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NMA Publications is pleased to announce a new book release:

# the pink violin

A portrait of an Australian musical dynasty

by

Jon Rose

Rainer Linz



## A book that will change the way you think about music!

...At times in the history of music come the occasional moments of inspiration: we think of the Paris performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, John Coltrane's album *Ascension*, or Jimi Hendrix' version of *Star Spangled Banner* at the Woodstock festival in the late '60s. More recently, we appear to have drifted through a period characterised by a lack of such visionary events. But the atmosphere has just changed, thanks to a book called **the pink violin**.

At face value this is an anthology of writings about a family of innovative musicians. Perhaps best known of these is the composer Johannes Rosenberg, but there are others too: Jo 'Doc' Rosenberg the jazz violinist, Jimmi Rosenberg the country & western (turned hard core rock) artist, and many, many more.

What makes critics, music lovers and fans sit up is the audacity with which the writers in this anthology have turned the history of music upside down. Through the use of cutting wit and satire the protagonists have run riot, and left no stone unturned in their frontal attack on a decaying culture. The whole catalogue of pretentious music theories, fat funding bureaucracies, petty bourgeois aesthetics, egomania, commercial hype, reductionist educational principles, political manipulation, wholesale music theft and cultural imperialism has been put to the flame. It's also very, very funny.

**Don't believe it?** Why not find out? If you are one of those people who are wondering what's it all about, where are we going and who's paying for the pizza after the gig, you need to read this book **and soon!**

Available from good bookshops around Australia. Distribution enquiries: Manic Ex-poser (03) 416 2050

# overland

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Temper democratic, bias Australian

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*Portrait of Helen Garner, 1992*

*Drypoint by Rick Amor*

JANINE BURKE

## Lullaby

November 28, Mission Beach

DO YOU REMEMBER *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where everyone is bewitched under the moon? Well, I'm no Oberon but beneath the canopy of the far north sky we allow ourselves certain liberties. I am not talking of the amorous kind, though Gaye's sadness has reached out to touch me. I could not face another woman's disappointment. "I do not know when I will leave or how long I will stay." I realised I'd have to make the same miserable little speech. So I turned away from Gaye, wondering if I'd hurt her just the same.

You say love is different for men. I'm not so sure. Maybe I'm better at bottling it up. Maybe I'm a better liar. You mark the borderline, don't you? It is one of your constant habits, perhaps some need in you to make separate what could otherwise merge. Maybe, after all, I have another way of giving which you have not discovered. There is not everything you know about me.

My first was a peddler's daughter. Her family had camped on that bleak road leading out of Belmullet just as you enter the Bog of Erris, their home a wormy caravan pulled by nags, mists fore and aft. Going where, who knows? Some lousy market, some falling-down town. The peddlers and tinkers, the wandering traders were beggars, in truth, poorer than peasants whose ten-acre plot of peat got handed down from one bad-luck son to another. There's nothing more hated in Ireland than a wealthy man. We nurture a culture of poverty.

She offered to polish my boots. We liked each other without speaking, and when I stepped inside the van, low it was and stale smelling, she unbuttoned her blouse and placed my hand beneath her breast, the nipple rich and dark as burning honey. I felt her heart. I had never felt another human heart, only the swine, and the cattle in labor. Its beat was thunder in my palm. On her arms were bruises, and just outside, orders about unharnessing the ponies were being shouted in her language,

Shelta, the tongue of the travelling people. Entering her, I watched her eyes. I cannot say what I saw there: some fear overwhelmed by pleasure – or was that my reflection? Above our heads smiled Jesus, his bleeding heart in his hand, offered like food. We were silent and only afterwards, when we rose, did she make a sound, a quick catching of the breath, like the start of pain, or fright. I gave her what money I had and that was when she smiled: I realised what a child she was, both of us were, and that there was an end to that.

There is gratitude to the first woman (and you, to the first man?) for the one who reveals what you had imagined is both more and less – possible. You do not forget your lovers, no matter how slight the union. Men do not, at least.

I was clumsy with that girl through a terror of failure. Performance is a kind of untruth, recognised later, when we are older and the act itself does not have such desperation in it. It is often in the letting go – not of love but of its shorter answers – when needs are met.

You used your body like your words – quick and pleasing. The heart of your lovemaking was love itself, total, with you, and complete. You said there was no other way, and that this was true for women. I reckon connections of the briefer kind whet the appetite for more. It's the conquering urge. Don't deny you're without it. Is it 'better' or 'worse' to sleep with a woman and never know her name, never exchange more than casual remarks?

You say without words there *is* no reality. Because you are not sure, without words, of your feelings. This was part of our quarrel, wasn't it? You wanted the *words* of my feelings and could not trust their deeds. It is easier to say *here* that I love you, in the secrecy of these pages. That should please you, word-woman. Does writing make it come alive? I create your voice, and my own to answer you. Out come all the answers, marvellously clear and calm, I could never manage when we were together! How easy

life would be to control if we could write it down. You are here in this room with me but sometimes, even here, I lose you and the night, the waves or some scattered recollection arises to take your place. The throbbing, that is your absence, fades and I hear the still separateness that is my self. I am often surprised by what I write, embarrassed even to turn back the pages. They quiver with your breath.

I find a different man than he who inhabits the day-world, the one who drinks at the bar that's no more than a tin shed tacked on the side of the pub on the highway opposite the cane fields where we knock them back and shout another round. It's dirty work and we curse the fields at the end of the day, and the tractors, and the company, and our boss. Australians curse well, bleak and funny all at once.

"You Irish bastard no-hoper," they say, "you don't know whether you're coming or going. You're arse about tit, mate. You got shit for brains. For crying out loud, mate, you're a fuckwit, a drop kick, a moron, a nong. Crikey, you're a drongo. Strike me dead, you're a dill. You're in a flat spin, mate, you've gone berserk. You got no more nous than a drover's brown dog."

"You Aussie son of a convict dickhead," I throw back. "You wouldn't know what day it was. The Poms had to teach you how to wipe your arse. You're fucked, you're stuffed, you're up shit creek, mate. You don't know whether you're Arthur or Martha. You got your balls in a knot and a dick in your ear. Japs wouldn't bother with your lousy race. They had a better war elsewhere." That calls for another beer! We teach one another obscenities like points of etiquette. Swearing is our common tongue. Vile phrases are delivered tenderly. We taught a Greek lad to say...Oh, never mind but he copped a mouthful from the foreman.

Men are good at silence, you know? Comfortable with it. Our companionship, it's enough. In the sharing of work, commonplace remarks are adequate. And, yes, I've considered this silence an escape from women. Well, another kind of language perhaps, the language of men.

There are things I cannot discuss with you. No, that's wrong. It's not the subject itself, it's the way of telling. It's not something I'm aware of when I'm with you, only apart.

But, finally, don't we share? The stars we watched, they were tracked and named by men – did it lessen our enjoyment of the universe? And what about your father who told you stories and whose leg you clung to like a monkey, that father who angers you and who grips your heart? He spoke, you listened. Wasn't it his language you also learned?

I like to think that stories, the great ones, are

there for all of us, that Dickens *is* Little Nell and Tolstoy, unhappy Anna. If we haven't got that, what have we got? I've tramped the moors with Emily Bronte and been entertained by George Eliot. (Yes, I know you said I should read 'the moderns' and even last week I bought a dog-eared copy of Patrick White's *Voss* from the second-hand bookshop at Innisfail.)

I've not spoken with a woman before the way I spoke with you. My wife Eleanor never called from me what you did. We weren't speaking different languages then, were we? Could that be true when that poem you wrote, you wrote for me? You were cross with that poem and called it "a cliché". But I think it was your own self you were angry with and the statement of feelings which I could feel to be true without having to accept.

This one day –  
I would have held it,  
But knew my finger would have stroked  
Cold stone and water.  
Names are nothing,  
Without an echo to retrieve them:  
I hear our voices drowning  
In oceans of air.

Well, it did not seem such a bad effort to me, and I memorised it. What was I supposed to do with it? Give you a mark out of ten? Half the time you respected my opinion, the other half you were thinking what a dill I was. No, no, you never said it. Didn't need to. I didn't say it was *too* emotional, I said it *was* emotional. "Next you'll be calling me neurotic!"

I have come to all this reading late. As a man in middle age, I sit with a lamp in the dark accompanied by a book and a pen, and an open page.

Your gift to me was books. You, and Cherry Tree Road. What about Queenie reading the Bible as though it was the daily newspaper? I'll never forget her dispatches about Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians and his forces from Nineveh who marched on Ecbatana and "captured its towers, plundered its markets and turned its beauty into shame." Queenie loves the power of words, understands them, I think. Those strange stories of hers cobbled out of everystory. It was her *reading* of them I found the grand experience. Her belief made it all so vivid – it made *me* believe, too, and I am no Bible boy. She seemed enchanted by stories, Queenie, who has so much to tell!

If you wrote of me, what would you write? How would you describe me? (After all, the poem was about *us*.)



Jack Reilly. Medium height. Red hair, green eyes, wonky great beak of a nose and a mouth hooked up in a smile for somewhere to go. Straggly nest of a beard. Tattoo left arm. 'Mum'. Fingers, tobacco stained. (But I'm giving up, I'm giving up!) Ancestry, Irish. Nationality, citizen of the world. Would you write about the traits a person is never conscious of himself? What are my good points, after all?

Good at mending what is broken, asking a question, beginning a tale.

I don't go wild with the drink these days. Don't get in fights. Am a most sober and respectable fellow. But I'm lazy in my soul, not tired but lazy.

Great hopes get dashed that way.

And how would I describe you?

You who change so much.

You, anguish over trifles.

You, refusing to understand what doesn't suit your purpose.

You, lady of atmospheres.

You, clever angry careful woman.

You who are not my friend.

If it weren't for what we were too afraid to say, I wouldn't need these pages.

I don't show them to my friends. They are not acquainted with the man who writes them. But I need that man, too, the one who belongs to other men. You are nearer, faint star.

Last night I dreamed about my father. Which is the first time in a long time that I seen him. Incorrect. That I *did see him*. He was the same as in real life. He never died. It's like he never – Glad to wake up I was.

I stood before our house, that tiny, damp and sunless rock, and he was planted like a gargoyle on the step. His head was in his hands. "What's up, Da?" I asked.

"Judgement Day is coming," he replies.

"Been coming a long time."

"I seen my name in the great book," says he, "and I'm going down below."

"The grave? That's where we're all heading?"

"Nay, it's to Hades I will go." His face is blanched like he's already carked it. "Eternal damnation," and he starts to moan.

I'm thinking what a bastard he was and what a lousy life he made us lead, but I can't help feeling sorry for him. "Da," I says, "get down on your knees and pray and maybe God'll forgive you. Better hurry up."

He scrambles onto his knees and starts to mutter Hail Marys and Our Fathers scarcely taking a breath. Then he cocks his head, like he's had a great idea. "What about you?" he says.

"Me?"

"I got a family to take care of. I can't be spared but you could go in my place. Now what d'you say"

Just then, there's a fierce crack and the ground splits open and we see flames and souls in torment. He wrestles me towards it and I'm struggling, but he's stronger, and as I fall, I wake. The last sight are his eyes, close to mine, and reflected in them, the fire.

If he came back it would be as something remorseless. A cockroach or a jackal. A creature without pity. My mother described him as "a laughing youth". That was the man she loved and the one she held on to, like a faded painting.

I grew up in a dream culture where Auntie Peg heard the trot of the headless horseman astride the headless horse and knew it foretold her husband's death, and cousin Jenna dreamed her child was born without a mouth, and so it was, it was born a mute, and wretched Bidy, the priest's lackey, told your dreams according to the state of the sky. One kind of cloud meant one kind of disaster, one sort of sunrise meant another. *Tír na nóg* rises to human sight only when there's to be a national calamity. Always bad luck, never good! A horrible foretelling, it makes you scared of your own mind. Were we afraid of the future in Ireland to make sure it was so damned cruel? (Why don't I dream of your thighs and lips? Why don't I dream of your eyes?)

Since my dream about the old man I see it in different ways, the house. Home, I should say. Before I couldn't see it at all. I tried to write it down the names of the towns and make a map of

Galway

Clifden

Westport

Castlebar

Ballina

*Gailimh*

*An Clochán*

*Cathair na Mart*

*Caislean An Bharraigh*

*Béal An Atha*

Tried to write my way home. The dream has returned what the words could only suggest – so long it's been since I remembered, so long since I dreamed, allowed myself to touch

the step

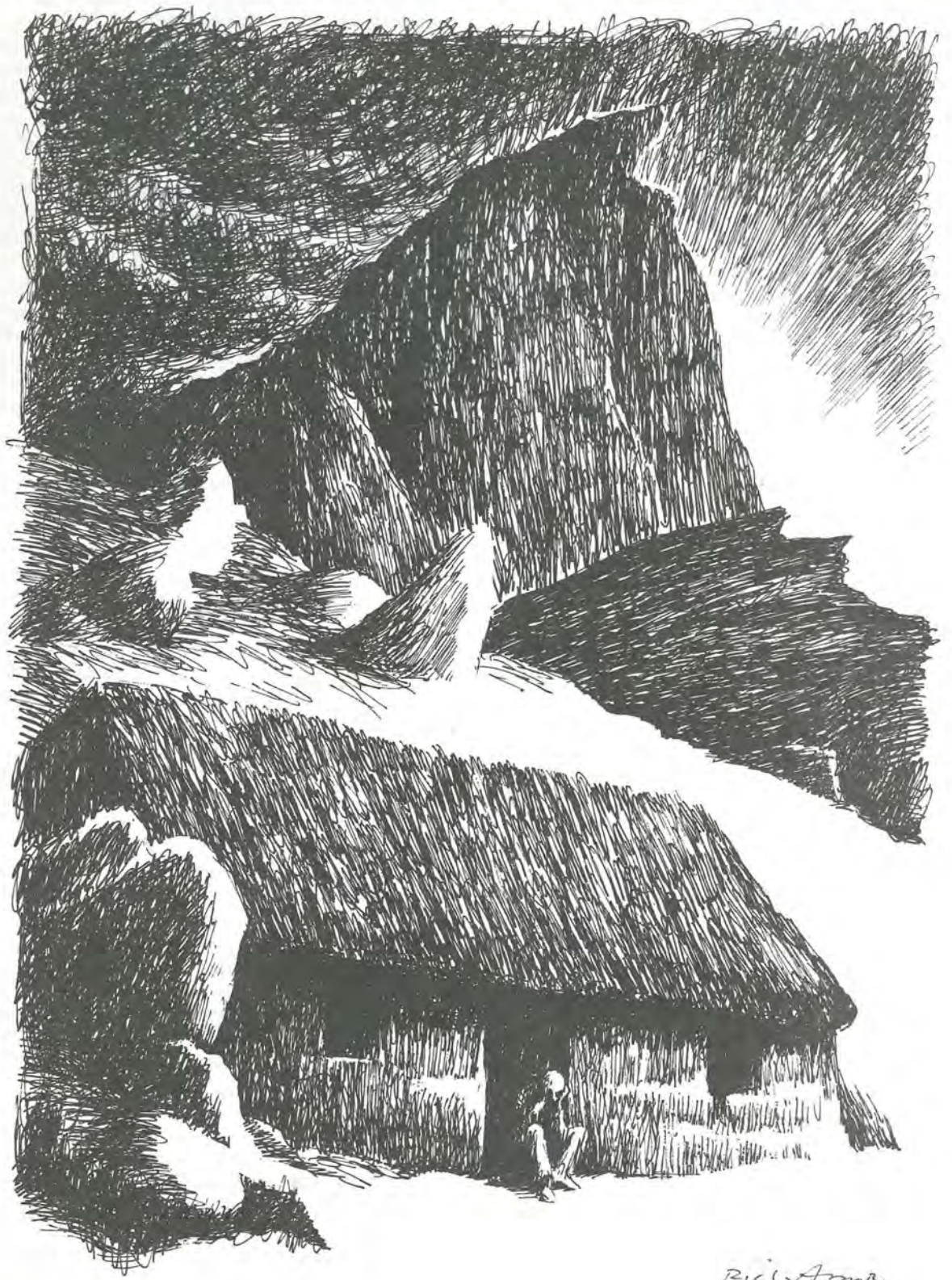
the wall

the door

the hills and valleys, stones and glass, fires and hearths, they have collapsed into the one dwelling.

Home

I see the walls as sheer like the sides of Slieve-more or the cliffs of Blacksod Bay. It's built of the stone of Croagh Patrick, and the shipwreck rocks



*Rich. Amor*

of Clare Island, and the cairn at Ballymacgibbon, and the ruin of St Brendan's monastery. Its roof's the turf from Achill Island. The door belongs to Rosserk Abbey, there's a cornerstone from the Carrowkilleen tomb. A window glints from the tower at Castlecarra and moss from Killogeary smears the step as the Owenduff river goes rolling by. There's gorse from Crossmollina while the stout stone fence stretches like the Wall of China from Cong to Castlebar. I seem to have the county all mixed up in my mind and instead of the house being a wee place, that fits six souls like sardines in their tin, it stretches across Lough Mask to Sruwaddacon Bay. A great paw over the land. Smack! It's weird – fate in Scotch Gaelic, another lick of our sliding Celt tongue.

I dwell. *Cónaim.*

You dwell. *Cónaióinn tú.*

He/she dwells. *Cónaióim sé/sí.*

We dwell. *Cónaimid.*

I do not move. *Ní bhogaim.*

I shall not move. *Ní bhogfaidh mé.*

It's night when the language awakes. Between quiet of evening and quiet of dawn it speaks to me, it does. It creeps towards me. And it says Pratees. I cannot look a potato in the eye. We ate them boiled, mashed, fried in lard, baked in coals, done in their jackets and with green mouldy faces instead of white. They had pimples and shoulders and little hairy toes. They were dirty and watery and tasted of mud. My father had a still, of course, where the pratees got turned into firewater-poteen. It was my first drink, cruel, powerful stuff. Burns the gullet. He swore he saw visions, by Mary! By the Mother of God! Our sainted Lady! I see her. There, by the hob, in her white and blue robes and her dear little feet on rosebuds and her crown gold like the sun. Get down on your knees and worship, you heathen scum! So down we would genuflect to the kettle and get a cuff to boot.

at me *agam*

at you *agat*

at him *aige*

at her *aice*

at us *againn*

Indoors. She was always, within. She who lit the fire in the morning. Who kept it going all the day and kept us warm when the wind blew, oh, it blew! Who crossed herself. Mother of memories. Flower of firelight. Holy stone. Who sang alone in the broken voice, *chandos*, the trademark of our county.

The singing woman, the haunted verses, the ban-shees cry

She

*Sidhe*, shee. A fairy, a goddess, a sacred place beneath the earth.

My mother told me...

"The merrow girls are so beautiful are they that any man will fall in love with them, despite their webbed feet, their green skin, and their curving scaly tails. One man, he took a merrow, *murríghach*, for his wife. He stole her sea-going cap and hid it in the well. She bore him children and cooked his supper and sang him songs, deep and wavy, until one day she found the cap and did steal away and long he waited and long he pined and never did she return. You cannot cut their tails off. They die!"

You can love the sea, as long as you do not live on it, so I found, unlike the girls of County Donegal who, on leaving home, kiss the waves with their lips.

We got pretty little gods, in Ireland, we got useless, mischievous partygoing folk. They get you drunk, they steal your child, your wife, your purse. If you sneeze, they steal your soul. If you walk alone the little people will come and play a game with you. They'll give you a hump on your back if you're not polite. They pull your ears and trip you up. They always know your name. If you walk out of your country. If you walk

Somewhere between Clew Bay and Killala I must have been bewitched. The county is not laid out flat like a map. The county will not be still. It moves, and hands arise from the Ballina road, a woman's hands, swollen from coldwater scrubbing, the work that numbs the bones, that stuns the joints, hands, purple, chillblained where a weathered gold ring sits like a high tide marker. Breaking the surface of wide Lough Conn are the fingers of a woman clenched in prayer, that plead with the air. And high in the hills of Nephin Beg, hands caress the fairy rath as if the very earth itself cannot bear sacrilege. Forgetfulness

I try to keep it still and flatten down the past, so I can read it, straight, so I can see

The road to Ballina

Pointing north, touching home

A skeleton hand, a living thing, white across the county for there's a place on the island of Inishglora where the nails and the hair of the dead grow just like they're alive

This country, my mother,

This mother, my home

I must sleep now. I must stop

Remembering...all disconnected...a writing that starts to tell its own tale in Gaelic, then English, some crazytalk as if there is a

language inside language

a memory beneath memories

like a cave tunnelling deep, becoming  
greater than the mountain that contains it.

You must be careful how you say goodbye. Casual farewells can have the greatest consequences. There was a thunderstorm that day, we grow them like roses in County Mayo. They bloom in fury and turn off the lights and no human voice can be heard. You sit in the dark and you wait. And when it ended I rose, and took what I had, and left. I never made a plan. The boats at sixteen. It was a stupid act to join the Navy so young. But I had to go – somewhere. Too cold where I was. Too cold in the winter and the tight black corner where the spider sits and weaves in the gloom and broods. In the house where the bed is a cot and the floor is a stone with slippery moss and you hop and hop in your toe-torn sock, and the smoke pours out like bad breath and the window is the sun's sole joy. In that defenceless place I had no strength. I would not be my father's man, brute bully boy bragger, he was the despot of small children and drowning kittens, the voice of a Mayo village cursing its poor bloody history, its long foul tale of betrayal and revenge, the sound of its farting disgust. I would not tell that story. He was Ireland's folly all in one body. I shut the door, I stepped onto the road. Away from him.

I am the sort of fellow who likes to know where he is, always. Particulars, the details. The latitude, the point, the degree. That's what the Navy taught me, what school never did, an attention to detail. It's a kind of humility, a virtue in itself. It's how you earn rewards at sea. Didn't matter what the job was, as long as I could do it well.

