Australian bush, inspired by the vastness of the country and the smallness of its population, and contemplated the possibility that yours is the first white foot to have trod there? Suppose you could imagine yourself about a hundred and fifty years back in time, entirely new to the country, an escaped convict lost in the bush where quite certainly no white man has previously trod. Would you have words to describe all that you see and hear, the experiences completely foreign to all your previous experience? Imagine that you are a young man about twenty years old, that you come from the Isle of Man, from a family that still sees the English as hated con-

querors who, in imposing their language on your country and its people, have destroyed their religion, culture, myths, social organisation and way of life. Can you imagine the thoughts that isolation and estrangement might put in your head?

Rodney Hall has set himself this challenge in his latest novel, *The Second Bridegroom*, and it is a testimony to his exceptional powers as a writer that he is able to succeed in persuading his readers of the plausibility of his narrative. The young man at the centre of this unusual novel is awed by the power of language to bring some kind of order and meaning into the chaos of the new reality in which he finds himself: "I want you to understand that there is something to be understood out there, something free of the law, free of any comforting faith in



Photograph © Rowan Fotheringham.

a God whose motives may be explained through our own, something that has become the map of my heart." Yet he is aware that words are shackles which confine by bringing the unique into a relationship with what existed before, diminishing it by naming it. He realises that the unique Australian experience would be conquered by being rendered into the English language, which would distort it into something comprehensible only in relation to the English experience: "If once we gave things our own names we would have to begin destroying them."

In a novel charged with ironies, the most fundamental is that the young man comes from the oldest British colony and is now transported to its newest. From his point of view (he is the narrator of the story), the effect of the English occupation of his homeland has much in common with the effect the white invaders have had on the indigenous population of Australia. The novel invites a consideration of this parallel with its implicit criticism of English



colonisation, seen as destroying the culture it finds by superimposing on it a replica of its own.

The narrator, usually known as John Stanley, though this is not his real name (names are dangerous), is a 'word man', has been transported for forgery, is given to philosophising on weighty matters such as Order, "a way of trapping anything wild, tricking us into the game of thinking we understand"; or the Law which "is for one part of mankind to explain how its oppression of the other is for the good of all"; or a moral code which declares, "any piracy, any theft, any evil would be made right by the future: isn't this the truth of our colonial philosophy?"

Forgery, unlike murder or theft, is an intellectual crime, appropriate to Stanley's contemplative personality. That the effect of transportation is to brutalise him is not surprising. He continues to philosophise in the sense that he searches for meaning so that he might understand what happens to him, but the circumstances of his captivity are so intolerable that intent to murder becomes irresistible. That the effect of his alienation from everything he has previously known is also to make him progressively deranged is not surprising though it poses a considerable difficulty for the reader. As the novel progresses, the reader is gradually alienated from the narrator's increasingly bizarre consciousness which results in a withdrawal of sympathy and, ultimately, in indifference. The impulse to continue reading is dangerously diminished when the reader becomes as alienated from the principal character as he is from the world around him.

Stanley is a man of too many words. Worse, although the matters he raises are serious, even profound, he is unable to concentrate on any topic for long: his mind circles around his story and the ideas provoked by his circumstances in ever-widening ellipses. While this is a useful mechanism for holding in suspense key events in the plot, its effect is to make Stanley increasingly tiresome and ultimately a bore.

This is not to say that there are not wonderful patches in *The Second Bridegroom*. If the writing is irritatingly sententious, it is also rich in visual images as well as haunting and original descriptions of the Australian forest. There are also several brilliantly realised scenes, set pieces where the action is concentrated inside the periphery of brooding and meditation. One such is the bloody attack by Aborigines on an isolated settlement told from the marauders' point of view since, at this point in the story, Stanley is travelling with them. He has been adopted as a totem by a band of Aborigines who have made him the centre of their travelling circle as they roam the

country. The image of the circle recurs so frequently as to make inescapable the idea of the cyclical nature of history, a threadbare notion and one that does not need the emphasis it is given here.

The sections of the novel where violent action takes over from contemplation seem as arbitrarily imposed as the monologues on such subjects as the nature of society, the meaning of brotherhood in different cultures and so on. This tends to make Hall's conscious artistry so visible that his ability as a storyteller becomes submerged; though one is delighted by his cleverness, the imposition of the writer between the reader and the work has the effect of diluting its emotional force and making it excessively cerebral.

*The Second Bridegroom* is the first in a trilogy of which the last, *Captivity Captive*, has already been published and widely acclaimed. *Captivity Captive* was a chilling tale of murder and incest, mythologising our early colonial past in a way that made it a metaphor for the early stages of the development of civilisation. It had a cast of extraordinary characters and a well-paced and suspenseful plot. It was written in such carefully wrought, richly evocative prose that it proved compulsive reading. As a consequence, its successor, even if it pre-dates it in terms of the period with which it deals, carries a burden of expectation that is difficult to achieve and, although it has much in common with *Captivity Captive*, these expectations are not completely fulfilled. This is not to say that the book might not assume a fuller significance when it takes its place in the completed trilogy – it very likely may – but, as a novel in its own right and in spite of its many virtues, it is remarkably slight.