Your life has been to break with such conventions. There was your job in the library. "The routine was mindless" – but you earned a decent wage and managed to write your first book. There's a certain work you don't take seriously. This is the romantic in you. You see a person as being the same as their job when it's what they do because they must. Being "stuck in the library" defined you, but what were you stuck with? A lot of your sadness comes from being apart from ordinary pleasures. It's why I'm glad you've got the garden. Don't treat it as a symbol. Let the harvest bring you money. After all, you've said it yourself, there's no money to be made in writing. I think you can do anything you set your mind to but, doubting yourself, life's currents don't flow easily around you.

I did not invent your aloneness. Whatever world you created when you were young must have been more powerful than any man-made one. You have made a life out of returning to it. It is a difficult journey, though I have never known you to describe it in that way, or to complain about the task. Did you fear I would not understand you and there would exist another gulf between us?

I believe you will write a new book. Perhaps without me to bother you, even more quickly! Since writing these notes I feel I can better follow you. The path you walked was a mystery, even loving books, and loving you, I could not accompany you there. I am not saying I resented your writing or the places it took you but I read you clearer now, spending time myself in a written world.

The card I sent was insubstantial. I don't belong. I don't belong to you. That's what it said.

QUEENSLAND has given Australia more than its share of environmental controversies. The federal government has intervened five times – more than in any other State or Territory. But while the resolution of these disputes has always lain principally in the political arena, the courts have also played a significant role. Apart from determining the scope for federal intervention, they have helped to define the way in which resources are allocated, the rights of conservationists to participate in these decisions and the legal consequences of environmental protest. As much as the law has been a tool of conservationists, it has been a weapon used against them. For some – particularly John Sinclair of the Fraser Island Defence Organisation – the cost has been extraordinarily high.

The clearest illustration of these uses of the law is sandmining on Fraser Island – an issue which first seized national attention in May 1975. Miners then had one-tenth of the island under lease, including nearly all its east coast. The American-owned Dillingham Mining Company held twelve thousand hectares in partnership with the Australian Murphys. Another American company, Queensland Titanium, held one thousand hectares. But even though the first of these leases had been granted in 1950, mining on a large scale was only about to start. Dillingham had imported five giant bulldozers, cut a new road across the island and built a plant to separate rutile, zircon and ilmenite from the island's non-mineralised sands. By the end of the month, it planned to be mining some of the island's highest dunes around Lake Boemingen.

Dillingham's problem was that Fraser Island is rich in more than mineral sands. Not only is it the world's largest sand island but its sands descend at least thirty metres below sea-level before bedrock starts and it contains the greatest number of independent dune systems in the world. The foredunes of the east coast are the site of several large Aboriginal middens – some extending over almost 1.5 square kilometres. The island's vegetation ranges from heaths to rainforests,

all the more extraordinary because they grow out of sand. The island's hydrology is no less unusual. In all there are sixty freshwater lakes – some perched on a near impermeable layer of sand; others 'windows' into the watertable. One, Lake Boemingen, is the largest perched lake in the world.

Because the State government of Joh Bjelke-Petersen wanted mining to proceed, conservationists had three options. One was to persuade the Whitlam government in Canberra to refuse export permits until the environmental consequences of mining the island had been properly investigated. This refusal would not stop mining directly since the companies would remain entitled to exercise the rights granted to them by the Queensland government. But it would have the same effect because almost all mineral sands were processed overseas. Another possibility was to persuade unionists to impose a green ban. The third was to challenge mining in the courts.

The first option should have been easy since federal Cabinet had decided to require impact statements for all proposals with significant environmental consequences and the Commonwealth parliament had enacted legislation providing for both impact statements and environmental inquiries. But just four days before this legislation came into force, Whitlam and his Minister for Minerals and Energy, Rex Connor, had secretly approved Dillingham's export contracts. A green ban to stop Dillingham's bulldozers reaching the island had already been tried by the Queensland Trades and Labour Council and failed when the company had shipped them direct from Sydney where no ban was in force. To win in the courts the conservationists not only had to overcome the financial obstacles to litigation and the notorious requirement of 'standing' but also find a legal basis for stopping the mining.

The conservationists' main ally in Canberra was Moss Cass, Minister for the Environment. After failing to persuade Rex Connor to suspend his decision until an inquiry into the island reported, Cass took

the matter to Caucus on 13 May. Whitlam was present; Connor absent through illness. On a vote taken on the voices, Caucus unanimously agreed not to grant any export permits until the inquiry reported. This decision ordinarily would have been final: the Parliamentary Labor Party would have imposed its will on a minister (and prime minister) who had ignored party policy. But six days later Connor bludgeoned support from a majority of Cabinet by threatening to resign. When Caucus met the following day, Whitlam used his authority as Prime Minister to win support for Connor. Even so, the vote was 43 to 42 in Cass's favor on one count; 43 to 43 on another. Rather than recount, Caucus voted again, upholding Cabinet's decision 42 to 41.

When the Queensland Trades and Labour Council met over the following two days, it decided to ban mining. But most of the unions which supported this



decision had already completed building Dillingham's new plant. The ban was not supported by the Australian Workers Union whose members would undertake the mining. Still the TLC hoped that, if mining proceeded, its maritime members would stop shipment of minerals from the island. The TLC looked for support from the Australian Council of Trade Unions. But just three members of its executive supported an unqualified ban on mining. Only eight, with seven dissents, supported a ban so long as suitable alternative employment was found for the sandmining workers. This condition meant no ban.

Finally the High Court assumed centre stage when it heard a case brought by the Fraser Island Defence Organisation – the first decided by the court involving an environmental dispute of national interest. Rather than trying to stop Dillingham's operations directly, this action challenged a recommendation by the Maryborough Mining Warden that the State government grant Queensland Titanium four new leases. But it indirectly raised questions about the legality of all leases on the island, including those of Dillingham. Whereas the three judges who had heard the case in the Queensland Supreme Court unanimously dis-

missed the conservationists' arguments, all five justices on the High Court upheld their challenge.

Fraser Island would never have become such a divisive issue – the island would simply have been mined – had it not been for the Fraser Island Defence Organisation, one of numerous conservation groups formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Australians became increasingly concerned about their environment. When Murphysores and Queensland Titanium applied for new leases over the island in January 1971, the members of three existing groups in Hervey Bay, Maryborough and Bundaberg decided to establish a new organisation devoted to the island. In February 1971 they formed FIDO with a logo of a bulldog wearing a spiked collar stepping out from the Queensland coast to Fraser Island. None of FIDO's officers was paid for their work. Most of its small budget came from conducting tours of the island and the subscriptions and donations of its members who mainly lived outside the region. In 1971 they numbered two hundred and fifty; by 1975 there were five hundred and fifty; a year later there were seven hundred and fifty.

The key figure in FIDO was John Sinclair – one of many political conservatives radicalised by their concern for the environment. Born in 1940 in Maryborough, Sinclair left school at fifteen to become a grease monkey in his father's garage. But after a year he persuaded his family to let him study for a diploma at the Queensland Agricultural College in Gatton. Had he been successful in a land ballot, Sinclair would probably have taken up a lease in the brigalow belt, enjoying a loan from the State government to clear the land. Instead Sinclair returned to Maryborough where he worked for the Department of Education as the district organiser of Young Farmers and studied by correspondence for a degree in economics from the University of Queensland.

Sinclair's family had strong connections with Fraser Island. His parents had honeymooned on the island and talked to him about it from when he was a small boy. When he first went there in 1955, the island lived up to his "almost mythical expectations". Eight years later, when he returned to work in Maryborough, the island was one of the first places he went with his wife Helen. In 1967 Sinclair became foundation secretary of the Maryborough Field Naturalists Club. In 1968 he was instrumental in turning this group into a branch of Queensland's Wildlife Preservation Society as he realised that he was more interested in protecting the bush than studying it. Two years later his opposition to sandmining at nearby Cooloola prompted him to quit the Country Party which he had served as president of its Maryborough branch and a member of the State Central Committee. In 1971 he became FIDO's first president.

Sinclair's most important forum for opposing mining was the local warden's court – a tribunal which, despite its name, not only decided questions of law but also advised government on questions of policy. Sinclair's regular appearances before the warden and less frequent challenges in the Supreme Court tested whether decision-making processes and legal structures accustomed only to developers and government could respond to the demands of concerned members of the public. During the 1970s, his cases provided one of the most important measures of the individual's right to take part in environmental decision-making, the extent to which the courts are open to ordinary members of the public, and the willingness of the courts to review environmental decisions made by government. In addition, he tested the law's protection of conservationists who persist in opposing industry and government – revealing the failure of the law to serve as a shield against intimidation and victimisation.

FIDO's first foray into the Warden's Court was in May 1971, to oppose applications from Dillinghams and Murphyores for two new mining leases covering 3,400 hectares, including the high dunes bordering Lake Boemingen. While FIDO briefed a Brisbane barrister, Lew Wyvill, who had already acted for conservationists opposed to sandmining at Cooloola, the miners were represented by a Queen's Counsel. In total the hearing lasted fourteen days with each side calling eleven witnesses. Apart from Sinclair, FIDO relied primarily on academics. Its witnesses included two geographers, an anthropologist and an economist. Dillingham relied on its own officers and consultants supported by representatives of the local tourist industry and chamber of commerce.

At the Warden's insistence, the conservationists gave evidence first, as if the onus was on them to show why the leases should not be granted. Rather than oppose all mining on the island, FIDO argued that no further decisions should be made about its land use until it had been the subject of a comprehensive survey by a team of independent experts. This argument was partly an attempt to turn a weakness in FIDO's case into a strength. Some of FIDO's witnesses had not even visited the island. Apart from Sinclair, none had been there longer than a week. But this argument also reflected the state of ignorance about the island which made informed decision-making about its use impossible. An interdepartmental committee established by the government to examine the island had spent less than two days there and included neither a botanist, zoologist or ecologist.

Dillingham's case was even less specific than that of FIDO. The company produced no evidence of the

extent of minerals in one of the leases and little evidence for the other. It also admitted that it had not yet undertaken any detailed feasibility studies and so had made no plans for roads, wharves or loading facilities. But it claimed that mining would simply result in "a temporary set back to the [island's] natural beauty". Its local witnesses testified that mining would not only stimulate Maryborough's economy by providing employment but also promote tourism by bringing services to the island.

Just before the hearing concluded, FIDO had its one opportunity to rebut the company's evidence when it called its economist, Athol Fitzgibbons. The Warden had accepted that Fitzgibbons had to give his evidence last since otherwise he would know nothing about the amount of minerals which the company intended to mine or the nature of its operation. Because Dillingham's evidence was so uninformative, Fitzgibbons still had to put his case in general terms. He argued that the benefits for Australia from a largely foreign-owned venture, like that of Dillingham and Murphyores, amounted to little more than their taxes and royalties

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*"He argued that the benefits for Australia from a largely foreign-owned venture... were negligible."*

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which were negligible. Royalties were just one per cent of the value of production.

The Queensland government did not even wait for the Warden to assess this evidence. Four days before he reported, Bjelke-Petersen informed Sinclair that Cabinet had already decided what to do with Fraser Island. When the Mining Minister, Ron Camm, received the Warden's recommendation to allow mining, he refused to release his report – hardly a satisfactory conclusion to proceedings which, in effect, constituted a public inquiry. Although a small group of Liberal backbenchers repeated FIDO's call for a comprehensive survey, Cabinet decided to grant the leases while making a national park of a quarter of the island.

The government did not try to justify this figure: its interdepartmental committee fixed on it without rationalisation in a thirty-page report which the CSIRO's Len Webb declared "scandalous", superficial at best, fallacious at worst. But even this committee proposed that the national park should include a representative sample of the island's eco-systems, its most scenic areas and as much of the foreshore as possible, whereas the government confined the park to the

heathland in the island's north which the mining companies had already rejected as not worth mining. While Sinclair promptly declared this proposal a sham, the Premier did not wait to let opposition grow. On 24 June 1971, Queensland's Executive Council approved both the leases and the park.

While these decisions demonstrated that FIDO could expect little of the Warden's Court or the government, Sinclair persisted in objecting before the Warden as part of taking every opportunity to challenge the miners' plans. His first attempt concerned six leases which the Warden had recommended should be granted to Murphyores in 1966 and the government had approved but not issued at the company's request. The reason was that Murphyores and Dillingham preferred to work out their other deposits in Queensland and New South Wales before they began paying for their leases over Fraser Island. Every six months, the miners had sought exemptions from the labor and expenditure conditions included in these leases to ensure that they would work the resource. But when FIDO objected, the companies withdrew their application, claiming that their previous practice had been due to "overabundant caution".

When the Queensland government finally issued four of these leases in 1973, FIDO returned to the Warden's Court to oppose applications by Dillingham for exemptions from the labor and expenditure conditions. The result was some embarrassment for the company — for example, when Sinclair forced it to admit that it had been conducting a feasibility study for just a fortnight, not five months as it claimed. Yet the Warden still recommended the company receive its exemptions and the government duly followed his advice. As the cases persisted, the company stopped calling its executives and relied simply on its engineer and local agent. According to FIDO, the Warden also showed increasing disregard for the evidence. When the parties returned from lunch on the second day of the third case, both sides were yet to present their concluding addresses but the Warden had already written his report recommending the exemptions.

These cases explain the behavior of FIDO and Queensland Titanium in June 1974 when the company's application for four new mining leases around Bogimbah Creek came on for hearing. Although FIDO considered the Warden's Court a "farce", it was still intent on using the court to present its strongest case against mining. But the sandminers' repeated successes, regardless of their evidence, encouraged Queensland Titanium to ignore the proceedings. In the unlikely event that the Warden rejected its application, the company could be confident that Ron Camm would give it everything it wanted despite the environmental consequences.

The hearing began with Queensland Titanium seeking an adjournment even though it had initiated the case. When the Warden refused, the company withdrew so that FIDO had the court to itself. For the next two days it called eleven witnesses, including a botanist, economist, engineer and tourist operator, who testified about the benefits of preservation, the hazards of mining and the need for an independent inquiry into the island. Then Queensland Titanium returned and called just one of its prospecting superintendents and an ecologist. The superintendent identified only twenty-four of the four hundred and seventy hectares covered by the company's four applications as worth mining. The ecologist tried to explain away the failure of the company's attempts to repair the island after mining. It was usual, he claimed, to see a poor response in the first few years of rehabilitation.

Things began to go wrong for Queensland Titanium when the Warden reported. The reason was not his findings: as ever, his recommendations favored the company. The problem was that he published his reasons. In a short statement, he acknowledged that the State's Mining Regulations required him to find against Queensland Titanium if the leases would prejudice the public interest. But he ignored Queensland Titanium's failure to show that the areas covered by its application were worth mining, while rejecting FIDO's evidence because it simply represented "the views of a section of the public", not "the public interest as a whole".

Even without legal aid, Sinclair would have challenged these reasons in the Supreme Court. A grant of eighty per cent of his costs from the Commonwealth took him to the High Court. Whereas the Supreme Court held that it was sufficient that the Warden had considered some version of the "public interest", whether correct or not, the High Court examined whether the Warden had been justified in dismissing FIDO's environmental concerns. Because of the strength of FIDO's arguments, Sir Ninian Stephen found it difficult to see how the Warden could have recommended in favor of Queensland Titanium even if each of the leases were worth mining. Since the company's own witness had admitted that two contained no worthwhile minerals, the Warden had clearly misunderstood his responsibility to weigh the benefits of mining against those of conservation.

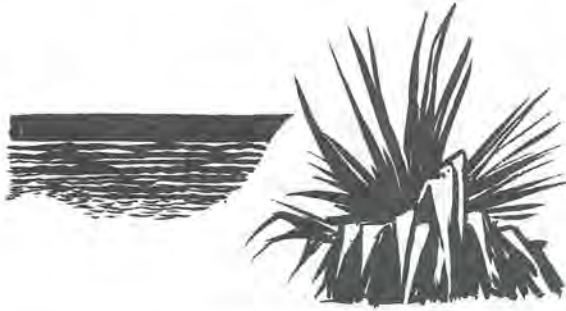
This decision prevented the Queensland government granting Queensland Titanium even greater rights over the island. Instead the company had to reapply for the four leases at Bogimbah Creek. Although it eventually did so in October 1975, it then deferred this application and abandoned it in December 1977. Elsewhere the High Court's decision worked to the detriment of conservationists in the short term



as Wardens stopped publishing their reasons to lessen the likelihood of further legal challenges. Despite criticism in Parliament, the Minister for Mines also refused to release their reports so that he could endorse or disregard them at will.

Queensland Titanium did not immediately renew its application because Moss Cass had persisted in establishing an inquiry into the island despite losing to Rex Connor over the export licences. This inquiry – the first under the Commonwealth's Environment Protection Act – was conducted by two senior federal public servants assisted by four expert advisers. While Queensland Titanium and FIDO participated in the hearings, Murphyores went to the High Court. After instituting one challenge which prompted the Commonwealth to redefine the inquiry's terms of reference, it instituted another unsuccessfully challenging the constitutional validity of the Commonwealth's actions. Meanwhile Murphyores joined the State government in boycotting the inquiry.

This inquiry placed an even heavier burden on



FIDO than the proceedings in the Warden's Court, Supreme Court or High Court. A grant of \$5,000 from the federal Department of Environment enabled FIDO to employ a biologist to prepare a plan of management for the island. Another grant of legal aid allowed FIDO to employ Wyvill as its counsel while the Commission took evidence. But Sinclair had to use his long service leave to co-ordinate FIDO's case. As its expenses mounted, one of Sinclair's refrains became "FIDO needs feeding". Among those who responded was Patrick White, who had already set *The Eye of the Storm* on the island and was writing *A Fringe of Leaves* which he also set there. In July he sent Sinclair \$1,000.

When the Commission reported in October 1976, the scope and substance of its investigations provided a stark contrast with those of the Queensland government's interdepartmental committee and Mining Warden. While not without the slips found in any 250-page document, the Commission's report rested on a close examination of the island's natural and human

environment, a careful analysis of the significance of this environment, and a detailed consideration of the environmental and economic consequences of mining. Above all, the Commission provided reasoned conclusions, not unsubstantiated claims.

The Commission's confirmed FIDO's claims in all major respects. It found that Fraser Island was not just of national but of international environmental significance and that mining of the high dunes around Lake Boemingen begun by Dillingham in May 1975 would "involve major permanent and irreversible environmental harm to the landscape, vegetation and lakes of the island, and consequently, substantially damage its value to the Australian people". The risk was hardly less for the rest of the island. Even the eastern beaches north of Indian Head could not be mined without significant environmental harm because the sandminers would have to construct a road through the existing national park, violating its integrity. While cessation of mining would adversely affect the regional economy, the cost to Australia as a nation would probably be under \$5 million a year, less than 0.01 per cent of national income.

Rather than making dozens of recommendations hedged by qualifications, the Commission kept its conclusions simple to increase their chance of implementation. Its most important recommendation was that the Commonwealth refuse export permits except for mineral sands extracted below high water mark from the island's east coast south of Indian Head – an area which, the Commission implicitly recognised, might not be profitable to mine. Its second recommendation was that the Commonwealth provide economic assistance to compensate the region for loss of employment and income resulting from the ban on mining. Finally, it recommended that the Australian Heritage Commission include the entire island on the register of the National Estate.

The new Liberal-Country Party government in Canberra adopted all these recommendations. Within a week of the Commission reporting, the government announced that the miners would have just eight weeks to pursue their existing operations since, apart from the beach south of Indian Head, it would only grant export licences for mineral sands extracted before the end of 1976. The government also announced that it would give Queensland \$10 million to provide employment in the Maryborough region. The Heritage Commission made Fraser Island the first place on the National Estate.

These decisions were uncontroversial as a matter of law. When the High Court dismissed the second case brought by Murphyores, it applied settled constitutional principles, holding that the Commonwealth's unfettered power over exports allowed it to refuse

export licences on any basis it liked, including environmental grounds. But politically the government's decisions were more remarkable because Malcolm Fraser was otherwise committed to reversing Whitlam's centralisation of power in Canberra. By implementing the inquiry's recommendations, the new government became the first federal administration to stop a major resource project in one of the States on environmental grounds. It also became the first Australian government to give such precedence to environmental concerns that it shut down a mining project in full production. Not least, it became the first to provide compensation to those affected by its decision.

These decisions surprised both conservation groups and the mining industry, most of whom had expected mining to continue for several years. Possibly the government was influenced by the glut of mineral sands which had forced the world price down to one-third of its 1974 levels, jeopardising the new Western Australian sandmining industry. Fraser may also have wanted a sop to environmentalists as his government moved towards allowing mining of uranium at Ranger in the Northern Territory. But Fraser also had a genuine commitment to environmental protection, serving as one of the first councillors of the Australian Conservation Foundation in 1965. Luckily for conservationists, the strongest advocate of resource development in Canberra – the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Country Party, Doug Anthony – was in hospital when the decision was taken.

Whatever the reasons, the government's decision was a remarkable triumph for John Sinclair whose family had been ostracised and vilified in Maryborough because of his stance: his wife had received threatening phone calls; his children's bicycle tyres had been slashed; Sinclair himself had been booed when he led his scout troop into the ring at the Maryborough show. On 14 December the *Australian* published its first letter nominating Sinclair as "Australian of the Year". A week later, it published another from Patrick White. Then came one from Judith Wright. On New Year's Day, the *Australian* accepted their judgement. Two years after selecting Joh Bjelke-Petersen on account of his "undistinguished" but "singular impact ... on national political life", the newspaper honored Sinclair with the same award. According to the *Australian*, Sinclair's great achievement was to have demonstrated that "the little man, the ordinary bloke, could stand up and fight for his beliefs". He had shown that "the individual was still a force in our society".

FIDO's campaign against mining did not end there, however, because the Country Party and the Australian Mining Industry Council worked to overturn the Federal government's decision, while Dillingham

demanded \$23 million compensation. When Dillingham rejected the Commonwealth's offer of \$4 million and threatened to sue, Sinclair decided to challenge the company's leases. FIDO had to fund this litigation itself as Fraser had transferred control of legal aid to the States and the Queensland government refused to assist conservation groups. But Lew Wyvill thought it worth the risk. His argument was that the Warden had failed to have proper regard to the public interest when recommending that these leases be granted. If the leases therefore were invalid, the company's claims to compensation would collapse.