Apart from the dominating figure of its central character, the novel has only three other characters of any significance and their parts are small. They are merely ciphers. The plot has three or four climactic moments but unfolds with tedious slowness making the suspense seem unnecessarily attenuated. More disappointing is that the didactic aims of the novel are so transparent they undermine the mythic status of the story.

*The Second Bridegroom* takes its name from a Manx myth concerning the Goddess of Kirk Braddon who took one husband at the feast of a horse mating in spring and another in autumn at the feast of goat mating when the spring husband, his lust gorged, was ritually slain. One summer, after the Viking raid had begun, the horse king resisted his death and slew the goat king thus beginning the age of kings and wars. As the myth goes, the wars will continue until a second bridegroom brings back the peace. Stanley sees himself



fulfilling this prophecy, but he is quite mad – though readers of this journal will have no difficulty in sharing his anti-royalist sentiments.

The novel has an admirably provocative title and much to enjoy in its contents but, as an enclosed literary work, it is a lesser achievement than *Captivity Captive* though, like it, it is on one level a meditation of the beginnings of civilisation. One of Stanley's aphorisms states that "tales tell a hidden truth as well as the things they seem to say". In his story, the truth is not hidden well enough. Or perhaps it is hidden far too well for this reviewer.

*Mary Lord's most recent book is The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories.*

## A Sad Bodge's Lament

Shelton Lea

Barry Dickins: *I Love to Live; the Fabulous Life of Barry Dickins* (Penguin, \$14.95).

I first met Barry Dickins in the back of a burnt out car on a vacant lot in Carlton. It was 1966 or '7 and Barry was a poet. He would surface like a shattered angel from the back seat, mouth off lithe half rhymes that would disappear into the morning mists and we would adjourn to the pub, his *bon mots* echoing in the frigid air. Stunned, we palisaded through shadows recently hung by the sun. So my earliest memories of Barry are him as a poet and, to my joy, he remains so.

I have come across this gem of a book years after the plays, the columns, the acting, the TV appearances, the film scripts, the numerous books that have charted the inner lives of suburbia with such demonic accuracy and I am reminded of the poetry inherent in all Dickins' work. Dicko at times waxes lyrical, rhetorical, biblical, spasmodical, yet always the rhythm flows like water underground. You can't see it but you can hear its faint gurgle.

His gift for metaphor is a delight: a tennis ball is "slazengered into a wall", innocence is "calm as a moth's bum on a couch", a taxi driver "an abuse with a cardigan on" and wood is pinched from an English professor's "own neat, elite woodpiles".

Words for Dickins are a way of life, without them he would not exist. This, of course, is part of his charm. He is driven by a muse that has the air of a sad bodge, knowing things about the cracks in our lives and giving a voice to them. In the most moving

piece in the book he talks of John Pappas and what, while he was alive he meant to us, and, dead for a while now, he still means to us. I will not quote from this piece as it should be read in full in order to savour the power of its apology. Could we have done more? Should we have done more? Finally, his murder becomes the resolution; the end result of our dreams. And then there is Motherwell, a badly neglected figure in our localised lives: poet, playwright, actor and many things more, Motherwell is part of our, until now, uncharted history. Dickins brings him alive, even though, in this book but not in reality, he is in the morgue. This, to me, is the bleakest humor. Motherwell's blind father is led to the slab and asks John Timlin, "How does he look?"

Dickins continually reminds us of the extraordinary within the ordinary. He notes the "bloke who keeps the iron bar over the papers in a railway station kiosk", he comes to grips with the haunting refrain of Martin Meagher who punctured what was left of the romantic in all of us. It is to Dickins' credit that he controls himself to a point of eloquence when writing of this dreadful human being:

Martin Meagher had been living with white, witches, he said, in witches' covens in Belgrave, and his eyes had a real burnt out look to them as though he'd been staring into light bulbs for hours, and he had been staring into light bulbs for hours. Years.

And this is the man who murdered a girl "to exorcise the devil outer ya."

If the book has a theme it is one of barely controlled despair. I would like to be given, as a prize, one day in Dickins' head, no more than that. One day would be enough to remind me of the awkwardness of mankind, of the foibles and the fractures that make us genuine. His love of family, mothers, fathers, brothers, has an edge of sentiment that I can only applaud, yet not understand fully. What a riotous life to lead; one of adventure, where at every corner's turn there is surprise, for after all Dickins "does love life".