FIDO was unable to get the Supreme Court to consider this argument. Because the Queensland Attorney-General refused to give FIDO his fiat or special permission to initiate proceedings, Sinclair had to bring the action in his own right and Justice Sheahan held he was not entitled to do so and awarded costs against him of \$2,500. The problem was that Sinclair had not been an objector before the Warden as in his earlier litigation. According to the judge, neither Sinclair's position as a resident of Maryborough nor his presidency of FIDO gave him "any



greater standing or interest in the matter in the legal sense than any other citizen". That Sinclair had spent both time and money trying to ensure that the labor conditions in these leases were complied with, and that any exemptions granted were justified, was "irrelevant" since all his work had been "voluntary".

The Federal government's decision against mining also left Sinclair ensnared in a defamation action brought by Murphyores. Sinclair's criticisms of the mining companies had always been hard-hitting. But he blundered in the twenty-fifth issue of FIDO's newsletter *Moonbi*, which the *Hervey Bay News* published as a supplement in August 1975. Sinclair's mistake was to publish allegations he had made to the Commission of Inquiry that Murphyores and Dillingham had corruptly obtained their leases and export licences. Because he had made these claims before the Commission, Sinclair believed that they would be privileged when he published them in *Moonbi*, identifying

them as coming from the inquiry's transcript of evidence. In fact, he only enjoyed this privilege when before the inquiry.

Had Sinclair only had himself to think of, he might have contested the proceedings. But Murphyores had also sued the Hervey Bay Publishing Company for publishing his accusations. Sinclair was also only too aware that the litigation was diverting him from more pressing work to protect the island. Three days before the case was due to begin in the Queensland Supreme Court, the parties settled. Sinclair publicly apologised, met Murphyores' costs and agreed to pay the company an unspecified sum as damages.

Sinclair, meanwhile, was unable to use the law to defend his reputation from unwarranted attack within the Queensland Parliament. In November 1975 Country Party members had begun questioning how Sinclair could devote so much time to FIDO and yet perform his work as an adult education officer. The Minister for Education's reply was always the same. The Department's records showed that Sinclair worked the required number of hours. When he devoted whole days to FIDO, he usually took time off in lieu of overtime. But, under parliamentary privilege, Country Party politicians vilified Sinclair, declaring that he was "abusing" his position as an Adult Education Officer and maligning Maryborough with a "great torrent of lies, distortions, insults, abuse and criticism".

When Bjelke-Petersen made similar remarks to the *Australian* in January 1977 as part of criticising its selection of Sinclair as "Australian of the Year", Sinclair sued. One reason was to protect his reputation. Another was to show that the law of defamation was available to conservationists as well as developers. Although Bjelke-Petersen admitted the inaccuracy of his statements, Queensland legislation also required Sinclair to show that the Premier had not made his remarks in good faith. Justice Lucas held that Bjelke-Petersen could not reasonably have believed what he said since he had known that Sinclair had done the work required of him by the Department. However, the Full Court decided that the only question was whether the Premier had believed what he had said (rather than whether this belief was reasonable). Since Sinclair had failed to show that Bjelke-Petersen was acting out of malice, his case failed.

For Sinclair, the worst aspect of this defeat was that Bjelke-Petersen pursued him for his costs even though he had not incurred any personal liability because Cabinet had agreed to indemnify him if he lost. The government began by garnisheeing his wages, taking \$50 a week which simply covered the interest on the original debt. Then, in August 1987, it served him with

a bankruptcy notice. But the result was not what it intended. In response to a program on the ABC's *Seven Thirty Report*, Sinclair received 2,000 letters of support and \$63,000, twice his debt. In November Sinclair sent the Queensland government the balance of what he owed. He divided the remainder between, for once, paying his own lawyers and a trust fund for the conservation of Fraser Island.

Such belated public support could not help Sinclair against victimisation in the Education Department: a fate suffered by many public servants who opposed the National Party on any issue. When Sinclair returned from taking long service leave in the United States in August 1977, he found that the government had replaced his position as adult education officer in Maryborough with another in Bundaberg, one hundred kilometres north. While the government claimed this decision was simply part of its program to integrate adult education into technical and further education, it was no co-incidence that Sinclair's solicitor had just issued his writ against Bjelke-Petersen for defamation and that Sinclair's absence



prevented him from applying for the new post. As it was, Sinclair found himself seconded to an administrative/research position in Brisbane.

A year later Sinclair won a promotion to the position of officer in charge of adult education in Ipswich where he was responsible for the largest adult education program in the State. But in 1982 the government ordered him back to the Department's Curriculum Branch in Brisbane even though he lacked appropriate qualifications and had not applied for the position. Finally, in 1986, with his marriage and family life in ruins, a further sequence of unsolicited transfers prompted Sinclair to resign. Although it meant sacrificing his seniority, job security and superannuation, he went to Sydney where he was out of work for more than six months. From there, he continued to run FIDO and publish *Moonbi*. In his words, he was a "political refugee".

By then, mining on the island was hardly an issue. After invoking the assistance of the United States government and threatening to take its case to the

international court, Dillingham had finally accepted the Commonwealth's offer of \$4 million which inflation had reduced to half its original value. Murphyores retained the former partnership's leases but the Queensland government had given it a permanent exemption from its labor conditions so it did not have to resort to the Warden's Court. Queensland Titanium had relinquished its leases after receiving compensation of \$500,000. The focus of debate over the island had switched to logging and tourist developments which had again prompted FIDO to lodge objections under Queensland's planning legislation and resort to the courts.

FIDO continued to pursue these processes because its campaign against sand-mining had demonstrated that, for all their deficiencies, they could be effective. While FIDO had never won in the Warden's Court, these proceedings had enabled Sinclair to confront the sandminers and publicly press FIDO's case for conservation. Although the Supreme Court had not considered the merits of his arguments in one case and his defeat in another had left him deep in debt, Sinclair's victory in the High Court had helped to preserve part

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*"Sinclair's victory in the High Court ...demonstrated that even a small environmental organisation... could represent the public interest."*

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of the island from mining leases and demonstrated that even a small environmental organisation like FIDO could represent the public interest. Above all, FIDO had persuaded the Commonwealth's Commission of Inquiry to give Fraser the justification he needed to intervene in the affairs of another Country Party-Liberal government. Because of this federal intervention, mining had stopped in December 1976. Without Sinclair's tenacity in all these forums, it almost certainly would have continued.

*Tim Bonyhady is the author of Burke and Wills: from Melbourne to Myth (David Ell Press, 1991). This is an excerpt from his Places Worth Keeping: Conservationists, Politics and Law to be published next year by Allen & Unwin. End notes have been omitted here. Full references will appear in the book.*



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WENDY LOWENSTEIN

## It's My Time Mister, And My Price

I've got nothing, nothing but time,  
And every minute of it's mine.  
My time is precious, it's all I've got,  
And I might sell it and I might not.

Everyone sells something, well time's my stock,  
I sell hours by the clock.  
Time once gone won't come twice,  
It's my time, Mister, and my price.

**D**ON HENDERSON ran out of time at the age of 54. A prolific songwriter and poet in the vernacular tradition, he wrote some of the best-known and most widely performed songs of the Australian folk revival, songs like 'Put a Light in Every Country Window', 'The Basic Wage Dream', 'Ton of Steel', 'Bottle of Wine', 'Fourteen Million People', 'When I Grow Up', 'Going Home' and 'Legend'.

Although firmly set in the Australian tradition, Henderson was well aware of its limitations. "Three quarters of Australians live in the city. Three quarters of [folk] songs come from the bush. The past is alive and well in every folk club in Australia", he joked.

He described himself variously as a guitar maker and song writer. I wrote in *Australian Tradition* (September, 1971) that he was a full-time individualist, a craftsman, an all-Australian casual bloke, a cynic, a romanticist, and a militant anti-establishment man. But I left out the important bit. At his best, Henderson was a charismatic performer, and as a performer he was greatest, not on stage, but sitting at the kitchen table, surrounded by friends and folkies, with a flagon of red, a guitar and an entranced audience – singing, philosophising, telling yarns. When the crowd was in the hollow of his hand, he'd pick up his guitar and try out his latest song.

One such gathering I remember well. Don went into his workshop. His instruments were beautiful. Returning with his latest, a dulcimer he'd made for

a friend, he slipped it out of its linen bag onto the table for us all to admire. And its front was smashed in! The instrument maker and the company of musicians were stunned, horrified. "What the fuck's happened? Who did that?" A small voice (mine) said, "I did! I dropped my tape recorder on it a few minutes ago. I was going to tell you afterwards. I'll..." Mateship asserted itself. "It's all right", he said casually, swept the mangled thing into its bag, picked up his guitar, and went on singing. The dulcimer was rebuilt, and nothing else ever said. No apologies needed or allowed.

Hillbilly singer Tex Morton, and Don Henderson's friend Geoff Wills, seaman, singer and communist, both influenced Henderson's song-writing. In a recorded interview for the National Library, he told Edgar Waters that as a child he heard Tex Morton "...there among the sweat and dust was this man with a guitar singing about the life he lived...lived as a showman...and I tried to pursue that line of music...to get the reality of what I saw about me, the same way as he was doing it". Waters wrote:

His early songs were in the style he learned from Tex Morton. The style of the songs changed somewhat as he learned more about other traditions of song, especially the bush folk song tradition. There were times when he thought it would be nice to win a country music award at Tamworth, even to write a pop song which would make him a million dollars. He wasn't in the race. He could never stop trying to get the reality of what he saw about him into his songs: the hillbilly songs of a thinking man.

Words were his forte. These are not songs as much as poems with a tune thrown in, a delight of off-beat social and personal comment, militant trade union politics and warmly sentimental pieces about life, kids, love, sex and social responsibility,

ironic, understated. The words are the thing. Often the tune succeeds, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes no-one but the author could ever sing it.

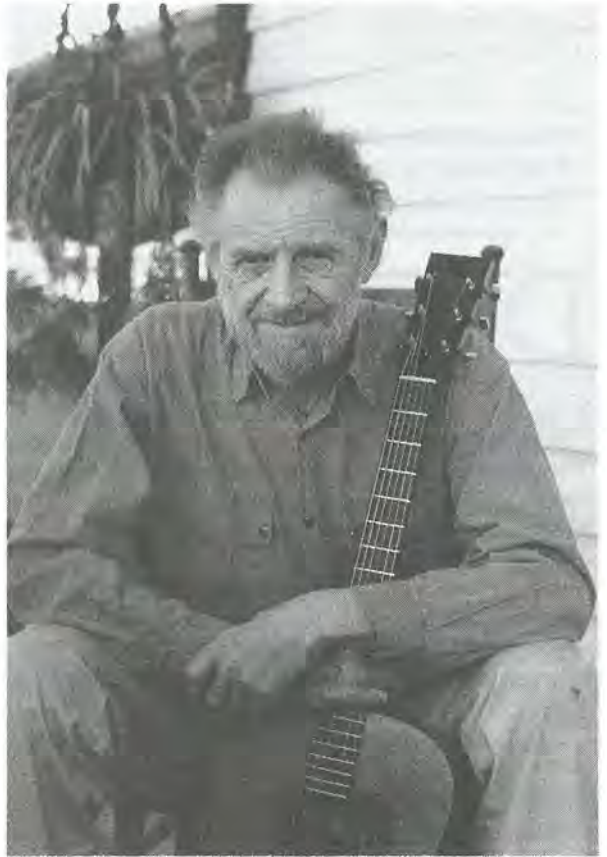
Craig McGregor calls them "plain songs, plain man's songs". I'm not so sure. They are rough hewn certainly, down to earth, full of variety, off-beat ironic humor, wide ranging, full of humanity and occasional brilliant lines. But Henderson himself was far from being a plain man.

We first met in Sydney in 1966 and were friends ever since. He was then 29 years old, imposing, young, tall and solid, with red hair and beard, a gravelly voice, self-assertive in an offhand way – an entertainer and raconteur, with the hands of a worker, and an easy and immediate rapport with a new person, a new audience. In his spacious front room of a run-down Kings Cross terrace house, there was a workbench, a couple of chairs, a bed and wardrobe and a flagon of red. The bench, designed to fit neatly into his panel van, was the only furniture he'd take with him when he went. Add a pencil drawing of his mate, Tom O'Flynn, a leather apron, and some carpenter's tools to his guitar and the few clothes in the wardrobe, and one had seen all his worldly goods. He talked and sang his songs all day while we drank our way through the flagon. I remember a host of throwaway lines. At some stage I turned on my tape recorder. Now and then he'd vanish and return with bread and cheese or more grog. "Right now", he explained, "I'm living on ten pounds a week, eight quid for grog, two pounds for food. I think that's reasonable, don't you?" So persuasive was he, that I found myself in agreement, before doing a double somersault and landing back on my feet shrieking, "You're kidding. Two quid!" But he wasn't kidding too much, and the two quid a week householder, turned out a great meal of Mexican beans. Then he strained the budget by adding an omelette, but a respectable upper-middle-class upbringing dies hard, and that, despite the fact that people often compare him with Woody Guthrie, was one strand that helped to make this complex man.

Like John Manifold, the Communist poet, Don Henderson came from wealth. His family were practical engineers, and Henderson's Federal Springs was reported to be the largest family-owned company in Australia. Had young Henderson stayed in engineering, he could have expected to become 'management'. But he received confusing messages from his early life. The family lived in a big, posh house, but it was in the western suburbs close to the works. His father Harold, was managing director of Henderson's Springs, but held an AEU ticket all his life. He sent his son not to private

schools, but to the tech. When Henderson workers were on strike, the sons offered to work. The response was immediate. "You'll do nothing of the sort. No son of mine's going to be a scab!"

Eventually the young Henderson left home, went on the track, and started to get an education, to find out what side he was really on. He spent years travelling around Australia doing a variety of jobs to pay for board and bed. Never a member of any party, his strong and active sympathies were with working men and women. With Geoff Wills, he went to Mt Isa during the big strike of 1965, wrote several songs, including 'Isa', 'Who put W in AWU?' and 'Talking Mt Isa', which became part of the



struggle, sung at meetings, in pubs and picket lines. Indeed the two men and their songs became so much a part of the action that they were run out of town by the police.

They're free up in Mt Isa, I know that much  
because  
I sang a song of freedom there and  
the policeman said I was,  
He said, "Every dog has its day", I said  
"I know that much",

He said, "You've got three minutes, son",  
and looked down at his watch.

The early practical training in engineering stood him in good stead when he became a maker of fine musical instruments. His hands curved round a tool or a piece of timber, with an instinctive hereditary sympathy and knowledge, and he was proud that a set of carriage springs made by his great-grandfather was exhibited at Maldon Folk Museum.

He wrote many songs, some were widely sung, others I never heard except on his own records, or at our informal recording sessions. Gwenda Davey, reviewing his songbook *I Can Sing* (Horwitz, 1970) in *Australian Tradition*, (September 1970) said songs like 'MWS&DB' and 'Three Loves' needed "only a singer as talented as Declan Affley to raise them to the level of the agonisingly effective 'Rake and Rambling Man' which Declan recorded".

Some of this best songs, like 'MWS&DB', probably the only song to have been written about a sewerage authority, are about work and workers. As a once-upon-a-time digger of water board ditches, he could sing with authority:

My yard of sky, stay blue, stay dry  
Stay up there, stay wide and high,  
Stay my yard of sky.

Two fine songs little sung, are 'Wittencoom', and 'Tobacco Sale Blues'. The latter is the song of the tobacco farmer who "wouldn't care if the whole world had cancer/As long as I had my farm". Remarkably, it conveys both the small farmer's determined blindness to all but his own crop and his living, and enormous sympathy for the little man, who "can't sell my crop in the land I was born in".

I went to the sale, I heard the bidding,  
Went to the sale, I thought they were kidding,  
A little bit sold and a whole lot didn't,  
I won't have a farm.

Price fluctuates without any warning,  
Can't sell my crop in the land I was born in,  
All I've got is a cough in the morning,  
I won't have a farm.

I'm giving up this growing tobacco,  
I work day'n'night, I'm breaking my back, oh  
I'm going broke, I haven't a zack, oh  
I won't have a farm.

Long before the bitter legacy of Wittencoom's asbestos mines became known, Henderson wrote

'Wittencoom' about another union issue, but the lines are still valid:

Australian Blue Asbestos, don't you  
ever forget,  
That whatever you give is as good as you'll get,  
And remember, though the memory  
may be hard,  
That a miner is a man, not a number  
on a card.

Don Henderson's songbook and most of his records have been out of print for years. Edgar Waters and Sally Henderson are preparing a posthumous collection. Two records 'In My Time', sung by Henderson, and 'Flames of Discontent', which he produced for the Seamen's Union are available at International Bookshop, 17 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne 3000, or Union Records, (07) 396 0725.

He was often seen as an Australian Woody Guthrie, and like Guthrie his work is so close to folk sources "that it shares many of the real folk virtues", but he was no simple Australian bush bard, nor a working-class poet either. Don Henderson liked to think of himself as a rake and a rambling man and an anarchist. I think of him as an old-fashioned nationalist, but a city man, sentimental with radical overtones, into mateship, drinking, yarn spinning, smoking, lusting, and singing around kitchen tables; creating his own songs, poems and legends. There is much of Don Henderson, in his song 'Legend':

Leaves were falling, skies were overcast,  
And older now he dreads the winter each year  
more than last.  
The tools and the tent are loaded in the boot,  
On the back seat, boxes, blankets; just in case,  
one business suit.

While friends and neighbours gather the gate,  
And waving hands turned willing hands, push  
start the old V/8.

[chorus]  
And you know that the new day's  
gonna find him,  
Leaving more than time gone by behind him.  
He'll be standing on his shadow in the sun,  
On the road. On the road. On the run.

[bridge]  
Young bushwalkers find his camp and  
share his fire that night,  
He'll cook a meal, make pots of tea,

spin yarns till almost light.  
Elusive lodes, and lucky strikes, ships  
and tropic seas,  
Mounted men neath ostrich plumes,  
bullock teams and trees.  
He might recite "The Ladies", read a  
chapter from "Lord Jim",  
The hikers won't recall it all but they'll  
remember him.

Planning to get westward of Cooktown,  
The creeks ran high last season, will have  
washed some good gold down,  
But like as not, he won't get half that far,  
The weather's warm in Brisbane, stay a while  
and fix the car.  
Meet some woman, fall in love again,  
Then the monsoon will be coming and  
you can't get up north then.

[chorus]

[bridge]

The speculator, overhearing bar talk,  
plays a hunch,  
Presents his card and chats a while.  
Suggests they might have lunch.  
Though pleased at first, on being quizzed  
he's having second thoughts,  
But plied with booze, at last relents and  
shows a piece of quartz.

To the gambler's greed, it's chicken feed,

to the seeker's mill it's grist,  
While there's one born every minute son,  
they're too hard to resist.

Sitting round and we've cracked a can or two,  
The night is like a furnace and a change is  
overdue,  
When paper starts a-rustling in the street,  
The kids leave off their bickering,  
the dog gets to his feet,  
And he blows in with the south wind  
off the bay  
And it seems for all the world as if he's  
never been away.

And you know that the new day's  
gonna find him,  
Leaving more than time gone by behind him.  
He'll be standing on his shadow in the sun,  
On the road. On the road. On the run.

[coda]

Sur la terre. Sur la mer. Cherchant toujours.

"These are my songs. I have seen a few things  
and met a few people. I have tried to tell others  
about these things and these people because they are  
my life and no man wants his life to go for nothing."  
Don Henderson.

*Wendy Lowenstein was founder and editor of Australian  
Tradition, journal of the Folklore Society of Victoria.*

## floating fund

BARRETT REID writes: A happy new year to you say I, ducking your missiles about not responding quickly to your letters, books and manuscripts. And if it is a happy new year for *Overland*, in these dicey times, it will be because of the generosity of our readers. From late August to early November your donations totalled \$1,759.68. ALL DONATIONS OVER \$2 ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE. Specific thanks to:

\$951.68, Anon.; \$100, J.W., R.C.; \$80, G.S.; \$26, V.I.; \$24, J.E., D.R.N., M.E.V., J.F., C.G., N.Z., C.S.; \$22, G.B.; \$20, Anon., N.B., B.B.; \$14, P.H., A.S., J.L., A.W., R.S., J.B., E.D.; \$10, J.McK., D.D., J.G., R.D., R.J.H., D.H.; \$9, L.S.O., A.S.; \$5, A.McG., G.S., B.H.; \$4, K.P., R.A., E.W., M.M., F.J., D.&K.W., W.K., J.R., G.S., M.T., O.J., L.C., R.B., M.McL.; \$3, N.C.N.; \$2, D.W.



THE RHETORIC in favor of 'Asia-literacy' is so insistent today that it comes almost as a surprise to find how far we in Australia have come along that road. We are so used to abusing ourselves with protestations of inadequacy that it seems somehow unfashionable to salute success, but how else can one describe the recent exhibition at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra of 'The Age of Angkor'? Yet if this was a display of Cambodian sculpture, it was also a very Australian exhibition; there was more going on here than at first appeared.

This becomes clear if we compare 'The Age of Angkor' with another recent blockbuster exhibition, 'Rubens and the Italian Renaissance'. Visitors to exhibitions of this type generally position themselves along a continuum. At one extreme, an exhibition is iconic; it represents Art or Culture or even Civilisation. At the other, the objects form a text from which the viewer draws instruction or new understanding. The former assumes a capacity for participation, perhaps even a kind of cultural self-justification or moral uplift; the latter is based on an acknowledgment of the possibility of self-improvement, the recognition of insufficiency tempered by a willingness to learn. Both uses of an exhibition are valid and valuable, and they are usually found in some form of combination.

Learning and an openness to new artistic experience were clearly important to viewers of the Cambodian exhibition. Yet this does not fully account for the warm enthusiasm of its reception. Although we no longer have to follow the nineteenth century explorers in hacking a way through an actual jungle, for most of us as we seek to find out more about 'Asia', it is all too easy to be lost in the welter of new names and places, concepts and forms. The excitement of this exhibition was that the clarity of explanation and the sheer quality of the material allowed us to develop some appreciation of a new sensibility. Contact with 'the other' may not have been

complete or even accurate, but one had only to study fellow-visitors for a moment to see their careful attention. Today, very many Australians are willing to engage in this enterprise of exploration in several senses.

The bare facts were clear enough. Thirty-three items from the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh were brought to Canberra for two months in late 1992. They ranged in date from a sixth century statue of Krishna to an early thirteenth century carving of the Buddha calling the earth to witness. Some were large, like the bronze fragment of a reclining Vishnu, which must have been colossal in its original state, or the complete pediment of a temple from Banteay Srei. Others impressed by their power on even a small scale, such as the head of a Hindu ascetic or the wonderful bronze top to a military standard in which a monkey pointed the way forward with an outstretched foot. A bronze lotus leaf and bud, a fragment of a larger work, revealed a marvellous sinuosity of line while, in an adjoining case, the sandstone head of Jayavarman VII blended an expression of serene meditation when seen from the front with raw power in profile. It is an image that stays in the mind. The popular favorite of the show was undoubtedly the extraordinary delicate sandstone figure of the Buddhist goddess of wisdom in the form of a young girl. The technical assurance and visual quality of the pieces pose, in the most acute form, the question for historians of how was it all done, but our concern is with the exhibition's role and impact in modern Australia.

It helps that the technicalities of the display were superb. In the gallery, it very adequately filled the same three spaces, with the same burgundy walls, as the Rubens exhibition. As for Rubens, an introductory video complemented an excellent audio-tape, while a souvenir shop at the exit sold a substantial catalogue and a range of other books and mementos. Academic discussions and related

cultural events were arranged in the gallery's theatre. Techniques for making a feature of the self-contained exhibition within the gallery context are now well-practised.

All these common features invite comparisons between the two exhibitions and, to some extent, with others we have seen in Australia in recent years. In hard times, why not begin with the question of visitor numbers? Yet, if we do that, what is it that has to be explained – the hordes queuing to see Rubens and, a year or so ago, the 'Civilization' run-through of West Asian and Mediterranean antiquities – or the relatively pleasant viewing conditions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the Guggenheim collection and the bicentennial 'Terra Australis' exhibition? How many people should one expect? What are the limits of the 'market', however good the quality of the 'product'? What are the triggers that provoke the hordes? For the record, 'The Age of Angkor' seemed to me, over several visits, to be getting a very steady stream of custom and there would have been some discomfort with less room to view the items. Moreover, and this is very significant, I am told that there were many repeat visitors.

In case anyone is silly enough to count heads as a measure of more than monetary worth, let me offer the insidious thought that not all heads are the

same or, more exactly, and as has been already mentioned, that there is more than one use to which visitors put, or wish to put, an exhibition. Most visitors to 'Rubens and the Italian Renaissance' came anticipating Great Art. Rubens has, from his own day on, ranked among the Great Artists, even if just behind Michelangelo, Leonardo or Rembrandt, but it was a masterstroke to evoke in the same title the Great Cultural Moment of the Italian Renaissance. To arrange to visit this exhibition was to anticipate an exposure to quality or, to use a less passive metaphor, a participation in the grand tradition of Western Art. In a society which is still (rightly and happily) conscious of its European cultural bases, strong attendance was undoubtedly a sign of cultural vitality.

The irony is that the reality of the exhibition was rather different. While it included some superb paintings, not least from Australian collections, the dominant theme of the exhibition and its very scholarly catalogue was the demonstration of a point of art history; it explored the influence in his later work of the painting which the young Rubens saw, or might have seen, during his time in Italy. In this context, the rather mediocre quality of a few of the Italian paintings seemed positively enlightening and entirely appropriate.

Though the banners outside the gallery may have

*Exhibition installation showing Nandin the Bull, 7th century, and Standing Buddha, 7th century. Photograph by Richard Pedvin, courtesy Australian National Gallery*



seemed to extend the same promise, those coming to visit 'The Age of Angkor' had rather different expectations, at least as far as I could judge. The material was inescapably 'Asian', which signifies for many 'the other'. This is what we do not understand – but should! This is unfamiliar territory not just in the sense that relatively few Australians have

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*"The material was inescapably 'Asian'  
which signifies for many 'the other'.  
This is what we do not understand  
– but should!"*

---

been to Cambodia, but both the French colonial experience and the atrocities of the 1970s have located it beyond the bounds of that which is somehow in our own image. The anticipation for this exhibition was primarily that of learning.

There was also some call of obligation. Now, if ever, is the political moment and presumably it was no accident that a letter from Prince Norodom Sihanouk graced the entrance and that the Prime Minister himself was willing to open the exhibition. Here is a foreign policy arena in which Australia seems to be playing a significant role and our troops are there on the ground. The least one can do is to learn something of the Cambodian cultural legacy.

Some cultural details certainly needed explanation. Few Australians would have picked up the significant orientation of the bull, the vehicle of Shiva, facing the Shiva linga in the centre of the first exhibition space devoted to pre-Angkorian material, nor would they have recognised the appropriate placement of a small Ganesha, associated with beginnings, at the entrance to the following section. This explanation was provided in several forms; the wall captions, the audiophone commentary and the catalogue complemented one another. The catalogue's glossary of terms was a masterpiece of care and clarity. Not all, however, was explained; the extensive stretches of Khmer text in the catalogue served to prevent too ready an appropriation of all knowledge by the reader of English. To include the Khmer must have been a tough editorial decision, but it was entirely the right one – and not least for later use of the book in Cambodia.

If the expectations of those seeking instruction were abundantly fulfilled, that is not what made this exhibition so remarkably memorable and affecting in the present context. Why did so many people want to return to see it again? Where did it get that special feeling of 'heart'?

The answers lie in certain aspects of its relation to the question of Australia's place in 'Asia'. First, there is the tension in Australian attitudes between what Anthony Reid has called 'reformism' and 'alterity'. This may have been art from a very 'different' society and culture, but Australians also want to involve themselves in modern 'Asia' and promote changes which they see as desirable. Here there was the very worthy cause of helping the National Museum in Phnom Penh. The Australian professional staff involved in the exhibition's preparation in Cambodia clearly identified themselves with the problems of this institution. Leonard Teale, who has had a long association with Cambodia, delivered the text on the audiophone with special feeling, as well as professional skill. There was open solicitation for funds to help the museum in Phnom Penh. No call for conservation could have been more stark than the acknowledged presence of bat droppings on some items.

For one group of Australians, of course, the exhibition had special meaning. Before each of the main sculptures there quickly appeared an offering of flowers. Wattle and rhododendrons may have no place in Buddhist iconography, but they served well enough to convey the feeling which these images evoked among the Cambodian community and, perhaps, other Australian Buddhists. The tragic events of the last twenty years have ensured that Australia is not the only country in the world to have a community of Cambodian descent; nonetheless, the quality of acceptance by the majority is, for better or worse, peculiarly Australian. The sprig of wattle before the head of a meditating Jayavarman VII was both touching at a personal level and a symbol of one aspect of modern Australia.

Finally, it bears noting that this was an exhibition drawn from Southeast Asia. Experts may argue about the unity of the area in any sense before the twentieth century, but Southeast Asia is a real category for Australians today. Moreover, unlike most Europeans and many Americans concerned with the region, we come at it directly, not through India or China. There is a certain logic of propinquity, now reinforced by some considerable strength of Australian scholarship. There was a striking – and, I suggest, very Australian – emphasis in the explanatory material that Cambodia is more than a province of Greater India. While there was no hiding the Indian derivation of form and content, the transformation of ideas in new settings was made equally clear. Perhaps the complexities and subtleties involved are easier to grasp in a society and culture where the transformation of all things European has been a central motif.

If the irony of the Rubens exhibition was that those looking for participation received instruction, the ironic twist in 'The Age of Angkor' was reversed. Those seeking instruction, perhaps out of some sense of obligation, were drawn into something much more. These wonderful objects from long ago, so brilliantly displayed with the all the resources of modern ingenuity, had the power to touch our spirit.

The subtlest triumph of this exhibition was to show that, in today's Australia, we can respond to quality from any quarter.

*Campbell Macknight teaches history at the Australian National University.*



*Our landlady is lonely  
but respectable,  
like the tigers from the coffee shop.*

*This is a page from Vienna by Jiri Tibor Novak, a chapbook published in a limited edition of 325 copies by Nosukumo, GPO Box 994 H, Melbourne, 3001. The artist, well known to Overland subscribers, tells in drawings and words of a recent visit to Vienna and his encounter with its landladies of fearsome respectability. Nosukumo chapbooks are deservedly much admired and this is, I think, the most beautiful. Copies are available at \$15 each; twenty-five copies, specially numbered, signed and bound, with an original etching by Jiri are offered at \$90 each.*

MAX TEICHMANN

## When The Mountain Came Over The Moon

THERE USED to be a place in Melbourne called Temperance Hall. I think it's gone now, washed away in the flood. It was the headquarters of all the people who hated the drink, and I used to frequent the place as a child. I didn't have strong views about alcohol, though I was pretty frightened about the mumbling, pathetic, aggressive drunks who used to lurch along the streets in my suburb, often bearing the marks of earlier falls and fights. I would try to keep as near to the edge of the pavement as I could, for quite a few, if they caught your eye, would shout, "What are you looking at – eh, whatya looking at".

But my visits to Temperance Hall didn't exactly put me on the side of angels either. Every Sunday there used to be a free film show for the unemployed and their children. In return for this generosity, we tacitly agreed to listen to an illustrated lecture on the evils of booze. In between there'd be a spell of community singing, including if I remember right, a few of the more crumbly hymns.

We didn't have much option. Sunday was a dead day – *not* like the others. There was no television then, no wireless for most of us, and it was deep depression time. So why not line up? Still, sometimes I used to think, why?

It was not as though we had the money for nights of wild debauchery. And a drunk was not likely to turn up anyway. At least, not until one night. The lecture itself was always the same – big easel at the front, with a great octopus occupying the best position on the chart. He was Drink – and to be truthful, he did look as if he had the shakes. His eyes used to stare at us something 'orrible, as they say. Each of his arms represented various side effects of hammering the slops. Poverty (too true), broken homes, crime, a tendency to get the clap, neglect of religious duties, just about every physical ailment known to me, then and now – except earache – and, worst of all, failing mental powers. Not a word about sex. Presumably, the clap covered that. Who would

have thought that you could cop all that from a few bottles of Melbourne Bitter? My Dad used to call him Bacchus.

The earache was supplied by the lecturer. I have a half-formed mental image of a shortish figure, well dressed and a bit of a pansy, who appeared to be suffering from the sins of pride, gluttony and long windedness. He would go on and on, and bloody on – about matters of which he obviously had no real experience, to people who had, and who just wanted an hour or two's escape into illusion, for themselves and their kids. Sometimes, I used to wish that old Bacchus, sitting up there behind him, would stretch out a tentacle or two and do a certain thing, as our local sex rag used to describe the primal scene. But no, Bacchus had to sit it out and listen to himself being rubbished, just like all the others.

Of course, in Australia the Depression shattered everyone, in a way, more than did either of the Wars. Nobody knew how the disaster had occurred and what lay ahead. The rich and the merely well-to-do felt pretty insecure; maybe they thought we'd riot or something. Some of them appeared to think that losing your job and not getting another was really an act of free will – that you actually enjoyed hanging around, doing nothing, watching your family live on bread and scraps while you kowtowed to the relief people. They thought that if the unemployed got too much money from the Government, they'd never work again. Or else, they'd spend it on drink.

Of course, some did, some always will. A lot more fellows were driven to heavy drinking then – in my town anyway. Maybe the Big People thought we'd all get inflamed with plonk and rampage through the nicer suburbs knocking off their graven images. So, through an automatic reflex, they'd dish up this wallop about the alcoholic self-indulgence of the poor.

When the lecture became quite unbearable, we'd start giving the slow handclap. We had to be careful, else we might lose our soma. On the other hand, if

they ever *did* refuse it, I think the place might have been broken up. The lecturer would evade the slow clap for as long as he could be heard, meanwhile tittering ferociously at our funny little ways and going all pink with embarrassment. I bet his old mum used to hear a few tales of working-class ingratitude when sonny boy got home.

Eventually, he'd give up and finish, and we'd try and square things up with a storm of applause. Once or twice our mob overdid it, and he nearly started up again. Stupid plucks.

Community singing was much, much better – but even here there was an indefinable air of constraint. We shouldn't really have sung "It wasn't the girl I saw you with at Brighton" in quite that way. One Sunday I saw my first drunk at the Temperance Hall. He was sitting right in front of my sister and me, breathing heavily as drunks do – or so I have been told. He had a bottle of evil-looking stuff in his back pocket. (A terrible habit; you might fall on it). From time to time he took a surreptitious sip,

and I must say he was one of the most energetic performers during the slow handclap. But that apart, he just sat hunched up, very morose.

As community singing got under way, his whole demeanour changed. The bottle was forgotten, he sat up, started waving his arms and singing lustily. Only once did he overshoot the mark. The pianist took us into "When the Moon Came Over the Mountain", and to everybody's absolute delight, he joyously shouted the next line, "and the Mountain Comes Over the Moon". The pianist gagged briefly, but he drove her on remorselessly, supplying his favorite line at every opportunity.

Singing finished rather earlier than usual that evening – the lights went out and the murder film came on. My friend in front gradually lost his Dionysian zest for life, and dropped off, while we watched a long drawnout struggle involving death, money, lush apartments and Hollywood sex. All done in moderation of course.



Bill Amos

## TWO POEMS BY JAN OWEN

### PARABOLA

(The horizontal axis shall be  
Monday to Friday  
and the vertical,  
an increase in pocket-money)  
I looked in disbelief –  
a page of green fly-wire  
and  $y = -2x^2 + 5$ ,  
abstracts in underwear.

"Now plot the points."  
Mine were random,  
dark stars on a grid,  
black confetti for the jilted curve.  
"Precision and care," said Mrs Yuer,  
survivor of science  
and other camps.  
"Imagine the arc of a ball."

I thought of a stone:  
the co-ordinates came right.  
I drew the parabola,  
shakily just  
and did not see  
the fall past zero,  
the blink of the absolute.

*would feel the gas  
and crowd together  
away from the menacing columns  
stampede towards the huge metal door  
with its little window  
where they piled up  
one blue, clammy, blood-spattered pyramid  
clawing and mauling each other in death  
Twenty-five minutes later  
the Sonderkommando went in  
with hoses and nooses and hooks  
prelude to the search for gold  
and the removal of dentures and hair which  
were regarded as strategic materials by\**

The sum done  
I leant my head on the desk  
and Mrs Yuer let me sleep.

My cheek against gentle graffiti,  
x loves y,  
I dreamt night rainbows,  
snaky ropes,  
precise anapaests  
I would skip and skip.

\*Based on a passage in *The Final Solution*, by Gerald Reitlinger, Sphere Books, 1971.

### THE TREACHEROUS HOUR

*The Pyrenees Highway*

Colors are questioning the night.  
A dam's sheet-metal.  
Now is a foreign land,  
pure direction between  
the fiery markers and the dotted line.  
Brief as smears,  
the small towns seem misspelt:  
Moolert, Bung Bong.  
The local signs say  
Cemetery Road, Madman's Lane,  
Nowhere Creek 2k.

I have been East  
to read the books of friends.  
Passing the power lines  
at the city fringe,  
I thought of their solid bodies,  
the particular smell of their skin.  
The forked pylons  
that shoulder the lines  
stride the countryside like Siamese twins.  
Something I read has thumbled a ride,  
is making a home from home –  
at the autopsy in 1951  
of a hydrocephalic child,  
five fetuses were found  
nested in the swollen head  
of their stillborn brother  
as in a womb.  
Little shadows, come in from the cold.

Possibility's strangest music  
fills my head.  
the derivation of 'monster'  
is 'show, portend, warn'.  
Darkness is rising now,  
I ease my speed,  
bearing my friends in mind.  
I do not know what world I am within.

## ROBERT THE BANTAM ROOSTER

This little red rooster  
has two hens  
and has to be locked up  
with them  
because he harries all other poultry  
even the peacocks  
flee down onto the road

as you see  
what he lacks in size  
he gigantically  
makes up for in aggression  
his beautiful teal tail feathers  
wave and tremble

how much rage can be held  
in one small heart  
if I let him out  
he would conquer Africa  
whole continents  
would be his  
America would collapse  
at his first crow  
the Statue of Liberty  
would curtsy  
and hand over her torch

however  
he's trapped  
in the cage of his rage  
beautiful potent  
and furious  
that's him crowing now

KATE LLEWELLYN

## ALZHEIMER'S

out of the pocket  
of the old checked apron  
she takes a handful of seed

it clatters onto the lino –  
spreads in silence  
with a kind of shhh

the chooks are no longer here  
but every morning she still feeds them –

at 6 a.m.  
it's dark in the room –  
but the light is fierce  
with angry birds  
fussing at the wire.

MIKE LADD

## FOR MY NEXT POEM

Yesterday I saw you in the mall, a battler  
signing up for The Britannica,  
"\$2000 for a lifetime of knowledge"  
and debt to the book company.  
It looked a hopeful acquisition:  
you, smiling and blushing,  
he, suited, courting to replace  
all those scrimping, mothering, bookless years  
when every salesman knew more than you,  
and your kids grew taller,  
correcting and informing petulantly.  
And I stood registering  
the greed of ignorance,  
the empty, hungry, common need  
consuming you.  
All this I noted semiotically,  
well-fed by Marxist theory and postmodernism,  
stung by the pleasure of an image  
for my next poem.

LYN MCCREDDEN



## TWO POEMS BY STEPHEN OLIVER

### RECOMMENDED

- \* Inches of blue sea between the hours,  
Jeff Chandler.
- \* Rain, its rhythm on deciduous trees, cold and  
audible, Alan Bates.
- \* Cavernous rooms that give onto black and white  
footage, Bette Davis.
- \* The kid with a walk-on-part become hero to  
some mini-series, Micky Rooney.
- \* Half-moon windows in New York city apartments,  
Paul Newman.
- \* Riding out the 50s into a brand new color print,  
Rory Calhoun.
- \* The bright red fire hydrant blossoming on  
the curb, Donald Duck.

### JOHN KEATS CAME ON TOO STRONG

to Fanny his girl he did. To think, if telephones existed in those days what a mess he would've made of it. Verily, the best Romantic is an isolated one. Post-by carriage. Reflection through a long sea-cliff stroll. A quiet cough in Rome, or blood the color of port? So he'd write Fanny and say: "On the 21st of this month, Sunday at 10.30 a.m. precise, check out Shakespeare's sonnet No. 38, ditto, I'll do the same. Thinking of you." She didn't give a rat's arse for John as genius and he never got to bonk the woman. He just couldn't cope. O My Beloved, so it is that in the mind's eye I scale you down to little dimensions, and you but a gentle cough away.

### HOW TO WRITE THE PERFECT SUICIDE NOTE

Start at the end, and work your way back.

Don't write your name; it doesn't matter anymore.

Leave sincerely out. Everyone knows that you mean it.

Be gay. Be merry. Say, "I'm having a wonderful time, I wish you were here."

Don't mention the names of people you hate. That way, you keep them all guessing.

Spruce it up with a little French: Je'taime, Joan of Arc...the Eiffel Tower.

Don't write the pronoun, "I". You will only appear to be "big-noting yourself."

Picture in your mind all of the places you have never been to, and then leave postcards to confuse the police.

Now, here's the tricky part. Fold the note many times and then tie it 'round the thin ankle of a blind homing pigeon and whisper into the bird's ear, a secret destination you know it will never return from.

Get very drunk. Get very crazy.

You have done a good job. You have done your best. Be happy my friend. Be proud my love.

You are about to become the perfect poem.

MICHAEL CRANE

## A RITUAL OF SUBTEXTS

as she climbs the stairs to  
the 2nd floor she puts on  
the guise of an angel of  
mercy tic tac in mouth she  
stuffs the cigarettes to the  
bottom of her bag and  
checks her face in the  
compact mirror mask in  
place she enters the room

during the meeting she  
encounters and engages  
with the angel of jealousy  
the angel of competitiveness  
the angel of self aggrandise  
ment the angel of revenge  
the angel of sexuality and  
the angel of youthful  
enthusiasm

3 hours later the avenging  
angel watches as they leave  
in a fast car bound for the  
latest yuppy restaurant the  
angel of mercy drives

## ELUNED LLOYD

### NOOSA INLET: STUDY IN BLACK AND WHITE

Motionless  
out on the steel  
black inlet  
under a doom dark cloud  
stands the egret  
startlingly white  
and by that burnished metal  
purely reflected.

Entranced  
I move too near.  
He takes off, groaning  
into the coming storm  
the threatening sky.

My Japanese print  
has flown away.

NANCY CATO

## BEEF

Angus yearlings roll anxious eyes  
blunder against wooden railings  
& tight-wheel at the scent of men.  
Separated into pens by prodding sticks  
black steers push & slaver.  
Flies hang around lips & eyes.  
As dust settles producers & the agent  
lean on a rusted gate, smoke rollies,  
estimate each beast's weight & calculate  
earnings. Talk shifts to subsidies,  
GATT, drought, politics & how the Japs  
have them by the short 'n' curlies & eat  
marbled beef in Tokyo for 150 bucks a plateful.  
At home the farmer's freezers bulge  
with grass-fed fillet & that night's tea  
thaws in hanging basket slung  
from a creaking verandah beam.

## SUE MOSS

## RIDER

Now the last girl's left home  
he's set up the room as a gym  
and begun to live  
on an exercise bike

first watching the speedometer  
racing against himself  
before settling for videos  
while the wheel

spins

clocking up  
what's left

Behind him  
stands the Reaper,  
black as black,  
the edge of his blade  
a line of stars.

PETER MURPHY

## POEM INTENDED TO BE ENCLOSED IN A TIME CAPSULE

To understand  
what we were  
it would be best for you  
in some way  
to understand touch.

As you will have seen from the photographs  
our upper extremities  
had five jointed extensions  
and it was  
with the tips of these  
that we touched.