*Shelton Lea's eight books of poetry include Poems from a Peach Melba Hat (Abalone Press).*



## Theatre of Ideas in the Shadow of the Chair

Robert Harris

Billy Marshall-Stoneking: *Sixteen Words for Water; a Play in Two Acts* (Angus & Robertson, \$9.95).

So much enters Marshall-Stoneking's two-act play about Ezra Pound in the last months of his twelve year incarceration in St Elizabeths Hospital that it's difficult to know where to start. With Pound the great Modern or with Pound the traitor? Pound the revered or the hated? That's the first thing I like about Marshall-Stoneking's play: it engages me in a paradox instead of a program about being nice. As Basil Bunting wrote, it's a very long way around Ezra Pound, and poets of my generation deserved better, when we were in our twenties, than the scowls we got for reading him at all. He can be revered too much and hated too much: those who love to hate Pound might care to remember that under his country's legal code he remains innocent of the charges of treason against him, those who revere him will be shocked at some details of his pro-Fascist eruptions.

"I wasn't indicted for anti-semitism, was I?" Pound reminds his State Department interlocutor early in the first act. The State Department is deciding, over a six month period, whether or not to proceed against him: he's rehearsing his defence.

Do you really believe that poetry legitimises what you've done and said? Well, it doesn't. And it never will... Even after twelve years in this hole you still think you know more than anyone else.

The speaker is Woman, the functionary who up until this outburst has been on the receiving end of Pound's formidable wit. It falls to this character to question Pound from the standpoint of the audience, not to say biographers, poets, academics and other readers who have puzzled over his conduct for the past fifty years. Though Pound fends her off ("On the whole I have a greater quarrel with the Irish" i.e. than with Jews) eventually her attacks penetrate his armor.

So the big question is, who is she? I would have preferred this character to have been clothed with a name rather than the masque-like 'Woman', especially as her predicament, as much as Pound's, becomes this verse-play's theme. She has been sent along to assess his ability to stand trial but Pound tumbles early on that the decision has already been taken. In this position she has nevertheless to decide

whether she can say that Pound is sane enough to stand. A liberal Methodist, she is opposed to the death penalty he would face.

As Woman's character develops she becomes the intrigue of ethical America; upright, a little stiff, conscripted from childhood into a preoccupation with justice and determined to be morally consistent. In possession of a legible ethical schema she is not above tempering it with a little heart. These attractions of the Protestant American ethos are nevertheless subordinated to a ruthless and irresponsible cycle of power. It's power which answers to no-one, which resides in administrative lakes, and which predetermines life and death outcomes. To American political individualism as represented by Pound (and in a later generation by Jane Fonda) it presents a hostile and massive, impermeable exterior.



Pound followed Australian literary affairs, he seems to have read *Meanjin* regularly and was a subscriber to *The Edge*. His passage in the *Cantos* about the Wandjina, or Oauin Jin, spirits, deprived of their mouths because they named too many things, appears to have been derived from Strehlow's anthropological work of 1936 rather than the Jindyworobaks. While the legal and political action develops, Pound is privately involved with the Wandjina as figures for "The man of letters. The man with an education. The man on whom the sun



has gone down.” Intermittently he composes a passage of poetry which is delivered to Betsy, an undergraduate admirer who calls him Grampaw:

Those without confidence in banksia  
and spinifex for lack of education  
must have though Terra Australis a lost  
land –  
an aberrant continent –  
where everything is back to front.  
Even now, the whitemen wander  
uncertain, uncomfortable;  
and not for want of plumbing or electricity  
but because they do not understand  
where they are.  
I am talking about the power of the Land.

The cadences are Pound’s and so too is the voice. It’s a sustainable imaginative development which offers a new route for poetic communications between Europe and Australia via Pound: Modernism reified by, and returning to, the continent itself. I think it’s an exciting linkage in that it transfers continental identity to Koori conceptions, yet it is a fallacy that white Australians feel no affinity for their country as place, albeit a fallacy that Pound might have taken up in hortatory mode.

For Marshall-Stoneking the Land represents the subversion of power by the infiltration of human scales and natural ratios. It holds the prospect of an end to the subordination of ethical people and the isolation of political individualists in marginal (or cruel) positions. These prospects are suggested by the ghostly Margaret, Betsy’s imaginary friend. If Betsy is understood as a figure for modern literature and its audiences, relations between Woman, Betsy and Margaret, are disclosed as the play’s unacknowledged subject.

Woman’s plodding but coherent legalisms are visibly counterposed against Modernist vitalism. Will this really suffice? she asks in the play’s undertext. “How is it far if you think of it?” Pound replies from the pages of the *Cantos*. Yet Woman also questions the omni-competence of literature in a discussion much further down: has Betsy the right or the ability to re-invent her as Margaret? Is literature reaching down too far in searching out a new cultural synthesis? I don’t think Marshall-Stoneking is in his retrieval and celebration of an overlooked poetic connection, yet Woman’s scepticism is timely: last year’s Literature Board assessments were based to the tune of twenty-five per cent on the “cultural significance” of applications, an Orwellian pomposity which would have

had Ezra Pound’s eyebrows leaping about like dogs on chains.