To lose our sense of sight  
was considered  
a great loss.  
You who are reading this  
must of course have sight  
and it well may be  
that if you disconnect it  
you will know  
how the total loss of it  
was felt by us.  
Yet  
with the sense of touch  
we could still  
know and appreciate  
our world.

In the films you will see  
us touch one another  
touch things we have made  
or found.  
But  
not the slightest brush of touch  
is included here.

MAURICE STRANDGARD

## MERLETTO

Depending on motivation  
my lace curtain  
enters the room  
pregnant,  
pendant,  
in a pattern which provides,  
even in marine retreat,  
a polyester perspective  
on life in my street.

In the evening  
the air comes  
calling through the lace,  
wuthering faintly,  
sobbing a little  
fitfully  
a name like mine.  
Just a fancy.

When the curtain fails to move  
I am reminded of  
Jane Austen;  
young nuns;  
and how Emma Bovary  
sat on Leon's knee,  
swinging her satin slipper  
from her bare toes  
because she couldn't bear  
the still life  
either.

KATHY HUNT

## THE RECOLLECTION

A dog  
growl-mouths within meat, grovelling  
prayers off till it's eaten, stretches  
jaw round dish to worry meat  
off, snarling  
at interruption, scratch-buries  
bone through scrape-mound to  
forget it on to decom-  
position as humus, scratches up

memory from  
under leaf and  
out of earth

CLIVE FAUST

## NOTIONALISM

Various notions,  
impeccable notions,  
ratified, pedigreed, charismatic notions

Notions that turn heads  
wherever they go

Notions *trop soigné* to look through a window

Notions that help elect governments

Notions you can take out to lunch  
on the company

Notions that titivate  
the columnist's insatiety

Notions that invariably arrest,  
others erotic as breasts

The notions of hair as numinous,  
guile as an honorable profession

The notion of prison as tonic,  
dreaming in shorthand,  
macchiato miasmas

The notion of a profoundly plangent cosmos

Notions that keep you awake all night:  
the one about modernist succubi

The notion of translating  
from the Icelandic, marrying  
venom with sang-froid

Notions such as Casaubon's Disease,  
failing to recognise your brother  
in a department store,  
lambasting foreign authors  
in front of your wife

The notion of even having a wife!  
(running to catch a tram  
and miraculously aborting)

The notion of strenuous exercise,  
if you don't mind –  
circumcision as radical-emotive therapy

The notion of celebrating  
your own significance

The notion of sky as unrealised canvas,  
life as forgotten quotation

The notion of annotating your own notations

The notion of never going anywhere  
without a clean set of notions –

If you've got a notion  
I'll show you mine!

## TWO POEMS BY PETER ROSE

### THREE HOURS LATER

It's three hours since we parted.  
Sitting by an open window,  
too lazy to do any work,  
I listen to all the usual morning noises  
(the drone of a lawn mower  
in some far, leafed suburb,  
a fond young couple downstairs  
folding sheets, fabricating furniture,  
an old termagant in the flat opposite,  
snuffling round her son's bedroom  
in search of – truffles? – confessions? –  
matricide manuals under his mattress?),  
listen to every tale this doomed tenement  
has to tell, a symphony of cisterns  
performed on authentic instruments.

Then I think of you,  
your sweet anxious voice  
as we parted on the street,  
the warmth of your forearm  
while Nero and Poppea  
fucked without conviction  
above the orchestra pit,  
your strident breathing  
piping through the house,  
Claudio's *Vespro* heard before dawn.

And then it occurs to me  
that my body remains as you blessed it,  
these truant hands undeflected,  
that held you, incited,  
operas ago, in antiquity.

## DENIM

You showed me nothing of yourself.

You opened up  
like a tear in denim.

A tiny fray  
Never quite showing flesh  
Through the loosely woven threads  
That covered your skin.

Your fingers,  
Needles,  
Busily knitting the fibres  
Back together  
To cover your hide.

My intimacy disturbed you.

My intimacy was all  
I even knew.

That was my language,  
And my fluency  
embarrassed you.

Was that really so vulgar?

Not as vulgar as  
Making love through denim.

I was naked.  
Every  
Bump,  
Bruise,  
Blemish,  
Was exposed.

Even my pores were open.  
Tiny wells gushing out my odour.

Nothing was hidden,  
Nothing was shameful,  
Everything was true.

PAULINE SHELDRAKE

## WE WON'T ROT

We try to be happy  
because we've planted a tree  
but we know that every day  
in many ways  
we're getting warmer & wetter.

In the train, we suck  
each other's lips  
with graffiti in our eyes.  
We scratch ourselves  
to be sure we're valid.

At the beach we sunglasses & sunblock  
& bury our heads in Walkmans.  
We lie in the shade  
sucking on our lips  
determined not to burn.

Studded with false teeth,  
we have nothing to smile about  
as we talk of irradiated food  
& whether it will brighten our teeth  
or help us glow in the disco.

We buy some junk, called food  
at the kiosk, & we worry about  
the preservative we're eating  
but we console ourselves by saying:  
When they bury us, we won't rot.

MYRON LYSENKO

KEVIN HART

## After Poetry 15, A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry

From Modern to Postmodern and Beyond

IT IS HARD to discuss Australian poetry these days without using the words 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. With some local writers, editors and journalists there remains a lingering nostalgia for the era of Eliot and Pound, perhaps because literary modernism never took firm root here. More generally, there is tireless talk about the postmodern, perhaps because we live in a world where we experience few deep roots of any kind. And yet there is a sense in which these two words make it hard to discuss Australian poetry at all. Like all quasi-historical terms, including that eternal pair Classicism and Romanticism, they partly obscure the characteristics that make individual poems compelling. They can easily suborn specific questions of history and place, of writing and reading, of production and reception. Yet it is only in the space opened by these questions that the conjunction of 'Australian' and 'poetry' can become intelligible and salient.

The vocabulary of literary evaluation changes, sometimes very quickly. Only a few years ago the expression 'avant garde' was still used by way of praise; today, a shadow is cast over it. The idea of an avant garde leading loyal troops onward to conquer new fields for literature now seems naive. Besides, how can there be an avant garde when so many of its values have been so thoroughly institutionalised? The key words associated with the concept – 'break', 'experimental', 'progress', 'project' – have accordingly lost much of their lustre. Few changes occur by themselves, though, and this one is linked to a contemporary critique of 'modernity' and its forms (including 'modernism'). People have prized the modern since the sixth century; but modernism, as it appeared in the teens of this century, is a consequence of the European project of enlightenment. They live in the same cadence: a desire for a completely new start. Hints for criticising this desire have been around for a long time.

Freud, a modern himself in crucial respects, also distrusts modernity, for he shows us that radically new beginnings are impossible. They require massive repression, and the repressed never fails to return. And Heidegger, that other major prophet

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*"Radically new beginnings are impossible. They require massive repression, and the repressed never fails to return."*

---

of our century, converges on the same point, though in another context. There can be no pure and simple beginnings because ruptures merely confirm the conceptual status quo at a deeper level.

It is important to recognise that this critique is aimed at modernism as an aesthetic doctrine and not willy-nilly at all modernist writers. (Some modernists, remember, were sharply critical of modernity.) More exactly, the critique recognises that this 'doctrine' is a loose network of ideas and practices, and tries to distinguish the threads. For instance, while certain modernists can be reproached for detaching the literary from its enabling social contexts, others can be praised for unsettling the borders between national literatures. No critique tries to improve a theory or a practice (even though it may pretend to do exactly that); it examines conditions of possibility, then rejects some and changes others in order to re-formulate the whole. With modernism this can be done in all sorts of ways. You can show that Eliot, Pound *et al* failed to engage Romanticism at the right depth and in consequence merely repeated it weakly (in which case the exemplary modern poets are conspicuous post-Romantics like Yeats, Stevens and Hart Crane). Or you can argue, as Auden came to do, that modernism is a

reduction of the modern impulse, and that we need to learn from writers like Frost and Hardy. Or you can tacitly keep faith with a modernism yet think it otherwise, which means you come up with a post-modernism.

Even more than 'modern', 'postmodern' is a difficult word to manage. By now it has overflowed so many limits as to become virtually useless for criticism. We can track it for a little while by holding onto a word I just used: 'otherwise'. First of all, it means "in a different way": the postmodern tries to keep the modern in play by doing it differently, to such an extent that 'it' becomes problematic. The accent is on difference, not identity, and thus all unities are dispersed and fragmented, far more so than in either Romanticism or modernism, which can both be regarded as meditations on the fragment.

Whereas modernity maintained a stripped-down Romantic ego, relying on it to ground a fractured world, the postmodern response has been to replace the authorial gaze with fitful glances from diverse standpoints and media. Second, 'otherwise' suggests that the postmodern gives a central role to the Other. But who or what is the Other? And what does he, she or it do?

It is an index of the bizarre range of competing postmodernisms that these questions allow all kinds of answers. To begin with, the Other can be conceived formally (the reader, language, poetry, the unconscious...), socially (blacks, gays, the poor, women...), or spiritually (your neighbor, God). And thinking otherwise, can mean anything from taking the marginal into account to recognising it as constituting the centre. Thus you can come up with a post-modernism regulated by the aesthetic (in which case you talk about allegory, bricolage, parody, self-reflexivity, simulation...) and that tends to bypass history and the public sphere, or one that centres itself in a conception and diagnosis of late capitalism and talks of the ceaseless circulation enabled by technology and endorsed by consumer societies. And needless to say, these are only two possibilities out of many. There are right-wing postmodernisms and left-wing postmodernisms, gloomy ones and happy ones. Some view the tradition as a deceptive fiction, others as a toolbox we can use to fix up the present.

John Ashbery has often been hailed as a postmodernist, though the fact that he sees himself as a modernist alerts us to the dangers of labelling him anything. His latest work, *Flowchart*, resists all fixed categories. How to describe it? It is a long poem by twentieth-century standards – running to 216 pages

– and is in a perpetual state of becoming. You might say it is a meditation that absorbs everything around it, guided by a lyric intelligence with no single aim in mind but which remains alert and open to all manner of signals, from the present and the past, from consciousness and the unconscious. All the jargon of postmodernism – decentred text, free play of surfaces, self-reflection – can of course be invoked when reading *Flowchart*, and while this can sometimes help to explain why we find bits of it amusing, it cannot explain why it compels our attention for so long or why particular passages move us. In a work without plot, where the notion of character is put into question ("I don't see how/ a bunch of attributes can go walking around with a coat rack labelled 'person' loosely tied/to it with apron strings"), and where themes ebb and flow, what keeps our interest is the integrity of Ashbery's poetic thinking.

The phrase is Heidegger's, and he has in mind a meditation that does not look for justification in grounds outside itself. Unconcerned whether reality can be truly mapped by philosophical distinctions (Is it objective or subjective? Exterior or interior?), the poet maintains an openness toward Being – that which lights up for us the ten thousand things of the world. Heidegger found authentic poetic thinking in Hölderlin, Trakl and the late poems of George and Rilke. Amongst his younger contemporaries he heard the voice of Being only in Celan and Char. Ashbery's tonality differs from that of these unmatched Europeans, but like them he suspends the quest for grounds and attends to what he knows to be real, his experience of being in the world. That experience is more dispersed, more self-reflexive, and far more mixed in kind, than theirs, and so it can be made to square with postmodernism. Yet while Ashbery accepts the flow, knowing that "the chatter never subsides", he does not give himself up to a post-historical play. *Flowchart*, like everything he writes, is marked by a recognition that there is "a longing one does not subdue".

Ashbery is keenly interested in the formal dimension of poetry, though he is neither a formalist nor much concerned with metrical neatness. One of the most touching passages of this new book is a double sestina, as obdurate a form as one can find, though one Ashbery makes more difficult for himself by taking his end words from a double sestina of Swinburne's. In a double sestina the final stanza in particular requires great technical skill, since in six lines it must incorporate in a predetermined order all the end words that generate each twelve-line stanza:

The story she told me simmers in me still, though she is dead these several months, lying as on a bed. The things we used to do, I to thee, thou to me, matter still, but the sun points the way inexorably to death, though it be but his, not our way. Funny the way the sun can bring you round to her. And as you pause for breath, remember it, now that it is done, and seeds flare in the sunflower.

There are resemblances between Ashbery and Peter Porter: Auden is a reference point in both their worlds, even though he has a different value in each, and in recent years the Australian has learned some new tricks from the American. If Ashbery is a poetic thinker, though, Porter is a poetic talker. Reading the one, we almost feel ourselves inside his mind,

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*"If Ashbery is a poetic thinker,  
though, Porter is a poetic talker."*

---

while reading the other we fancy we are in his company, listening to him chat about, well, whatever comes into his mind.

In *The Chair of Babel* we find all Porter's favorite topics, and much else besides. We hear more of his desultory argument with God about death, more of his belief in the transcendence of great music, more of why he likes cats, more about contemporary sexual manners, and more of the remorse he feels about his first marriage. Yet we also hear new things, far more about dreams and their logics, and far more about the stuff of talk itself. Ours is a Babelian world, he tells us, in which language is everywhere decisive and divisive. The title poem evokes an international conference with a mad genius of a translator. When the speaker's neighbor (who holds the Chair of Babel) asks, "Why do Schubert's lieder hymn the sea/and fisher-folk when he had seen no stretch/of water wider than a lake?" the translation runs, "The landlocked mind/will ever seek an amniotic..." To count this as Porter suddenly taking a postmodern turn is not quite right. He remains a conservative – in the positive sense of the word. (We need to distinguish his conservatism from his pessimism.) Part of that means he has a conservative's fascination with the present moment, and his aim has always been to work with whatever impinges on his sensibility and to humanise it or, failing that, humor it.

Driven into a corner and compelled to characterise the postmodern, one could say it is a melan-

cholia circulating at such high speed that it seems euphoric. Only when it slows down, which it inevitably does now and then, can we grasp the motivation for such speed. And one could say much the same of Porter's poetic world. "The Blessed are hard to tell from the Depressed", he writes in one poem, and in another, just as characteristically, "Redeemers always reach the world too late". Perhaps no other contemporary is so much given to the dying fall. Still, perhaps no poet since Hardy has written so poignantly about his dead wife. 'Bad Dreams in Venice' begins,

Again I found you in my sleep  
And you were sturdily intact,  
The counsel you would always keep  
Became my dream's accusing tract.

Still I dared not think your force  
Might even slightly slack my guilt –  
This wasn't judgement but a course  
Which self not knowing itself built.

It scarcely mattered where I dreamed,  
The dead can choose a rendezvous:  
You knew that nothing is redeemed  
By blame, yet let me conjure you.

In another poem we hear Wittgenstein remark, "we live stupidly/But are redeemed by what cannot be said". If music can count as what cannot be said, this comes close to Porter's deepest conviction. For poetry "can alter nothing, merely put its 'stet'/on each unfairness". Like Auden, he creates a poetic world in which one is asked to be suspicious of poetry.

In *The Innovators* Geoffrey Dutton called Ronald McCuaig "Australia's first modern poet". Certainly there is much that is fresh in this *Selected Poems*, as any reader of 'Au Tombeau de mon Père' will testify. And certainly there is much that is unsettling there too, from a lyric of the early 1930s such as 'Portrait of a Lady' to the rollicking 'The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie' (1951). The two poems establish a strange trajectory, at once lyrical and satirical, comic and macabre, sophisticated and crude. The 'Portrait' begins with an arresting conceit: "As her swift body can confer/Desire on rags, so time wears her/Until her creaseless days are past." Like Marvell? Yes, but a Marvell who has been reading Paul Eluard on the side. The woman dies, "Yet is a clock with motionless hands,/A swaying field that, reaped, still stands/Yet, reaped, she is for ever gone."

Nearly twenty years later, toward the end of



McCuaig's poetic life, the 'Ballad' relates the story of a farmer who attracts cheap labor by dangling before them the prospect of his beautiful daughter. But Bessie has an odd view of men, believing that when they look with bedroom eyes "It becomes any good woman's duty / To kill him, and save him from sin". And so she does; after the farmhand has worked long and hard for nothing. Only when she objects to her father shooting a trooper she adores, and then incinerating nine others who have come to investigate, do the pair fight:

For some to be foiled in their passion  
Is more than their reason can stand:  
The farmer saw firelight flash on  
The axe Bessie held in her hand.  
He shouted, 'No, Bess! You're my daughter!  
To threaten your dad is a crime!  
Then he out with a pistol and shot her  
Through the heart, for the first and last time.

Elsewhere McCuaig whimsically observes that "The world is a disreputable theatre" and styles himself as its critic. There is much that he sees tellingly – "Her beauty is a lazy razor / Drawn across the brain that has her", for instance – yet, for all that, there is no criticism of the roles that the female actors are required to play.

Where McCuaig is bright, chatty, contemporary, Antigone Kefala is brooding, serious and drawn to a mythic past. In choosing *Absence* as the title of her new and selected poems, she hits upon an elect theme of postmodernism. "Only *pure absence* – not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced – can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, and then make one work"; writes Jacques Derrida who, while not postmodern in any simple way, is often taken to be a doyen of the movement's intellectual wing. The shimmering absence that Derrida has in mind was first remarked by Mallarmé, and concerns the structure of inspiration although, as *le maître's* readers know, that structure also becomes a theme in several of his finest poems. Kefala, however, is not concerned with a poetics of the blank page, nor does she ache for the ideal essence of disappearing things. Absence, for her, is a theme: the loss of people and places, of events and things that are "Heavy with time".

"Dark", "silence", "stillness", "old": these are the coordinates of her poetic world, a place of echoes, longing and secret smells. Sometimes the quest for simplicity is rerouted by way of pleonasm, as when she talks, twice, of "black night". At her best,

though, as in the early 'Thirsty Weather' and 'The Death Cycle', she writes with intensity and starkness:

Something of us must remain  
in this light  
that keeps on reflecting.  
We have struck it with knives  
and were given  
the shadow of knives in return.  
Fountains  
fountains with springs in the air  
and we, drinking our death  
in small mouthfuls.

Part of the force of these lines comes from what the author leaves out. There are times when detail becomes clutter.

The figure of the exile haunts Kefala's verse, as it does much of David Malouf's. "We are all of us exiles of one place/or another, even those/who never leave home", he says when thinking of Dante in Ravenna. His is a world created by meshing contraries: the present and the past, high art and the everyday, Australia and Europe, the great and the tiny. All these polarities can be felt in the opening lines of 'Among the Ruins':

A late arrival on the scene, I stood in '59  
in the shadow of Titus' arch, watching pigeons  
in their brief season fluff  
and preen among the columns, inheriting  
old nesting-places high in a dung-patched  
cornice. There were ruins  
everywhere that year, though the war was  
fourteen years behind us and the Fall  
of Rome back further still. I had missed the  
best of it...

To feel oneself a latecomer, cast in the shadows, without an inheritance, yet longing for a true home: such is one version of the postmodern condition, and it informs a dimension of Malouf's writing. The celebrations of Queensland exotica ("The Pacific/breaks at our table"), of consummation ("I taste moonlight/transformed into flesh"), and of the sheer wonder of the "is-ness of things" create another dimension that permeates the first.

Of the two collections of Malouf's verse – the *Selected Poems* and *Poems 1959–89* – the second is the richer. Malouf is one of those writers whose achievement is better grasped as a whole rather than in single poems. There is a proneness for the author to appear, a little self-consciously, as *arbiter elegantiarum*. It is a nervous tic, though one soon forgotten

when the writing relaxes, and poet's ear and eye move in the same charmed rhythm, as when he talks of "Owl/with its heavy blood and vowel an open mouth/too slow to snatch the heads off/dustmotes". The new and uncollected poems, like Kefala's latest work, lack the force of earlier books. With hindsight, Malouf's most creative period seems to have been the early to mid seventies, the time of *Neighbours in a Thicket* and 'The Little Panopticon'. It is a pity that the panopticon lyrics were never gathered into a single volume and are not given in full in either collection. Lyrics like 'The Elements of Geometry' and 'The Fables' are amongst his most winning, and the whole series reveals a mind at home in its chosen element.

John Blight's *Selected Poems 1939-1990* gives us, for the first time, an opportunity to survey the whole of this remarkable writer's work. Blight has shown a rare talent for independence and, when need be, for remaking himself from unlikely points. The man who wrote two celebrated collections of sonnets about the sea reappears, with an apparently new idiom, as the author of lyrics like 'For Francesca' and 'The Geese'. One of the pleasures of this selection is to read Blight's early writing, before his long romance with the sonnet, and to find a poem as uncanny as 'It'. The nature of 'it' is kept deliciously in suspension. "It is outside and cannot come/into this mind without these words", we are told. Quietly, in its own space and time, the poem evokes the way in which the Other comes to the Self while maintaining its alterity:

And when at length it sees a light  
 shining within the intellect  
 it then may stand, as shadow might,  
 outside the entrance, tall, erect;  
 awaiting there in dread and fear  
 that she within may turn no key  
 unwilling yet to see or hear  
 unravelling of this mystery...  
 Then, meaningless, may traipse and pass  
 across the garden plot, the grass;  
 and, standing at the gate, may be  
 for ever afterwards a tree.

Just as beguiling are Blight's beachcombing sonnets. The sea, here, does not simply provide an occasion for describing a beached whale, a jellyfish or an island. Rather, it functions as the condition of possibility for poetic experience. Having no meaning in itself, yet rich in human projections, the sea offers itself to ceaseless meditation. "The wave is something, yet - nothing" begins one sonnet, in a philosophical key, while another starts, "These

are the first shapes: stonefish and starfish". The most anthologised of these lyrics, 'Death of a Whale', is also the most programmatic with its neat moral, "Sorry we are, too, when a child dies;/But at the immolation of a race who cries?" By contrast 'A Dog to Tie Up' remains open to the chances thrown its way. "If the sea must beat my door, hungry animal", it is because "it has no words to frame its speech;/but speaks cunningly nevertheless". All of Blight's beachcombing sonnets are a response to that dialectic: the sea, as Other, cannot speak (and so must be given voice) yet speaks in its own way (which must be respected).

"I am at no loss its meanings to guess", Blight goes on. (Confidence is one of his traits as a writer, even when the poems themselves seem hesitant.) And his understanding of the sea gives him a greater possession than property; it gives him "a guest". The sonnet then moves into its brilliant sestet:

And who has a guest at his door has  
 all wisdom for his learning; has  
 the sea, as he says, 'sighing or storming'; has  
 another's problems to exclude his own; has  
 the ocean at his door to deal with; has  
 a dog to tie up each tide - his dinghy; has...

The sestet is not only a technical *tour de force* but also a prime example of how a brief lyric can circumnavigate a complex theme. To detail all the modalities of possession implied by those six "has"s would take some time.

Blight's later poems, from *Hart* (1975) to *Holiday Sea Sonnets* (1985) and beyond, attest an effulgence of poetic energy. Searching for a parallel, I can think only of A. R. Ammons' work over the same period. For both writers, individual poems shine more brightly when read in the context of their whole endeavor. By the Seventies, we find that Blight has entered so profoundly into his imagination that he can only think poetically. This does not mean that everything he writes succeeds but that his successes tend to be more inward and more artless. One sign of great craft is simplicity, another is idiom, and Blight has both. Thus in 'The Geese' he muses over the birds' directions that he sees "as a maze and can never/follow in my groping hour by/hour of daylight", and so comes to this illumination:

Black out the sun  
 for ever, if I were gifted  
 with familiarities as  
 theirs with orbs and galaxies...  
 as though each sipped of stars all night.

Chained with them I may get drunk a

little – but have their pinions  
to ferry me beyond all comment.

One final point about Blight's and Malouf's books, not about their contents but their design. It has to be said that the covers of both books, and of all the books in the UQP series, are awful. The combination of the author's name handwritten in green on a piece of cheap yellow card is bad enough, but the addition of the one-minute sketch of the author's head and shoulders makes it worse. Surely UQP can learn how to present a book of poetry attractively. Antheneum, Bonniers, Knopf and Random House, amongst others, offer models.

Over the last few years there have been signs, sometimes very interesting ones, of people rethinking the long poem. Under the pressures of modernism, poems of any great length were edged into the realm of the impossible. There could be sequences, series and cycles, but these were no more than short lyrics linked together. In the mid-seventies Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' seemed drawn out, beautifully so. Now, besides *Flowchart*, that poem's mere 552 lines read like nothing at all. Since then we have had James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Alan Wearne's *The Nightmarkets*, Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and Andrew Hudgins' *After the Last War*, not to mention several other book-length poems. Calls for a return to narrative by advocates of 'expansive poetry' are a part of this trend, not a cause of it. One would be hard put to find a plot in Ashbery's new book, and one need not react against postmodernism to compose long poems: a theory and practice of perpetual displacement has no vested interest in brevity.

Geoffrey Lehmann's *Spring Forest* is a revised and expanded version of *Ross' Poems* (1978), the book on which his reputation has mainly rested until now. It is composed of ninety-five passages which, in effect, comprise one poem: the musings of Ross McInerney, the writer's former father-in-law. Lehmann's intention is to reflect a prior reality, to let us hear Ross talk about an old rifle, noxious weeds, going bird watching with Mr Long, looking at the stars or listening to a crystal set. Yet sometimes the poems work with what Jean Baudrillard calls the second phase of the image, its inclination to pervert a basic reality. In 'The Pressure Lamp', for instance, we begin in the first phase, a straightforward transcription of the real –

With Olive away, the house is in darkness.  
My feet fume with the cold.  
There is nothing, no room, no house, just  
freezing darkness

as I rummage  
for a match –

and then veer into the second phase, a masking of the real,

I am dead. We all died  
on the same day  
and are buried by the river  
our chins tilted upwards  
still sprouting beard,

before returning safely home to the first place.

What initially holds our interest in *Spring Forest* is Ross himself or, more exactly, the voice we identify as 'Ross'. Laconic and perceptive, a born yarner, Lehmann's main character has so seductive an idiom it exceeds in interest whatever he describes, imagines or remembers. Even more than Ross, though, we warm to the world he represents. For all its hardships and dangers, *Spring Forest* is a place of consolation and security. On one level the poem is a pastoral, evoking an imaginary golden age, a time of childhood, a period when, we feel, the complex could always be resolved into a prior simplicity. Yet there is nothing of the pastoral's coldness and formality here, and Lehmann strives to avoid the slightest hint of artifice. Matching Ross's rhythms, the verse itself is casual and loose (and sometimes flat). On another level, the poem works as an anti-pastoral, inviting dirt and death into the picture, correcting any idealisations we may have about country life. Comparisons might be drawn with Bruce Beaver's *As It Was* which also interlaces pastoral and anti-pastoral, and while they will favor *Spring Forest* we must remember that we are comparing Lehmann's best book to one of Beaver's least impressive.

Baudrillard defines two further phases of the image: when it marks the absence of a basic reality and when it bears no relation to any reality at all. John Tranter has long since chosen the final three phases of the image as his chosen ground or non-ground, and accordingly has been called a postmodernist. If the tag has never been quite convincing, it is because the postmodern gesture, however it be defined, requires agility and speed. One finds those qualities in John Forbes and John Scott, though not in Tranter whose poetic voice is disposed to be heavy, centred as it is in *ressentiment*. It is a voice that works best inside quotation marks, which can twist it toward irony, and his new book *The Floor of Heaven* gives him many opportunities to do precisely that. It consists of four interlinked narra-

tives about "A bikie's moll, a promising architect, a real-estate shark, a Vietnam veteran who can't forget" and several others. The blurb goes on to tell us that it "sparkles with the contradictions and ambiguities that make up the postmodern condition".

Certainly Tranter is drawn to what Susan Sontag defined as 'camp' style: a preoccupation with the artificial and exaggeration. But camp requires lightness of touch, and Tranter gains his effects by overstatement in this "complex tale/of wretchedness and despair". A characteristic passage:

Hell, she was a lovely woman, even shrieking like that – 'God!' she said, 'Go away! – I still have the scratches, look –' he showed us his neck – 'but it was the drink speaking, and the heat – it could get so dry in that house, an electrical feeling like a migraine...'

It is the world of soap opera: a surface realism disconnected from social reality. The blurring of distinctions between high and popular culture is one of the traits of much postmodern art, and Tranter wishes to show what happens when narrative poetry meets soap. In order not to be soap, however, the content has to ironised, undercut, displaced.

For the most part, though, Tranter gets too caught up in telling his stories of social schizophrenia to keep a critical distance from them. The tales tend to be told straight, and this raises a couple of other problems with the book. Poetic narratives have to do something that cannot be done in prose or they read like versified short-stories. No one could imagine *The Nightmarkets* or *After the Lost War* as prose, but it is easy to conceive *The Floor of Heaven* as four stories by someone beginning to write in the genre. By the same token, the verse is little more than the chopped-up prose that Pound warned modernists against:

Young Paul's been to Europe. Paris.  
Rome. Couldn't stand a bar of it.  
London? Hated it. California likewise.  
Joined a band, gave that away.  
Now he's in a monkey suit. I fixed it  
with Papa Florenzini, the old man.  
Be firm with the boy, I said,  
I don't want a slacker for a son.  
At least he'll learn manners, and restraint,  
which is more than his mother ever gave him.

Words like 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' cannot help us talk closely about poetry, but they do identify certain traits. The modernists adopted a critical attitude to literature, putting the category into question. The postmodernists went a step further and have broken many of the barriers between literature and criticism. With this we return to the beginning of modernity, with Friedrich Schlegel's call in the *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798) for an open commerce between poetry and philosophy. We sense that something has come full circle, not yet ended perhaps, but showing many signs of exhaustion.

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- John Ashbery: Flowchart (Carcanet, £16.95).*  
*John Blight: Selected Poems 1939–1990 (UQP, \$19.95).*  
*Antigone Kefala: Absence: New and Selected Poems (Hale and Iremonger, \$17.95).*  
*Geoffrey Lehmann: Spring Forest (Angus & Robertson, \$14.95).*  
*David Malouf: Poems 1959–89 (UQP, \$19.95).*  
—: *Selected Poems (Angus & Robertson, \$12.95).*  
*Ronald McCuaig: Selected Poems (Angus & Robertson, \$14.95).*  
*Peter Porter: The Chair of Babel (OUP, £6.99).*  
*John Tranter: The Floor of Heaven (Angus & Robertson, \$14.95).*

# on the line

Vida Horn reviewed Pam Young's *Proud to be a Rebel: the Life and Times of Emma Miller in Overland* 127. Emma Miller was a great woman and a marvellous 'character'. She was known in her lifetime (1839–1917) as "The Mother of the Labor Party" but was almost forgotten until Pam Young's splendid biography. I am pleased to tell you what all our Queensland readers already know: Emma Miller, at last, has been handsomely honoured. Brisbane's former Roma Street Forum has been renamed Emma Miller Place in recognition of her fight for women's suffrage, the right to free speech, and her many and long struggles against social injustice.

This is very appropriate because Emma Miller Place, in the centre of Brisbane, was where all the protest rallies against Bjelke-Petersen's laws designed to reduce civil rights took place. All the marches began there.

A full-length bronze sculpture of Emma Miller has been commissioned and will stand in the main square in front of the City Hall.

I would like to see similar recognition, by Victorians, of Muriel Heagney, one of the most effective "Stirrers and Shakers" (to use Geoff Serle's term) of a later time. Muriel Heagney was active in the labour movement for most of her long life. In the twenties she was a member of the ALP Executive and began her long struggle for equal pay for women. She called a conference on maternity allowances in 1923 and founded the Labor Guild of Youth in 1926. During the Depression she began The Unemployed Girls' Relief Movement. Ross McMullin, the historian of

the ALP, wrote that, "During the 1930s Heagney had no peer in advancing the cause of women in the labour movement."

She was stirring and shaking for equal pay for women, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. How many defeats she endured! I knew her quite well during this time. Night after night she would come into the Public Library of Victoria checking Law Reports, Arbitration Commission papers, Hansard, Votes and Proceedings, great piles of these tomes, night after night. I would make her a cup of tea about 9 p.m. but it was difficult to get her to stop working. She was shabby, bowed; what once must have been a charming, witty expressive face, was set in sad and determined lines. Her talk was objective, factual; there was a certain soft bitterness. So many, including many in the ALP, had ignored her quiet, reasoned advocacy for so long. Ironically, she died, aged eighty-eight, in May, 1974, just weeks after the Arbitration Commission, as McMullin writes, responding to the Whitlam Government's policy on equal pay, extended the adult minimum wage to women. Did Muriel know? I hope so. Few Australians have done more for social justice. I would like to see a biography of Muriel Heagney – and, yes, a sculpture in her memory in central Melbourne.

The demonstrations and marches of Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland are now being repeated in Jeff Kennett's Victoria. I was one of ten writers who supported Barry Hill in a letter to the *Age* (6 November). We pointed out that while the previous Labor Government was discredited and the Kennett Gov-

ernment, with its huge majority, certainly had a mandate for change, it did not have a mandate to dismantle civil rights in the work place. Acts are being pushed through Parliament to give effect to details of policies deliberately not described before the election. Are we beginning to see the application of a blueprint of Thatcherite policies, the dire results of which can now be examined in the present state of the United Kingdom?

We were caned for our presumption in writing this letter by a correspondent who said that we had, as writers, no special claim to speak on these matters. Of course we haven't. But we have the rights of any other citizens. Amusingly, he quoted the late James McAuley in support of his arguments, McAuley who in his lifetime made far many more political public statements than any other poet before or since!

The new Victorian Government has already provided more than its share of horse-laughs. Jan Wade, the Attorney-General, in full Thatcher flight, announced the abolition of the Law Reform Commission. According to Ms Wade the Commission did not use Government funds efficiently. But there were no Government funds! The Commission was funded by the legal profession, some of whom – the senior barristers – had good reason to think the Commission had better be stopped, and quickly. Mr Kennett and Ms Wade obliged with startling speed.

This is the time of year when we think about the books we *really* enjoyed reading this year and pass on the news, for the holidays, to other readers. A chancy business, recommending books. I have

been experimenting: what comes to mind easily, and with pleasure, of all the books I've read this year? Free association. There are some surprises, particularly best-sellers which were much better as literature than one could reasonably expect. Celebrity, as we've seen in the case of Tom Keneally, often leads to undervaluation by the taste-makers. I picked up Richard Condon's *The Final Addiction* (St. Martins Press, 1991) at my local library. Condon, of course, made his name with best-sellers like *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Prizzi's Honor*. With recent novels he has emerged as a remarkable satirist. *The Final Addiction* is pure prussic acid on the American Presidential electoral process. Timely. And very funny. Condon is a stylist with a gift for slyly inserting, here and there, words newly invented. All seem inevitable. Condon is as stylish and as savage as Gore Vidal, and a better story-teller.

Arnold Zable's memoir *Jewels and Ashes* (Scribe) was mentioned in a previous 'On the Line'. Don't miss it. I'm pleased to see that, after a quiet beginning, word-of-mouth has made it a runaway success. The first edition and a reprint sold out and it is now in the third printing. Harcourt Brace will publish it in the U.S. next year. *Jewels and Ashes* has won five national literary awards. Not bad for a first (adult) book and a small publisher. This is an intricately crafted work which in its humour and pain, both terrible, makes reading a lively engagement.

My favourite book of the year (actually, first published in 1990) is Isaiah Berlin's *The Crooked Timber of Humanity; Chapters in the History of Ideas*, now in paperback (Fontana, \$14.95). This is Berlin's fifth book of essays and is of the same quality as the earlier books which contained some works which, justly for once, were called "seminal". My pleasure is as much in Berlin's prose as in his ideas and the range of his learning. These eight essays constantly surprised me with their sharp relevance to what is happening right now. His subjects cover the conservative critique of the French Revolution, European unity, relativism, the effects of romanticism, Giambattista Vico, and a survey of the decline of Utopian ideals. The book's memorable title derives from a rather

free translation of a sentence in Kant's notebooks.

Bernard Smith is another notable voyager on the ocean of ideas. His *Imagining the Pacific* (Melbourne University Press, \$89.95) should not be missed. It will be reviewed by John McLaren in our next issue. The essay on the origins of Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* was a highlight of my reading year. The publishers have produced a beautiful book, superbly illustrated. Put this on your library list.

I enjoyed another contribution to the history of ideas: David Lehman's intellectual thriller (and very funny too) *Signs of the Times; Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (André Deutsch). Can you imagine laughing out loud while reading a serious, scholarly book? You will with this one. Lehman's balance and respect for the evidence, his good manners, are devastating. Oh, how some grandees of the Modern Language Association, such as Barbara Johnson and J. Hillis Miller, tied themselves into knots defending de Man after an innocent but diligent bibliographer inadvertently revealed his anti-semitism. And then there was the family he dumped in South America and seemed to forget – it did not inhibit his 'marriage' in the U.S. (convenient for citizenship). With a text like de Man's no wonder he followed Barthes in announcing the death of the author. With such a history no wonder de Man wrote "Considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint."

Just as *Imagining the Pacific* is far more than an "art book" so is David Sylvester's *Magritte* (Thames & Hudson). By close attention to biographical detail, especially accounts of Magritte's childhood and early adult years, by connecting the 'text' meticulously with the 'author', Sylvester illuminates Magritte's unforgettable images and reveals a great deal about their power to disturb. What extraordinary paintings Magritte made, and how quickly they travelled from provincial Belgium to find a place in the visual memories of so many everywhere. Time was when the art directors of thousands of advertising agencies had their dreams invaded by Magritte. And his images ensnared so many poets.

There is a Magritte-like scene in one of the most literate and intriguing crime novels of recent years, Michael Dibdin's *Cabal* (Faber). His Italian detective hastily hides in a seedy Milan palazzo in a great room full of human-size dolls dressed in the latest fashion. He freezes into a designer doll as the killer steps by. If, for the holidays, you want a change from P. D. James or Elmore Leonard try Michael Dibdin. His prose is like dry ice and the reader is placed firmly in the ensuing fog.

And talking of crime novels, have you noticed that Robin Wallace's books are getting better and better? Don't miss *Blood Money*. Few Australian fictions so vividly create the sense of place we find in Wallace's novels, in his case the small country towns of southern N.S.W.

As for novels generally, quite a few come to mind and none more rapidly than Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game* (Penguin, \$14.95), just the book for long spells of quiet, enchanted reading. Andrew Reimer wrote acutely about this novel in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Tom Shapcott in the last *Overland*. Some of the most beautiful pages of fiction I've read this year were in Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino* (McPhee Gribble, \$29.95). I have reservations about the whole work but none at all about some sections which have an extraordinary beauty. I also discovered, a little late as is the way of readers, another memorable Garner piece 'Three Acres, More or Less' in *Gone Bush*, a collection edited by Roger McDonald (Bantam, 1990). Garner creates a world where a woman in her safe, beautiful valley suddenly is taken by fear. I thought of Barbara Baynton. Garner is much less emphatic, more complex, just as devastating.

I have no reservations about Robert Drewe's *My Sunshine* (Picador, \$14.95). Another "Ned Kelly book" – that's enough to turn you off. If you overcome this you will find a unique work: a short novel made up of many short sections each of which has the power and concentration of a lyric poem. A story takes hold and grows with wit, capricious and cruel, sun and frost, into legend.

And no reservations either about Thea Astley's *Vanishing Points* (Heinemann, \$29.95). Astley's prose,

especially in the books of the last ten years or so, is like the best champagne, dry, biting, full of sparkle. These two novellas distil a fierce anger and a hopeless love affair with the human race. Are we laughing or screaming?

I've come late to the novels of Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (Bloomsbury) and *In the Skin of a Lion* (Pan) and to those of Amos Oz. Better late than never. In *To Know a Woman* (Harcourt Brace) Amos Oz, with his secret agent now without secrets, creates with lucid prose, spare but dense with implication, a world which connects, for me, with that of the early Camus. I'll now read all of his books.

Is it only in the United States that highly accomplished novelists deal successfully with suburban worlds, the pride and prejudice of the quotidian? Think of the great John Cheever. And think, too, of Anne Tyler and John Updike. I'd taken a rest from Anne Tyler for some years but I'm glad I picked up her latest, *Saint Maybe* (Random House), at the local library. It is perhaps her best and is now in Australia in paperback (Vintage, \$12.95).

It was this year that I read the final book of Updike's quartet, *Rabbit at Rest* (Deutsch, 1990). I've long had some resistance to Updike but this final part of the quartet swept that away. Updike is a master.

Bill Bryson's travel books are very funny, nicely written, and full of surprises about often familiar places. And some not so familiar such as the dread Hammerfest, the most northerly town in the world where Bryson in *Neither Here Nor There* (Morrow) went to see the Northern Lights. In this book he

wanders, clumsily and with due irreverence, about Europe, taking in odd parts of Belgium (why?), nasty little Lichtenstein, finding some tough truths about contemporary Florence, falling in love with Rome, and ending his erratic journey in Istanbul. He had me smiling all the way.

You do not have to have a garden to enjoy reading garden books, a few of them anyway. Not those coffee table books of glossy photographs, but those well-written few which are personal memoirs about making a garden. Even non-gardeners can dream of gardens. In the great tradition of Gertrude Jekyll, Russell Page and Christopher Lloyd, Susan Irvine has written *Garden of a Thousand Roses* (Hyland House, \$29.95). She tells of finding an old blue-stone cottage near Kyneton, Victoria, and rather more hectares than she needed of barren, windswept land. Here she made her wonderful garden. A most engaging writer she wears her scholarship (post-graduate work in Germany) lightly and, *rara avis*, tells of disasters as well as triumphs and lucky accidents. Charm and common-sense abound. If you want cultivation, in every sense, here it is.

The year brought its usual disappointments, among them two books by writers I admire. Both books were much boosted, and both fell flat for me: Barry Humphries' autobiography and Robert Hughes' *Barcelona*. Humphries writes very well about his childhood in the first three chapters of *More Please* (Viking, \$34.95) and, later on, there is an arresting account of his alcohol holidays where, conveying his disassociation, he writes in the third person. For

the rest his prose reads as if it came not from sharp memory but from press cuttings.

On a good day few write better sentences than Robert Hughes, as for instance in his long essay on Goya (*In a Critical Condition*). But, in the main, *Barcelona* is stodgy, the soggy middle sections reading as if written by a committee of researchers. And so many dull quotations from so many bad poets and songwriters of the last century. A plodding work with little of the élan we associate with Hughes.

My last "book of the year" came from my favourite secondhand bookshop, a handsome hardback edition in 'mint condition' (as they say in the trade) of *The Letters of John Cheever* (Simon and Schuster, 1988), which I snapped up for fifteen dollars. I had read it before but have enjoyed it even more this time around. Cheever did not think his letters would be published: "Saving a letter is like trying to preserve a kiss." Disliking the telephone, wanting his friends and distracting himself from thinking of the next drink, he wrote thousands. Luckily his friends kept lots of them. He writes of everyday occurrences, what he sees from his window, what someone just said, the book he is reading, the writing process. I do not think Cheever could write a dull sentence. On the other hand he wasn't too good at spelling. This is a great bedside book.

You ask what about poetry this year, Ashbery, Dobson, Mudrooroo, Robert Harris, Ken Bolton? They have all been written about in *Overland* and I'm on holiday. I get quite enough poetry at home.

Barrett Reid

ROWAN CAHILL

## Another View of the Sixties

I ENJOYED John Herouvim's comments on the Sixties (*Overland* 126), an era ill served in print; as he points out *Seizures of Youth* by Gerster and Bassett does little except perpetuate media and advertising myths about the period.

One myth is that being a radical in the Sixties was easy, a simple adolescent role one fashionably slipped into. As one of the radical 'leaders' of that era, variously arrested, jailed, spied upon, vilified in NCC literature and *The Bulletin*, etc, this role-playing thesis is a vast distortion.

For a start, radicalisation tended to be a *process*, not an instant conversion. For me, it began in a NSW State secondary school between 1958 and 1963, courtesy of some caring and – for their time – radical teachers (amongst them a Communist and an Andersonian), and a humanities curriculum that in *their* hands encouraged questioning and wide (if precocious) extra-curricular reading (e.g., Orwell, Huxley, Freud, Anderson, Russell and A. D. Hope), encouragement that was not in accord with the attitudes of my parents, nor the prevailing spirit of the Menzies era.