*A fifth book of poems by Robert Harris Jane, Interlinear and Other Poems has recently been published by Paperbark Press.*

## Porter Major

Kevin Hart

Bruce Bennett: *Spirit in Exile: Peter Porter and his Poetry* (Oxford University Press, \$39.95).

Quite properly, Bruce Bennett begins by telling us what this book is about. It is “a study of a major Australian writer who has lived in London since 1951”. And so we immediately become aware of the tensions that inform Bennett’s reading of Porter’s life and writing: the romantic theme of exile; the nagging question of what ‘Australian’ means; and a critical evaluation that, taking advantage of an ambiguity allowed by English grammar, hesitates between aesthetic relativism and objectivism. Is Porter a major *Australian* writer, or a major *writer* who happens to be, in some important but secondary sense, Australian?

Of course Bennett could easily have told us that his book is “a study of an Australian writer, one of the best his country has produced, who has lived in London since 1951” or that it concerns “a major writer, an Australian who has lived in London...”. There are moments when the first sentence seems the more appropriate. Example: we hear of the cultural battle between Porter and Les A. Murray, based on their different socio-cultural assumptions. It sounds like someone trying to beat up an interest in Australian literature; after all, can a brief and chatty exchange on town and country values in poetry sustain the weight of “cultural battle”? Then there are other moments when Bennett wants to make very high claims indeed for Porter’s poetry, such as when he talks of *The Cost of Seriousness* (1978) as containing “some of the finest and most moving poetry of the twentieth century”, thereby letting Porter into a room where Akhmatova, Bonnefoy, Montale, Rilke, Stevens and Yeats are all gravely assembled. Splendid as poems like ‘An Exequy’ and ‘Non Pinagere Liù’ are, they do not earn Porter a place here. Nor would he claim entrée, an attractive modesty being one of his virtues.

Yet it would be wrong to lean too heavily on Bruce Bennett for oscillating between aesthetic objectivity and relativity. We live in an age when (publishers’ hype aside) in order to get a hearing



overseas Australian literature still needs the hint of exotica the adjective gives to the noun; when claims to critical objectivity come from the great metropolitan centres and mask, as they always do, a cultural hegemony; and when the very categories of objectivity and relativity are being endlessly complicated by endlessly complicated theories. One of the things those theories have fastened onto with dogged persistence is the assumption that life and art are positively and simply related. We all know that art generates effects of passion, and many people like to read those effects back into the author's consciousness. A moment's reflection should remind us, though, that one does not have to be feeling gloomy to write a gloomy poem. (In *Literature and Sincerity* Henri Peyre tells as many stories as one needs to clinch the point: Victor Hugo wrote his most piercing poems on the death of his daughter while also writing sensual love songs; and Palestrina's compositions lamenting his wife's death were not composed in the depths of depression but after he had happily remarried a rich widow.) Part of what we mean when we call an artwork great is that it is both overdetermined and underdetermined; it answers obliquely to a variety of competing pressures, and it can never be fully accounted for by any given context: economic, historical, institutional, political, religious, social, or whatever.

Which is to say, more positively, that all artworks leave traces of those pressures, whether cryptic or legible, and solicit a range of contexts. So the door is always left ajar for the comparativist, the historicist, the feminist, the literary biographer, the psychoanalyst – anyone, really – to enter and talk with and about the work. They are not dangerous guests. Even when they make the work speak about matters it would prefer not to; even when, after hearing them talk for a while, the notion of 'the work' begins to become fuzzy at the edges and blurry at the centre – they are still in the business of producing and finding meaning. Only reductionists are dangerous – and there are some in every camp. The reductive literary biographer explains the art by the life, or more romantically, the life by the art.

Bruce Bennett looks away when the temptations of reductionism whisper their sweet words of neatness and simplicity in his ear. But he knows full well that the construction called 'Peter Porter' must emerge from an hypothesis of some kind:

In the construction of any retrospective account of a literary life and its products, even when it is ventured while that writer is in his early sixties and still in full flight, a temptation exists to

identify a central crisis, a single event and make it the fulcrum upon which the story turns.

The central crisis about which 'Peter Porter' turns is the apparent suicide in December 1974 of Jannice Porter, the poet's first wife. Yet the hypothesis cannot be ventured just as it stands, for very good reasons. One of the strengths of *Spirit in Exile* is Bennett's refusal to read Porter's writing by way of a strict division between early and late periods, between social poet and elegist. Jannice Porter's death in 1974 (when the writer was forty-five) resonates with the death of Porter's mother in 1938 (when he was nine). Besides, Jannice's death came at a complicated time for Porter: he was living at the time in Australia, coming to terms with his maternal land, and had recently fallen in love with Sally Lehmann (later Sally McInerney). As Bennett says, with characteristic drama, "his sense of identity, loyalty, purpose and place" had been thrown "into new turmoil".

One way of understanding Bennett's study is to see him greatly expanding two themes of Porter's writing. The first of these, as I have noted, is the insistence that Porter strikes the *lachrimae rerum* note as early as the 1950s. His prolonged mourning of his mother, a nervous breakdown, and two suicide attempts are all implicated here; and now that we know about these events we cannot forget them when reading the early collections. (Exactly how we are to use them is another matter.) The second theme is exile, which gives the book its highly romantic title. It takes hold at two levels. There is Porter's voluntary exile from Australia, a story which gains drama as the protagonist begins to be reconciled to his native land; and there is the poet's sense of exile from anything like home, a sense which informs all his work at one point or another. Bennett's Porter is above all a poet of the Fall, a writer longing to regain paradise (through love, music, poetry, travel, and in imagining a certain Australia as Eden) but with an increasing awareness that the desire can never be fulfilled.

This book is neither simply a literary biography nor just a critical study of the poems; it is an interlacing of the two. Its danger is obvious; in regarding the life as a linear phenomenon, and in placing the poems along that line, one cannot help but read the poems in terms of organic metaphors. By the same token, its benefit is obvious: a number of cryptic poems are illuminated by references to specific events in Porter's life. No one could claim that *Spirit in Exile* offers particularly creative or arresting readings of individual poems; its strengths are to be found in its broad contextual moves. However,



from now on those moves, and the information they interpret, cannot be overlooked or bypassed by anyone whose primary concern is with Porter's poetry.

*Kevin Hart's new book of criticism, A. D. Hope is to be published by Oxford University Press later this year.*

## A Golden Hole

Hugh Anderson

S [Samuel] Le Maitre: *Songs of the Gold Fields* Edited with Introduction and Notes by Frank Cusack. Half-bound with decorated paper boards and jacket, edition limited to 305 copies signed by the editor. (Garravembi, Thumb Creek, 1991, \$28).

Books such as this require and deserve a fuller description than is usual with most publications, both because their content is intrinsically interesting and they are examples of fine press work in a rising sea of mass-produced books. *Songs of the Gold Fields* is said to be the sixth book from the Garravembi Press, but as Peter Marsh is the printer and binder, his published work actually goes back many years, at least to the facsimile of J. H. Tuckey's *An Account of a Voyage to...Port Phillip* (Marsh Taylor & Walsh, 1974). Later, as proprietor of the Queensberry Hill Press in Carlton, he printed and published many rare items that are very important to Victorian history. Although the book under review is a departure from the style of Peter Marsh's prior specially-bound, limited editions, it is none the less a well-produced, pleasant book to handle. The pity is that these useful documents are still not readily accessible to individuals other than book collectors, but should find a place in every worthwhile library.

The text of the seventeen songs (unfortunately without any attempt to give tunes) is well worth having as an addition to goldfield history, and has a curiosity value as the first book of verse issued on any Victorian diggings. We are told the songs were contributed to 'local papers' during the author's ten years' residence at Sandhurst (Bendigo) after arriving "in the early 1850s" [i.e. 1856?], but are given no further information. It is even more tantalising to learn of Le Maitre's larger collection from which *Songs of the Gold Fields* was drawn. The one definite fact is the death of the journalist at the Manchester Arms Hotel, Bendigo, in April 1876, although his later years had been spent in the local Benevolent Asylum.

The great disappointment with this reprinting of *Songs of the Gold Fields* is the vagueness of the references, so unusual in the work of Frank Cusack, and the opportunity is missed to place the songs in some kind of historical context and so enlarge our understanding of the times. Surely the dedication to the local politician John Forester Sullivan deserves a note as much as anything else. (He does achieve an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*). The flamboyant Irish born ex-United States lawyer and army officer of the Mexican War, became a Bendigo wine and spirit merchant, a land speculator and the second chairman of the municipality, besides the parliamentary representative for Mandurang electorate for ten years. On the other hand, a good deal is made of Robert 'Pump Handle' Benson, who is the subject of a song, where he is mentioned as "an old friend" who was "later spurned and forgotten", but we do not really learn anything much about him, and certainly nothing of the origin of his nickname. Benson, a member of the first Local Court of Mines in 1855 and a delegate to the Land Convention, held a seat in the Legislative Council for a short time, but "sacrificed his property to pay electioneering expenses and died in poverty" according to Thomson and Serle.<sup>1</sup> Again, Frank Cusack gives a note on Fanny Young, "a popular actress of the day", but no reference book known to me says anything about her. It is as if the editor assumes we are as knowledgeable as he obviously is, and therefore takes too much for granted.