In Leaving Certificate English I got a solid dose of the Romantics, a glimpse of the world of Jacobin intellectual circles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, from this, an inkling that protest and rebellion were perhaps okay. The 'new' History syllabus aimed at linking the social, economic and political in the context of world history from 1750 onwards. From this viewpoint I arrived at the idea that revolution was maybe a historical necessity and also found – in spite of Empire/Commonwealth Day and 'God Save the Queen' it was hard to be in love with imperialism.

I left school with real, if basic, intellectual tools and with a belief that life could be understood and that it was possible to make sense out of bewildering

data. I left, too, with the knowledge that not everything passed on as historical fact and wisdom was what it claimed to be. Later, Sydney University, being conscripted and the Vietnam War merely continued and accelerated a process that had already begun.

The "protest as an adolescent fashion" thesis assumes a couple of things. As Herouvim points out, first "that there was really nothing for anyone to get steamed up about". Forget the tragedy that was the Vietnam War, forget censorship, and the lies and distortions peddled by Australian politicians and a tame press. This modish and shallow view also assumes that protest was easy, that there were not family divisions, no tension or bitterness, and that 'little things' – such as the Army's brutal treatment (torture?) of anti-conscriptionist Simon Townsend – perhaps did not occur at all.

The adolescent 'fashion' idea also assumes that Australia in the 1950s was some sort of golden-age paradise, so come the 1960s there wasn't much to worry about. Let's simply forget about censorship in the Fifties, and the Cold War and its crippling impact on intellectual life; also the cringing fear of Asia and an era of government which cultivated the idea that an individual's democratic responsibility ended at the ballot box. And, while we're about it, let's also forget the "nowhere land" concept of our nation – one that held that we had too little past to bother understanding, little culture to speak of, and a future understood only in terms of powerful-friend politics.

To some extent – thought not with any sense of regret – I regard my radical youth as a 'lost youth', in the sense that I missed out on a lot of the hedonism associated with being young. In the mid-to late-Sixties I had a sense of being hunted, as the military authorities chased

me for failing to attend medical tests, and the State authorities prosecuted me for my role as publisher of the student journal *honi soit*. Brief and claustrophobic experiences of jail did not make the prospect of a prison term attractive, and martyrdom was not high on my psychological and political agenda.

Looking back on the 1950s and 1960s, Australia now seems like another country. But we should never forget the stultifying conservatism of Australia that the student revolt played a part (and I emphasise *part*, for it was only a part) in helping bring the curtain down upon. Gone forever now (one hopes) is that Cold War Australia where it was okay to conduct nuclear experiments on Aborigines and servicemen, where prime ministers played toady courtier to visiting royalty; that era in which Communists were 'Reds' and the Yellow Peril was about to engulf us all; when America was God and it was patriotic to be subservient to U.S. strategic and economic interests; and when newspaper editorials spewed crude anti-laborism, and ASIO mobilised to prevent the likes of Zelman Cowen, Alan Walker, Jimmy Carruthers, Lloyd Rees, Chips Rafferty and Manning Clark from setting the tumbrils rolling. It seems another world, too, in which I tentatively committed my first crime against the State, purchasing the banned 1961 Penguin *The Trial of Lady Chatterly*.

Herouvim is right in pointing out that it is a myth that Sixties radicals have abandoned their radicalism. Sure, some have. (Scratch an economic rationalist these days and you are likely to find an ex-Marxist!) But it has not been a blanket sell-out; like John, I believe there are a lot of Sixties values largely intact all over the place and, in my family at least, the indications are that these have been passed on.

In a recent interview (*Rolling Stone*,



September 1992) Noam Chomsky made clear why people want to trivialise and marginalise the Sixties. He argues that the Sixties were a time when people were not apathetic and passive, and leadership was not a top-down imposed phenomenon – when ordinary people came to believe that they could change things, and even tried to do so. As he went on to point out:

We are (now) meant to think of popular movements as things that grow out of individual leadership and individual charisma. The reason we are meant to think that is that it disempowers people. It makes them think they can't do anything for themselves.

*Rowan Cahill is a writer and teacher. Amongst other works he is the author, with*

*David Stewart, of Twentieth Century Australia; Conflict and Consensus.*

### Kurt Wiese Drawings in Mitchell

JOAN CLARKE

[Irmtraud Petersson wrote in *Overland* 126 (Autumn, 1992) about Kurt Wiese (1887–1974) and his little known Australian books and illustrations. The world famous illustrator (Bambi etc) was interned in Australia 1916–1919.]

When researching for my biography *Max Herz: Surgeon Extraordinary* (APCOL, 1976) I first discovered Kurt Wiese. Herz and Wiese were fellow internees at Trial Bay from 1915 to 1918. When Herz established his Deutsches Theater inside the old gaol, producing works by leading German dramatists

and some by Ibsen, Pinero and Shaw, Wiese not only produced posters for each play but often participated in the productions.

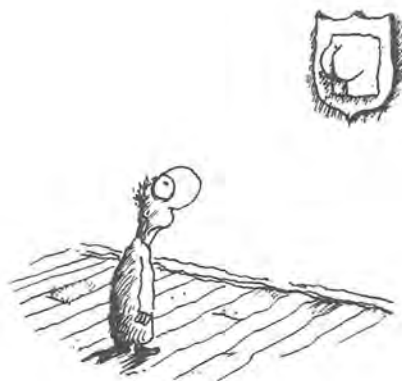
In my book on Herz are photographs of some of Wiese's posters and of his other delightful drawings recording the activities of the Trial Bay internees. These were reproduced from Wiese's original artwork which he gave to his good friend Dr Herz prior to his repatriation to Germany. They are now amongst the Max Herz papers in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and are probably the only original Wiese drawings in Australia.

While I knew that Wiese had later become a successful artist in the United States, I did not know about his children's books. For that information I am most grateful to Dr Petersson, and, of course, to *Overland*.

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## A Winter's Saturday Afternoon in Melbourne

In an old masonic hall  
I saw a bum upon a wall  
I saw its mournful, aimless stare  
And saw that life was cold and bare



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*From Michael Leunig's wonderful A Bunch of Poesy (Angus & Robertson), \$16.95) a collection of over 60 poems with accompanying cartoons gathered from Leunig's 22 years with the Age and with Nation Review. Seven collections of Leunig's drawings and two books of his poems have been published but this piece of magic, we think, his first hardback.*

PHILLIP DEERY

## The Long March of Laurie Short

WITH THE FUNERAL of communism in the land of its own birth and with the Soviet Empire smouldering in its own ashes, a turning point in history has been reached. August 1991 witnessed the death of an ideology that outlasted its shelf-life and the extinction of *Homo sovieticus* in all his cheerful proletarian hollowness. Although Russia is now on the brink of convulsive social upheaval, the West will remember only the speed and apparent ease with which the USSR vanished. The corpse of communism will quickly pass into history and out of our consciousness. Soon it will be consigned to the dustbin of forgotten failures.

In this context it is easy to forget how high the guiding light of communism raised expectations or how thoroughly it dazzled hundreds of millions of human beings; one of the many worshippers in Australia was Laurie Short. It is also easy to forget, now that the Cold War is over, the degree of fear, hatred and malice that communism aroused in its opponents; one who gave full expression to these feelings was the same Laurie Short. Marxist ideology thus has the ability not only to inspire lofty ideals, intense dedication and selfless sacrifice but also to provoke fanatical and well-equipped crusaders intent upon its destruction. It is rare for one person to straddle both extremes, to embody such opposites. The story of how this was achieved has now been told in *Laurie Short: A Political Life*, an impressive biography written by his daughter, Susanna Short.

This biography traces the steps that one man took along his road to Damascus. The ideological transformation of Laurie Short took him from enthusiastic advocate of class struggle and world revolution (1930s) through messianic anti-com-

munist warning of blood flowing in Australian streets unless the Red Menace were stopped (1950s) to cautious respectability and ABC Commissioner (1970s). It was during the early 1950s that Short's life reached its climax and when he etched his mark on Australian Labor history. In 1949 he stood against the all-powerful communist general secretary of the Federated Ironworkers' Association, Ernie Thornton. As predicted, he 'lost' but challenged the result in an historic court case. Two years later the judge found "forgery, fraud and irregularity on a grand scale" and declared Short legally elected; his reputation as a 'mushroom gladiator' was established.

Like so many of his generation Laurie Short was radicalised by the Great Depression. His attraction to political ideas, first cultivated at home – his father flirted with the anarcho-syndicalist theories of the I.W.W. – was soon nourished at Sydney street-corner meetings by speakers forecasting the collapse of capitalism. In 1931, at the age of 15, he joined the Young Communist League. His lifelong concern with communism had commenced. His ardent dedication to the cause led Short to leave home (his father now supported Jack Lang whom the son denounced as a "social-fascist"), provoke arrest and serve time in Long Bay jail. This was in 1932, the year he first moved to Balmain – the setting for his future industrial and political ascendancy.

The brash, pugnacious and independent Short soon found the style of Stalinist politics unpalatable. In one of the great ironies of his life, he criticised the expulsion of a young Ernie Thornton from the Communist Party; his defence of Thornton triggered his own expulsion from the Young Communist League. Within a year Short was a foundation member of Australia's first Trotskyist group, the Workers' Party of Australia (Left Opposition). He remained formally committed to Trotskyism until 1949. Four years after his breach with the Trot-

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*Susanna Short: Laurie Short; A Political Life (Allen & Unwin/Lloyd Ross Forum, \$29.95).*

skyists an audience of ironworkers heard Short, now their national leader, make this dire warning:

Should the countries in the Soviet orbit win this cold war, humanity will be plunged into an age of darkness – an age more barbarous than any before known in the history of mankind... [W]here necessary, armed resistance must be waged if the whole of the human race is not to be engulfed by the dark forces of Soviet communism.

By now, Laurie Short had completed the journey from total faith in communism to total rejection. En route he had been politically vilified, emotionally bruised and physically bashed. He was indeed, as James McClelland remarked, a Jack

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*"He was indeed... a  
Jack Kerouac of Australian politics."*

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Kerouac of Australian politics. Although heading in different directions, each took the road less travelled.

Short's path to the Right becomes less twisted, less deviant the more it is related to three 'contextual' signposts. First, the post-war dominance of communist union officials, particularly (from Short's perspective) in the powerful Federated Ironworkers' Association where Ernest Thornton seemed invincible. Second, the domestic consequences of Cold War anti-communism, which completely polarised attitudes in the Labor movement and elsewhere. Third, the ideological struggle between Stalin and Trotsky, which induced in their followers an especially poisonous brand of malevolence.

In the first context, the immediate and familiar industrial milieu, Susanna Short expertly locates her father. The power struggles, the ballot-rigging, the thuggery and intimidation, the protracted court cases – all are unravelled and analysed with flair and clarity. In addition, the dramatic tensions of these turbulent events are strongly evoked.

In the second area the author certainly refers to the bitter ideological climate of the early Cold War years – the time when Short was severing his allegiance to his Trotskyist comrades. But she neglects to explore the extent to which Short's formal break with Trotskyism in February 1949 was associated with the onset of the Cold War. It was not until the late 1940s that Australians such as Short seriously

felt that society was under siege from communism. This feeling took two forms. The first was the external threat: expansion from the Soviet Union and the spread of its ideology. The second was the internal fear: subversion from within. The twin questions of loyalty and national security only began to converge from about 1947; together they



Two cartoons which clearly reflect the changing power of the ironworkers' union: the first when Thornton was still leader, in 1951; the second after Short assumed leadership in 1952.



gave strong momentum to the gathering forces of virulent anti-communism. It seems highly plausible that Short's rupture with his past in February and his subsequent formation of an ALP Industrial Group in the FIA in May were influenced by the intensity of this Cold War atmosphere.

But it is at the final 'contextual signpost' that Short's biographer is at her weakest. The fanaticism of Laurie Short's anti-communism, his undeviating and unyielding quest to dislodge communists such as Thornton, his ability to overcome threats and resist pressures that would have crushed many other toughened unionists, has a missionary zeal, an obsessional determination about it that was highly

unusual among non-Catholic Laborites at the time. Susanna Short emphasises traits in his personal makeup: single-mindedness, puritanism, inflexibility and obsessiveness. (In a scholarly manner she is not afraid of judging her father harshly.) However, the venom and remorselessness with which he attacked communists in the 1940s and 1950s can be fully comprehended only when we connect it to the fratricidal warfare within the world communist movement in the 1930s.

The hatred felt by Stalinist communists towards Trotskyist communists and vice versa is now difficult to appreciate. One has to read almost in disbelief (as Short most certainly did) the extraordinary allegations made by Stalin's accusers at the Moscow show trials of 1936-38. Old Bolsheviks like Bakunin, whose theoretical works the youthful Short avidly read, were condemned as "Trotskyite saboteurs and wreckers" and executed. During this time, Short supported the POUM in the Spanish Civil War, an independent socialist party ruthlessly suppressed not by Franco but by Stalin. Then, in 1939, Trotskyists (and others) were shocked by Stalin signing a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany which gave Hitler the green light to start World War II. Finally, in 1940, Short's spiritual father, Leon Trotsky himself, was assassinated by one of Stalin's agents. Throughout the 1930s the Communist Party of Australia faithfully echoed and reproduced Stalin's "line" on Trotsky. It is little wonder that Trotsky's small, isolated band of followers in Australia would come to see Stalinism/communism as the incarnation of evil, a view they would carry with them through the Cold War years.

If these comments imply criticism of Susanna Short's work, it is a criticism of emphasis and balance in explaining her father's political journey, not of the book's overall merit. For it is a fascinating story of a remarkable man, full of drama, duplicity, intrigue and violence. Heads as well as doors were kicked. Ideals as well as positions were lost. Short emerges from the maelstrom of post-war politics with his principles largely intact. As John Kerr remarked soon after becoming Governor-General in 1974: "Y'know, I could never understand that man. He had every door open to him and he stayed a union secretary!"

But the book is more than a study of one man and his long battle for the control of one trade union, central as that battle is to Short's life. For it offers fresh insights into that cast of familiar characters that dominated Labor politics as well as the more shadowy figures who clustered around the Catholic Social Studies Movement, the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom or the United

States Embassy. We are reminded, for example, how B. A. Santamaria offered John Kerr the leadership of the newly-formed DLP; how critical Movement money and "the army of foot soldiers" was in ensuring anti-communist victories in particular unions; how closely interlocked were Kerr, McClel-



*An indication of the Cold War atmosphere in which Short challenged the communist union leadership of the F.I.A.*

land and Short: all former Trotskyists, they became in the 1950s "three parts of the one brain" and assisted each other to prominence.

We also get a glimpse into the lives of the less prominent: the artist Nancy Borlase, Laurie Short's wife, is one. It is from her that we hear one of the least generous assessments of Short. After he was lavished with praise during a trip to America in 1954, she commented: "He was always susceptible to flattery, being a small man." It is a tribute to the author's integrity that this is included in a published portrait of her father. While the portrait has different faces that change over time, one thing is constant: the author always approaches her subject with skill, intelligence and a sensitivity to the human condition. It is a fine biography.

*Phillip Deery teaches History at the Victoria University of Technology and is the author of Labour in Conflict; the 1949 Coal Strike (Hale and Iremonger).*

**A**DAM LINDSAY GORDON, the poet and horse-rider, who had three books of verse published during his lifetime and rode a number of winners at Flemington, was, because of pecuniary circumstances and some indefinable head troubles, compelled on the morning of the twenty-third of June 1870 to blow his brains out on Brighton beach. I've seen the grave, in the cemetery there. Brighton is a seaside suburb of Melbourne. If you want you can buy an ice-cream there and stroll out along the pier and watch the young boys fishing and the seagulls feeding on their bait scraps and the big grey ships gliding slowly back and forth between the Heads and the Port. They seem so close you could almost touch them, and yet so far away. The problem of distance is something we spend too little time on; much, I think, to the detriment of our otherwise rich creative lives. When A. L. Gordon came to Australia at the age of twenty he travelled from England by ship and he too had thought little on the subject of distance and was surprised to find how much free time he had on his hands. He smoked his pipe often, up on the poop-deck, and wrote a few seafaring verses as he listened to the magical swell of the sea. One evening a young woman encountered him up there and asked him what he was doing. Writing, he said, and being a bit flighty and a bit nervous and a little overwhelmed on account of her youth she asked him if then he might write a few lines in her album. He did, and the poem, *An Exile's Farewell*, was subsequently published in the collected editions.

The ship docked at Adelaide (to the west of Melbourne) and Gordon walked down the gangplank dressed in a scarlet coat and hunting breeches and soon lost himself in the thronging crowd; though not, of course, before bringing the young lady's hand to his lips and wishing her a pleasant stay. He made his way to the local office of the Mounted Police where a job had been secured for him through the intervention of his father but he didn't last there

long. He was too tall, too thin, altogether too shortsighted and a little too queer in the head. He quietly accepted his dismissal on a Thursday afternoon and took to the road the following day with his new friend Bill Trainor, the circus clown whom Gordon had mistakenly arrested the previous week for his impeccable impersonation of a drunk. They headed east, turned south, and soon found themselves in the country near Mount Gambier where they lived like two old chums in a two-roomed hut by the sea. In winter they smoked and chatted from their respective beds as the mad southern winds whipped the sea into a frenzy and drove ships onto the rocks. The roof rattled and shook, the lamp flickered and spluttered. The waves crashed endlessly on the endless shore. Gordon felt poetic, would walk out into the wind, write great poems in his head, forget them all, write new but worse ones, lose direction and huddle down in the shelter of a dune and pull his knees up to his cheeks.

One night he rides through a howling storm to bring news of a ship wrecked on the coast. He rides like a madman; ragged, uncouth. No sooner does he pull back on the reins and shout at the lighted window of the farm house he's reached than his horse, sweating the foam of the sea, collapses from under him. He's drenched, shivering, doesn't know whether he's really ridden from the sea or merely written a poem in his head. He's taken back to the hut sick with fever and dreams the ride again; the wild eye of the horse as he mounts it, turned violently towards him by the violent tug on the reins; the moonlight, the silver-blue dunes, the wild lashing rain, the sea sounds receding, his breath, the horse's, the farm house, the light. He recovers, and perched on a granite rock high above the boiling sea, his pipe clenched hard between his teeth, he writes.

Summer comes, and with it the all-consuming summer heat. They work inland, breaking horses for pay, riding the long dusty rides between stations, camping out at night beneath a sky full of stars.

Gordon is gloomy, he doesn't know why; perhaps the sun is affecting his head? He remembers the young lady up on the poop-deck, and the magical swell of the sea. He remembers the hedgerows, green fields and thatched houses, gets lost in distances he still can't bridge; between here and home, the hard dry earth and the ethereal sky, poetic thoughts and real written poems; between this makeshift camp under a dome of stars and the untamed horses waiting corralled at the station, a long twenty-mile ride away. He hates this place, hates it with a passion, is full of regrets and self-doubts. He sets off for no reason on wild gallops through the bush but with his poor squinting eyes he doesn't see the low-slung branches and is knocked sometimes unconscious to the ground. He wakes, confused, touches himself, and wonders why he isn't dead. His friendship with Trainor has become one of silences; Gordon ahead, mumbling in the saddle, Trainor behind, a reluctant Sancho, Boswell, Jacques. One day out riding near the Blue Lake at Mount Gambier he makes a suicide attempt that will turn into a legend.

IN 1862 he takes a bad fall near Penola and is nursed back to health in a nearby inn by the landlady's niece, Maggie Park. She is eighteen, he is twenty-nine. Things are bad; why don't they get married? They do; and move across the border into Victoria and settle at Ballarat. It's spring, the air is filled with the scent of flowers and their tiny cottage with its tiny cottage garden is in turn soon filled with the sound of a new baby's cries. Life is beautiful, every-

thing's fine; you almost have to be careful. Strangers dip their hats to you in the wide main street, mothers bend over the baby carriage and tickle the chin of the sweet-smelling bundle inside. Money comes from England, seven hundred pounds, and Gordon buys the adjoining stables and begins breeding and training horses. He's happy, perhaps too happy, and is even heard whistling as he pitchforks straw. Maggie stands at the back door with her hands on her hips her full bosom almost bursting her bodice. Is this too much happiness? How much for God's sake is too much? Gordon turns a horse the wrong way, crashes his head against a gate-post and almost dies from the wound. At ten months old his baby is carried to the grave in a coffin the size of a shoebox; Gordon walks alongside, his head still wrapped in bandages, a pathetic bunch of wildflowers in his hand. One dark night his stables burn down and most of his horses are lost. (Well this is a nice place isn't it, Ballarat?) He runs up debts, takes up racing for money and soon makes a name for himself as a steeplechaser on the Western District tracks. His eyes are no better but he rides no less recklessly; if he doesn't fall he wins, if he falls he can't ride again for weeks and is in debt all over again. Maggie nurses his wounds as she has done from the first, saying sweetly with a sweet wife's concern: Please try to be a little more careful Adam, your head can't take too much more of this. To which Gordon can only reply with brooding silence and the wish deep in his heart that like a horse he could be shot.

His old friend Bill Trainor comes to visit and urges him to give up racing and sell his poetry

### COMING IN OVERLAND 130 AUTUMN 1993

Stories by Odette Snellen, R. N. Callander. Mini stories from China

Barry Hill on Travelling Towards the Other

Bob Reece writes on glimpses of Australia in contemporary Irish writing

*The Ern Malley Affair* by Michael Heyward: an extract from the sparkling and finely researched book to be published August/September by U.Q.P. and, in England, by Faber

Poems by Stefanie Bennett, Geoffrey Dutton, Geoff Page and many more

Trevor Hay on Eric Rolls' *Sojourners*

David Goodman on Greg Denning's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*

instead. He takes up Bill's suggestion and has two volumes published but neither of them sell and the debts pile up again. He moves to Melbourne, rides at Flemington, each time hoping his next fall will be his last. He wants to die, rides more wild and reckless every day because of it, and is fast becoming a racing legend. Men cheer him down the straight to the post with their hats describing circles in the air. Women swoon at the sight of his death-defying bravery. Young boys ride their broomstick horses down the backstreets of Melbourne in a mad imitation of his style. *But if only they knew how much I wanted to fall*, he says as he peers into the haze before him; *if they only knew how much I wanted to fall!* Clods of turf whizz past his ears, he can smell the horse's sweat, the sound of hooves and poems thunder through his head. *If only they knew how much I wanted to fall!* He brings the horse back to scale to wild applause from the stands then sneaks out to the stables where he sits huddled, weeping, in a corner on the straw. The beach at Brighton can't be far away now.