Something more could be made of particular songs. 'The Song of the Rifle', that appears to deal with the Volunteer Rifle Corps formed in 1860, invites comparison with the much more personalised and pointed work of Charles Thatcher, 'The Rifle Brigade':

When first I saw Bill Jenkins,  
'Twas some few weeks ago,  
A yard measure then he had under his arm,  
And a roll of calico;  
But fancy my astonishment,  
When in town the other day  
I saw this knock-kneed draper  
With others marching away  
In the Volunteer Rifle Brigade,  
In the rummiest togs arrayed,  
And 'twas regular fun  
Too see him with a gun  
As he marched in the Rifle Brigade.<sup>2</sup>

On page 41, Cusack refers to the campaigns to unlock the land for smallholders, which is the



obvious background to Le Maitre's song 'Stand Back', but he directly invites comparison with Charles Thatcher's 'Lord of Barrantowan' [sic], a song medley aimed at John Harney who came from Tipperary, was a successful publican and obtained the licence to Bandedown Station in 1857. He was notorious for impounding the diggers' horses or 'prads' and any stray cattle.<sup>3</sup>

Oh did you not hear of John Harney,  
I don't think he comes from Killarney,  
You all know him well  
For he keeps an Hotel  
And a squatter besides is John Harney.<sup>4</sup>

The most intriguing thing about *Songs of the Gold Fields* for me is the song, 'The First Hole' (pp. 26–27), to the tune 'The Cork Leg' (about an artificial limb that wants to go its own way):

A few days ago, as I am told,  
A new chum came up to dig for gold;  
He purchased a tub, a shovel and pick,  
And swore he was the boy to do the trick.  
Ri too ra loo...

Exactly the same song is given as 'copied' in the *Queenslanders' New Colonial Camp Fire Song Book*, which was published in Sydney late in 1865, before Le Maitre's collection was issued in Bendigo.<sup>5</sup> Since *Songs of the Gold Fields* appeared in 1866, the anonymous compiler of the former collection of 'popular songs of the day, and new songs' must have been at Bendigo or have seen the original print of Le Maitre's poem in the local newspapers some time before 1865. Once more, we have an unsolved question of the authorship and of the sources for Australian 'traditional' songs. Who copied it, and when and from where?

In spite of such minor blemishes, *Songs of the Gold Fields* is well worth adding to any collection of goldfields material.

<sup>1</sup> K. Thomson and G. Serle: *A Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament* (Canberra, 1972), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Thatcher: *Gold-Diggers' Songbook* (Melbourne, 1980), pp. 71–72.

<sup>3</sup> See J. O. Randell: *Pastoral Settlement in Northern Victoria* vol. 2 (Melbourne, 1982), pp. 425–31.

<sup>4</sup> H. Anderson: *Goldrush Songster* (Ferntree Gully, [1958]), pp. 56–58.

<sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *George Loyau: The man who wrote bush ballads* (Melbourne, 1991), pp. 3–4.

*Hugh Anderson has been writing about Australian history and folklore since the 1950s. He is currently writing about Bernard O'Dowd's association with Walt Whitman, and Cecil Sharp, the English folklorist, and his ten years in Adelaide.*

## The Shame and the Horror

Max Teichmann

Mark Aarons and Robert Domm: *East Timor; a Western Made Tragedy*. Foreword by Jose Ramos-Horta (Left Book Club, \$5.95).

The fate of the East Timorese is still in the balance. Finally, they will be destroyed, disappearing from history through a combination of military, political and cultural genocide, or else by some miracle as yet unspecified, they will survive and live to see their own country, their own nation. The Timorese chances seem even slimmer than those of the Tibetans, the victims of another great and powerful Asian friend of ours.

Aarons and Domm document the whole sordid story of the abandonment of Timor by the West, from 1975 until now, ending with the persecutions which are following the Dili massacre of November last year.

Australian official attitudes towards Timor have been simply a part of our relation with Indonesia, part of the 'Batik diplomacy' associated with Whitlam. He enunciated this strategy round about the time he had us recognize Russia's annexation of the Baltic states.

The Batik policy goes roughly as follows: Indonesia is much bigger than we are, we cannot afford to cross her, so must swiftly distance ourselves from any small erstwhile friends in our vicinity who might incur her wrath, or expansionist desires. We don't put it as crudely as *that*, but as the authors demonstrate, that is the essence. We only use terms like human rights, national sovereignty or the rule of law when criticising opponents of Washington – e.g. European as against Asian Communists.

Australian Labor has come a long way in a short time. In 1981, Hayden, when Opposition Leader, said, "Our servility towards Indonesia seems to know no bounds, despite that country's appalling record in Timor and the intimidation and harassment of those who fail to support President Suharto. We in the Labor Party do not subscribe to the belief that Indonesia is vitally important to Australia and we are of only marginal importance to it. We are neighbours, we have to live with each other, but we do not have to accept so meekly the contemptuous and offhand treatment now regularly handed out to us." (There are so many such telling quotations to be found along the way in this book, which is worth buying for the quotations alone.)

Anyway, Hayden said it all then. What happened? Just as in 1975 Australians, with a little help from



some friends, ejected a tactless prime minister and government, so did Labor with a lot of help from its friends get rid of a tactless leader and his principles in 1983.

But, as the authors point out, the legal and moral situation hasn't changed. The Indonesian invasion of East Timor, and Indonesia's subsequent behavior flowing therefrom, are flagrant violations of the UN charter prohibiting the use of force. It also violated an Australian sponsored UN resolution which forbids members from recognising territory acquired by force. Australia's *de jure* recognition of Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor in 1978, the only Western nation to give such recognition at that time, was part of her Batik "diplomacy". So is her division of waters and oil deposits in the Timor Gap with East Timor's illegal occupier Indonesia. It is not theirs to dispose, as Portugal will be arguing before the International Court. Indonesia doesn't recognise the court's jurisdiction: it will be interesting to see if Australia accepts an adverse ruling.

But the slaughter goes on, as Aarons and Domm remind us. Over 200,000 Timorese have died; perhaps 30 per cent of the original population. Resettlement camps, strategic hamlets, secret police, masked hit squads which strike at night, routine disappearances, routine torture, networks of informers; all the familiar devices of imperialist tyranny. Jakarta has a black list of 17,000 outsiders who are considered critical of the Batik Reich. It really is the boot crashing into the human face – forever. It is necessary for books like this to appear regularly, to remind us of the history, and to update this slow motion Holocaust. So that no-one can say they didn't know and to remind us of our duties, even if we have governors modelling themselves on Pontius Pilate.

*Max Teichmann has co-written or edited seven books on politics.*

## Five to be Read

Michael Dugan

Anthony Lawrence: *Three Days Out of Tidal Town* (Hale and Iremonger, \$14.95).

John Kinsella: *Eschatologies* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$14.95).

Lily Brett: *Unintended Consequences* (Paper Bark Press, \$15.00).

Stefanie Bennett: *The Leaf, the Lion, the Lariat* (The Press Gang Collective, \$17.50).

Sherryl Clark: *Edge* (Pariah Press, \$11.00).

Anthony Lawrence's first collection of poems, *Dreaming in Stone*, won the Harri Jones Memorial Prize. *Three Days Out of Tidal Town* is the second collection by this Western Australian poet.

The longest poem in the book, 'Blood Oath', runs to 33 pages. I presume it is based on a Western Australian case of a few years ago when two teenage boys, hired to do maintenance tasks on remote cattle stations, set off to escape from the harshness of life and the loneliness there only to perish in the desert.

Lawrence creates a persona for one of the two and attempts the difficult task of getting into the mid of a 16-year-old city boy suddenly transferred to a lonely cattle station, monotonous tasks and a cruel unreasoning boss.

In a long and ultimately tragic poem, Lawrence sustains consistently and believably, the voice and thoughts of his teenage narrator caught up in a situation that becomes increasingly beyond his control and understanding. It is a disquieting and powerful statement about capitalist exploitation and man's inhumanity to man.

Anthony Lawrence's humanity and concern are clearly reflected in many of the other poems in this fine collection. They include poems drawn from his travels, from his life on the Western Australian coast and reflective poems on various, and often disturbing, aspects of the human condition.

*Eschatologies* is the second collection of another Western Australian poet, John Kinsella. Most of the poems in this book are simple and direct and Kinsella has a knack for clear evocation of both place and people. When he leaves the world of everyday life, as in the section 'Strange Metaphors', his writing becomes a little labored:

the fume cupboards  
that must accompany  
stacks on the roof  
of a laboratory  
infuse the notion  
that ibises  
were manufactured  
as prototype  
Concorde airliners...

However, the strength and vividness of imagery in many of the poems in this collection compensate for occasional lapses. As example, this stanza from the poem 'Pillars of Salt':

The salt is a frozen waste  
in a place too hot for its own good,  
it is the burnt-out core of the earth's eye,



the excess of white blood cells.  
The ball-and-chain rides lushly  
over its polishing surface, even dead wood  
whittles itself out of the picture.

Kinsella is also the founding editor of the Western Australian literary magazine *Salt*. He has recently edited the *Salt Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* under the title *The Bird Catcher's Song* (*Salt*, \$16.00)

Lily Brett has established her spare verse style in earlier collections. *Unintended Consequences*, her fourth collection, is no exception. Most poems are short and written with very short lines. This can pro-

every night

I don't like  
to be up  
alone.

These poems are about the everyday and the thoughts, moments of guilt, sadness and happiness that occur during it. Many of them are reflective and moving, including poems on the death of her mother, on enduring friendships, and love poems. There are poems that hark back to Brett's first haunting collection, *The Auschwitz Poems*. Other poems have the minutiae of daily life as their subjects.

A series of poems about Brett's experience of analysis and analysts is followed by a poem that celebrates one of those moments when life seems most worthwhile and analysts are far from the mind:

For my forty-fourth birthday  
my husband bought me  
a laser printer

my daughter baked a  
chicken  
she had marinated and stuffed

the other children  
gave me snapshots of themselves  
I had asked for

in the middle of the dinner  
I knew  
that life didn't come any better than this.

There are many fine poems in this collection but there are also some that seem flat by comparison. More rigorous selection could have avoided this.

Stefanie Bennett has published many collections of poetry as well as having been involved in the publication of books by others through *Khasmik* and other imprints.

*The Leaf, the Lion, the Lariat* is a small collection of poems accompanied by linocuts by Shirley Strano. The subject matter of the poems ranges widely, from the personal and introspective to the objectively political. These are not poems that draw quick emotional responses, like Lily Brett's, but poems to be thought about that often demand re-reading. Many of the poems reflect their author's reading and intellectual interests.

Bennett is a skilled wordsmith and a hard thinker. The poems in this collection are consistently accomplished, even though their themes vary



vide a degree of immediacy that makes the reaction to some poems almost one of shock. However, when it doesn't work, as with this poem 'I Go To Sleep', the product seems banal and anorexic:

I go to sleep  
at the same time  
as my husband



widely. From poems that are tough and questioning Bennett can move to a fine elegy for Francis Webb that ends:

Autumnal man, when last we met  
You'd grown free, almost agnostic  
And beyond my recognition.  
Wild clouds had imprisoned  
The once smiling eyes.

Still, the years are swift and time  
Dances about the chilling bough.  
The door I open  
Is expectantly slow – while  
The one who rocked the cradle laments

How the golden bird has flown.

Stefanie Bennett is one of number of poets (Shelton Lea and Tim Thorne are two others) who have published through small and often short-lived imprints. She, like Thorne and Lea, has reached a stage where a selected edition needs to be published by an established press.

*Edge* is Sherryl Clark's first book of poems. In Victoria she is well known for her work on community writing projects. The poems in this collection are mainly short and personal, often questioning the meaning of life at its different stages. They are about relationships and about the inner self:

I have sat by the stove with Sylvia  
and discussed poetry  
that made people laugh.  
I have read studies which  
link creativity and madness

and shivered in my straightjacket.  
I have pulled down the shades of grey  
and invited shadows in  
to dine and play the Tarot.

Although most of these poems are serious, reflective and often introspective Clark is by no means without wit and humor. These qualities come to life in poems such as 'Dark Lady' which I quote in full:

Dark they call me, oh aye,  
only because she's twice as fair  
his wife, the poor ninny  
dealing with stoves and chamberpots  
whilst Will pens alone.  
If 'twere not for me  
Hamlet and Macbeth  
would still be wisps in his brain.  
It pains me not  
to remain in the shadows,  
my power is the flame  
beneath his crucible of brilliance.  
And the sonnets – ha!  
The world has seen  
but a paltry flutter of phrases  
to melt a maid's heart.  
I hold two score of his best  
and vow to burn them  
before I die.

*Edge* is an impressive first collection that stands up well beside these books by more established poets.

*Michael Dugan is a children's author who has also published five collections of poetry. The most recent, Twenty-five Poems, appeared in 1991.*





## WRITERS IN PRISON

## P.E.N. Report, 9

### XU WENLI, CHINA

Many writers in the western world crave solitude as a refuge from the pressures of daily living. In China, authorities impose it so that writers can take no part in either daily living or public life. The writer and editor Xu Wenli has now been held in solitary confinement since 1985, when he was put in a windowless cell, denied visits and had his rations cut. In 1989, the vice-warden of the prison explained to a reporter from the *South China Morning Post* that "solitude was beneficial for Xu's individual reform." Xu's offences: he had, with others, published the *April Fifth Forum* from 1979 to 1980, when the government issued warnings to all unofficial journalists; he later circulated a private newsletter and edited *Contemporary Matters*, and he gave inter-

views to foreign journalists, emphasising the need for democracy in a Communist society. He was tried in 1982 and found guilty of "organising a counter-revolutionary group" and carrying out "counter-revolutionary incitement and propaganda". His solitary confinement began after his account of his defence and of the pre-trial and trial proceedings was published in England and America.

Melbourne PEN sponsors Xu Wenli. *Overland* readers are invited to write to him at Beijing Prison No. 1, or to direct enquiries about him to the Ambassador of the Peoples Republic of China in Canberra, or to Mr Jiang Zemin, General Secretary, Chinese Communist Party, Beijing, Peoples Republic of China.