News comes from England that he may be entitled to a share of an old family estate in Scotland and he borrows heavily on the hope. He and Maggie buy a small house at Brighton and Gordon begins to make contact with the poetic circles in Melbourne. He has published a new volume – memories of the hut on the wild southern coast – and now makes plans for another. Something's stirring, it seems like life might at last be offering him a more gentle, helpful hand. He drinks long hours at the Yorick Club on Collins Street then walks the eight miles home to Brighton; new poems flashing, whirling, then crystallising in his head. On the twelfth of March 1870 he rides again at Flemington – the last time, he says – in the hope of clearing his debts in one go. He falls at the second jump, remounts, dazed and disoriented, recovers ground and regains the lead then falls again and is taken home badly hurt. The doctor diagnoses internal injuries but above all Gordon's head is now on fire. News comes from England that his claim to the estate has been swept away. He puts his head on Maggie's breast and she strokes his burning temples. There's the smell of a hard-ridden horse's sweat in his nostrils and a high post-and-rail fence before him. A cold eye of blue, an all-annihilating stare. Birds fly up from the tea-tree scrub on the dunes at Brighton beach.

There are a couple of accounts of Gordon's last night, one better of the two. His fourth volume of poetry was due out the following day and in the afternoon he went to the publishers to ask for the bill. He met Henry Kendall at the Argus Hotel and they drank until five o'clock. Earlier that day he'd

asked a friend to lend him a hundred pounds to get him back to the England but the friend had refused and Gordon was now down to his last few shillings. Kendall left, and two young poets, admirers of his, invited him to their table and bought him a drink. They'd just been discussing Gordon's poetry, they said, how it was written the way he rode; wildly, recklessly, with little care for the fine finishing touch. Was this the direction that poetry should take? In a raw land shouldn't our poetry be raw and wild too? Gordon shook his head, mumbled indistinctly, left the pub and caught the train to St Kilda then walked the long walk home to Brighton. A half moon followed him, sliding ghostly in and out between the clouds. He hardly spoke to Maggie that night; they ate their tea in silence and she went early to bed. She only vaguely remembers him kissing her and whispering something softly in her ear some time around dawn.

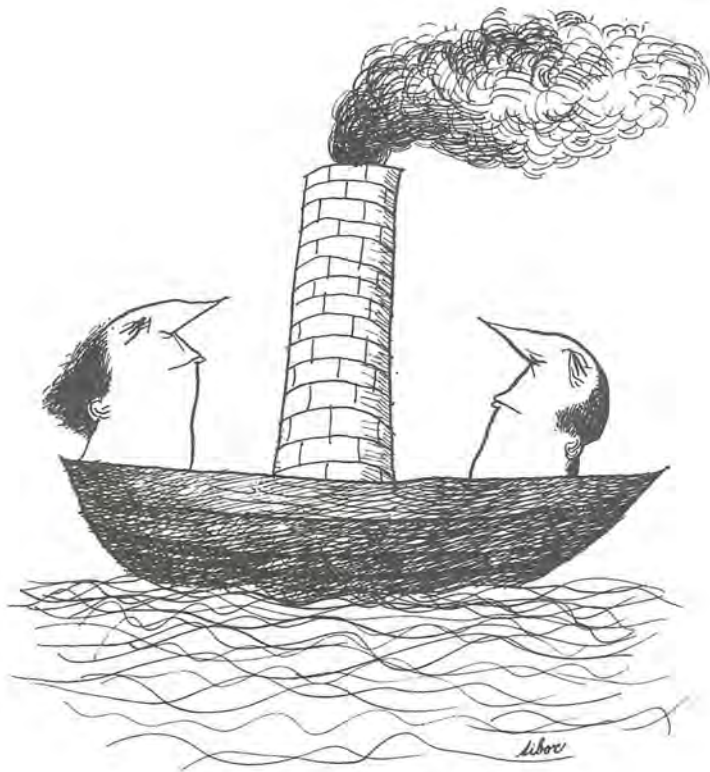
Gordon rose at daybreak; a cold grey sky, a miserable day. He dressed and knelt beside the bed where Maggie still lay sleeping and spoke softly, in a whisper, so as not to wake her: *Maggie, I'm sorry, the time has come*. He pushed back a lock of hair and kissed her gently on the forehead then strode out into the murky dawn and turned towards the beach. Some fishermen later said they saw him walking through the scrub between the road and the water; a lanky figure with a wide-brimmed hat and a rifle in his hand. He found a hollow between two dunes, shielded on all sides by low tea-tree scrub, and sat down to smoke his pipe. He listened for a while to the gentle swell of the sea and the sound of the waves on the shore. The young lady had asked him what he was doing up there on deck and he'd answered with one word: writing. A long forgotten smile tightened in the corners of his lips. He rested the rifle between his knees, muzzle towards him, and placed a forked stick onto the trigger. He leant forward, put the muzzle into his mouth, and pressed gently with one foot on the free end of the stick. A shot rang out, birds flew up from the tea-tree scrub on the dunes behind him, and Adam Lindsay Gordon, poet and horse-rider, was very quickly dead. The man who found him later that day, a local farmer searching the scrub for a strayed cow, hardly noted the mess the bullet had made. What struck him most was the upturned hat lying beside Gordon's head, a short cherry-wood pipe and one shilling piece placed carefully inside.

ON THE EVE of Gordon's death the two young poets stayed on in the Argus and drank and talked into the early hours. They both knew the story of

'Gordon's Leap', as most of the racing and poetic fraternity did, and were engaged in a heated debate about it. Some time around 1860 Gordon had been out riding with a group of friends near the Blue Lake at Mount Gambier and a kind of follow-the-leader game had developed. Gordon would spur his horse ahead of the pack, run the animal at a fence, the fork of a tree or a wide creek bed, jump the obstacle and challenge his companions to follow. This his companions had done, despite the increasing madness of Gordon's exploits, and they'd become very vocal about it. Gordon turned his horse around and galloped towards the lake. Then, as now, a high fence bordered the Blue Lake at Mount Gambier – set into the hollow of an extinct volcano; unfathomably deep, indescribably blue – and on the other side of this fence was a narrow ledge, a few feet wide at most; beyond it a three hundred and fifty foot drop to the jagged rocks below. Gordon ran his horse at the fence and the horse took it cleanly, hooves curled up tight. But if, as they say, Gordon had that day wanted to kill himself then the horse cruelly cheated him of his victory.

To the astonishment of all those who watched, it somehow turned itself around in the air, hung there a moment, frozen, then dropped down onto the narrow ledge between the fence and the edge in the only way it could save both itself and its rider.

It was a choice topic for a drunken debate and the two young poets had been going at it non-stop since Gordon had left them at six. One argued from his recently acquired knowledge of the new religious philosophy, now all the rage in Europe, and the idea that Gordon had tried to transform the poetic 'leap of faith' into a real-life leap into the abyss of death. The other argued from the simple fact of Gordon's short-sightedness, that he only made the leap because he couldn't see what was on the other side of the fence. The publican threw them out at three in the morning and they walked from Collins Street down Swanston, over Prince's Bridge and through the Gardens to their room on Domain Road where they continued the debate until dawn. I know the room, just near the corner of Park Street, and a light was burning there last night when I passed by on the tram.



*Jiri Tibor*



## TWO POEMS BY JOHN JENKINS

### REVOLT OF THE WORDS

All across the city, the lights are going out  
and a cleaner sighs in the central library  
above his swishing mop. A clatter of buckets  
leaves the books to silence.

A single light illuminates the long avenues of  
shelves  
where a million volumes stand to attention,  
stacked from A to Z. There's not the whisper of a  
single page,  
and a billion ideas lie dormant in perfect stillness  
of black and white – words waiting to be read.  
A moth lands on a mellow spine  
and closes the covers of its wings.

A small shadow lengthens beneath a book  
like ink from its unturned pages.

A long black stain runs down each shelf  
and out across the polished floor.  
The more you look they more you see  
the words are obeying their gravity.

The words are wriggling loose,  
marching off the page  
leaving sentences behind them, full of holes

as each breaks free, grammar and syntax both  
dissolve  
and there's not a thing that can fix them back in  
place

and the words flow down, in a million  
tiny streams, down from the books, from the  
shelves  
and out across the floor – like ants! Like ants  
marching,  
glinting darkly, out into the night,

leaving all the pages blank behind them  
leaving whole volumes bare,  
only blank and empty books behind

and each stream joins,  
as the words flow beneath the doors, and out,  
and down the steps,  
millions and billions, a black cascade,  
into the night.

Under the street lights,  
a vast black tide is rising  
higher, fed by more words  
from books in shops and books in homes,

Even the words from street signs slide  
down cold steel poles, and the words that say bus  
stop  
join them, and from shops and boards and  
buildings join *them*,  
and neon words and ones a metre high from  
immense movie hoardings,  
all twitch, slip, shiver, descend, drop with a splash  
of ink  
into an animated printed chaos that just moves  
on...

On, in a vast jabber of vowels, sibilance of conso-  
nants  
like the hiss of surf  
in a murmur and clamor of a and e and  
i and o and u...

On, into a frenetic psychobabble and  
onomatopoeia  
of unleashed language from each page in a rush of  
sound and fury...

out into the night.

And even the numbers and date on a soggy train  
ticket left in a gutter,  
And words in a newspaper, barely dry,  
fly away –  
just as a shape in an overcoat holds them up to the  
light...

All these words have become the engines of their  
own desire  
and are rushing out across the night like a vast  
black tide...

down storm drains of the city, and toward the sea.

And even the words that have just been said,  
and words before they are spoken,  
and words in people's minds, just the shadows of  
words –  
and ghosts of words, in ideas –  
are all rushing way into that dark black flow.

Where they crowd and crash and chatter until each  
character,  
each a and b and c,  
splits into a final alphabet babble-soup where  
commas and colons swim,  
and full stops too, though there are no sentences  
now to stop.

And the man on television begins to read the news  
but his mouth just forms into shapes like a goldfish  
and he says nothing.

and the gigantic dreamy shadows of people in  
movies open their mouths, but there's  
nothing...

And the woman who tried to talk on the radio is now  
tapping  
out Morsecode with pencil against the mike –  
tap tap tap – into the wordless night,

and all the words from all the songs are gone,  
leaving just an eerie absence within the music

and a lot of people are playing charades

or are nodding, waving their hands in the air,  
or popping their eyes

some write on pieces of paper  
but it's no good, and even before their words are  
dry –

they're gone!

Swept into a black swirl of ink  
all words, and worlds of words, away –  
Away! Down through endless conduits that never  
sleep –  
in a vast black torrent, to the sea.

## THE MUSEUM OF WISHES

In the Museum of Wishes, legend says, are things  
that never were, every forgotten thing:  
secrets left untold, love unspoken,  
wishes too elusive to be real.  
In the Museum of Wishes, are plans  
never carried out, such is their beauty.  
They rest in ghostly galleries,  
in vast halls of wondering.  
Exhibits, surrounded by silence,  
galaxies without a single star.

There's a map of the Museum of Wishes  
drawn as a footnote to some drab town,  
a dusty exhibit in the history of dreams.  
It gets further away as you drive there;  
people shrug, scratch their heads  
and offer to help, gesturing vaguely towards  
the horizon:

"There must be some mistake," they say.

"Certainly,  
there's no museum here."

In the Museum of wishes you may  
touch things best forgotten,  
unloved, unsaid, not there,  
in aisles and galleries as endless  
as speculation. People say,  
if there was no Museum of Wishes, thoughts  
couldn't stray on Earth. Untranslated  
into life, they accumulate perversely,  
forever refusing to be.

Reading signs in sighs or clouds,  
walking backwards, looking where there is  
clearly no museum,  
you might find it, paradoxically. Enter cruel longing  
at the edge of sleep,  
find a child's abandoned toy. Stumble,  
just by chance, into the Museum of Wishes.

When you return, there's barely a memory:  
a wisp of nothing, useless as a tear.  
Perhaps you cough, and change the subject:  
"Yes the weather has been mild.  
Besides, it hardly matters, does it?"

You drive towards the Museum of Wishes,  
an image in your rear-view mirror, bright  
like a star. Then something distracts:  
the sound of breathing, or profiles  
of clouds persuade false turns.  
You leave the road, and speed away.

"There it is!" and someone tugs your sleeve,  
some day you were almost absent to yourself.  
"There! Beyond the lake", pointing where an  
old bus shelter  
is scribbled by the rain. "There!" into shadows  
and broken glass in a wrecker's yard.  
"There!", then drops your sleeve and says,  
"Why did you bring me here?"

At last, you stop and stretch, or yawn,  
surveying yet another vacant lot.  
You wander down a ruined subway, linger  
on a bridge above a dreaming town. You  
look down at rubble, at some anonymous city,  
stroke your tired smile, adjust your frown.  
You have arrived, and stand silent at last  
on a patch of withered grass.

## REMAINS THE VOID

In the space before us  
vast mounds of objects collected.  
Studied in the half-light  
our guide was emptiness.

Our hearing was the debris,  
born upon the far ground  
at the very end of transport.

By the sturdy table  
sights came and went, unsure,  
Two walls, to enter one room  
of languages and broken lines.

To enter one room,  
old beeswax walls  
moving their known smells  
without man.

Each moment a ruin  
broken away from all understanding,  
Waiting in a passage  
as hardened suspicions fell into obstacle.

Remains the void, against the rise  
of the other.  
Here the form gorged  
vocal stones, cloth and identity.

The nature of our blindness  
devoutly acknowledged  
In the throat of suspension  
dark hands came to massage us.

The other  
the shadow born with us,  
How obtained, found,  
the earliest signal  
rising with the searchers  
from between mounds of dust.

To enter one room  
to wait in a passage,  
no feeling in our hands  
Waiting for impression,  
Guests of a gaze inherent  
with the great forms of wax.

JANETTE ORR

## SPELEOLOGY: THE STUDY OF CAVES

'*Stalactites*' the tour guide said  
and how my daughter liked his shape  
and the flash of his eye  
as he bounced light  
among wild stone

*'hang tightly to the ceiling,  
begin thin as straws.'*

In darkness light is god  
and the uniform of course  
in torchlight,  
among clusters of weeping stars  
her eye whites glimmer

*'calcite blocked, they thicken,  
resemble carrots.'*

and the rest –  
pillars, stems, trees  
a blind world of stone erections,  
skins of elephants and ice

*'stalagmites, might one day touch the ceiling  
in time they thicken.'*

Rock bleeds and blooms in crystal.  
Love bleeds and scars in stone.  
Calcified by savage words  
mother to daughter  
we rasp against the other,  
today, hard as stone.

*'These caves were first explored  
in 1907 by Frank Moon using candlelight.'*

Among these crystal constellations  
such night imagery is tantalising.

Imagine it!  
Discovery by candlelight.

Rich tongues of light  
unpeel the darkness  
wild images flicker  
trembling into shadow.

Beyond his torchglow,  
behind her eyes  
dark caves ripen  
with new discoveries.  
Beneath this stone sky  
raw shapes tremble into light.

CAROLYN MORWOOD

## THE GREAT WHITE HUNTER

the man who has  
nothing to offer  
sits in an office  
being told  
he is not ready,  
vanishing down  
liftwells.

the man who has  
nothing to offer  
walks through employed offices  
unemployed,  
with specifications of himself  
on ten photocopied pages.

the man who has  
nothing to offer  
collapses in offices  
is dissected in hallways  
fails on the steps  
of monumental capitalism  
hesitates in doorways  
stares into magnificent views  
and is somewhere  
else.

the man who has  
nothing to offer  
relaxes in appointment  
rooms,  
while the machinery  
moves the perfect girl  
towards him with a smile.

the man who has  
nothing to offer  
is sent away with  
promises,  
unarmed into the  
radiance of the iron street,  
an insect.

PHIL WALLACH

## BREATHE

In  
and the sky bears down, the earth bears up.  
These houses stagger down the hill in slow arrest.

Grey, grey. Time is wheezing to extinction.  
Someone has thrown their kitchen clock on the  
    iron,  
sick of the whole business.  
Dali-like, it ticks no corrugated hours.

Are you coming back?  
First you must leave and stop sitting there  
in your straight, straight chair,  
arms akimbo to the earth.  
Are you a sign, is this your outpost,  
and what do you see?  
You mean too much.

Out  
Light falls like a dress flung across a chair.  
Gone are the conversations arguing, the chairs  
sighing back from meals  
long relaxed to grease on a window.  
The skin of lovers fills the cracks in floorboards  
converging glossless to a door.

Not for us the genius of butterflies,  
the dry birth of snakes.  
We leave no skeletons, hatch no history.  
We have only the shape of worry in a pillow  
and the vacant shoulders of courage in a coat.

KATE LYONS

## OLD MAN

He functions  
between  
the color of trees

insects fall from his thinning head

there are no surprises  
no dreams between us  
there is  
soil  
in his fingers  
in the creases of his face

we watch aeroplanes  
and the leaves in our sun-space  
too many shadows

in each word  
and sound  
spread out  
and fertilised  
before they dissolve

hat on in his tea-cup  
cooling as he argues about  
mosquitoes smiles

about the worth of cabbage moths  
how many eggs laid by a dove

something  
moving on his face  
he smiles  
at old cat  
                    in his past life  
they holiday together

every year

under the white  
camellia tree

MELODEE UNTHANK

THESE TWO COLLECTIONS\* are part of a trickle which might well turn into a flood, as we come up to the Federal election. It has taken almost a decade for economic rationalist theories and their practical embodiment in government decisions to come under a sustained or systematic attack. So, why the long delay, and why have orchestrated criticisms turned up just *now*?

The symposiasts in the Manne–Carroll book say the delay has occurred because both parties were economic rationalists; so were the key treasury and economic department bureaucrats; so were the media, the bulk of big business and banking. And so were the IMF, World Bank and the British and United States Governments, whose views we have always treated with excessive respect. And, going from the sublime to the abject, university economic departments, with their teachers and researchers, have been overwhelmingly E.R.

So...critics were marginalised, and have had to await the patent failure of the economic rationalist enterprise for their views to gain a platform, or even a hearing. The Michael Pusey explanation – for he has pieces in both collections – concentrates upon our Treasury and university economists as having done the main damage; and *that* seems to be the general conclusion of just about everyone in these books. So, all we have to do is rid ourselves of these obnoxious theorists and their sadistic theories, and all, or most, will be well. Hugh Stretton, among others, calls for something like this.

But the cultural conspiracy story of Treasury economists and academics is surely too simple. It exonerates our governments of the past decade,

implying that politicians are puppets, or easy marks for their bureaucrats and advisers. And that they regularly burnt the midnight oil mugging up on Hayek, Friedman and John Stone. As Peter Chandler, the Dean of the David Syme Faculty of Business at Monash says, “Economists as individuals may recommend intervention, [for example], but it is undertaken by governments. Governments by their very nature make political decisions rather than rational economic decisions.” Chandler is a rather lonely voice in Donald Horne’s choir of dogmatic certainties – perhaps never more so than when he says that there is scant evidence in this country that interventionist policies have led to greater economic welfare for its citizens.

I would like to have seen this assertion developed at length – which it is not – but at least it provides variety to an otherwise unbroken succession of contributors, many of them non-economists, pronouncing that economic rationalism is bad; usually without bothering to provide sustained arguments supporting such a view. We are assailed on one hand by dogma from right-wing think tanks, sometimes funded by the miners, and now counter dogma from government-bankrolled gabfests which leave too many questions unanswered.

As to the Australian economists’ conspiracy story, there is some danger of the parochial fallacy here. Economic rationalist theories, savants, gurus and governments were flourishing in other countries – mainly Anglo-Saxon ones – before we took the plunge. You could say that it was yet another case of monkey see, monkey do – aping the Top People – but this is an argument *ex post facto*.

It might be easier to just consider who benefited from the deregulation of financial markets and banking, the removal of tariffs, the orchestrated decline in real wages; the neutering of regulatory functions over foreign investment, company take-overs and asset stripping, tax scams and money laundering; benefited from privatisation, a reserve

\* John Carroll and Robert Manne eds.: *Shutdown – The Failure of Economic Rationalism, and How to Rescue Australia*. (Text Publishing Company, \$16.95).  
Donald Horne ed.: *The Trouble with Economic Rationalism* (Scribe with the ‘Ideas for Australia’ Committee and the National Centre for Australia Studies, Monash University).

army of unemployed, handing over the media to foreign, right-wing billionaires? The answer, *surely* is the bankers, the miners, lawyers, accountants, media owners, corporate leaders and employers – and the politicians and union chiefs who facilitated this transformation.

Otherwise, we are left with a small-town conspiracy story, or the victory of ideas over matter – a form of philosophical idealism. A material explanation of history, in a world of gross materialism, fits *rather* better. To paraphrase a well-known vaseline salesman, economic rationalism was the theory we just had to have. And this is not to include the World Bank and IMF, which are *not* institutes of busy, impartial, economic intellectuals, though they may be serviced by such minor figures.

The interesting thing about Australia was that this counter revolution was carried through by a party and movement which would normally oppose – fiercely oppose – such a program. So there will be no prizes for answering the question, why did the media, the banks and sections of big business become such fervent supporters of the new Labor Party? Perhaps, even its creators. Why Labor's Left went along with all this, what they got out of this bizarre apostasy, is a separate story in its own right.

Consequently, the accounts of Australian political and economic history of the last decade read like the last voyage of the *Marie Celeste*; no crew, no captain, no map. Names like Hawke and Willis, who pushed privatisation from the word go; Keating who drove through deregulation of the banking and financial systems and floated the dollar; Button who was lyrical about competitiveness and constant tariff cuts; Dawkins, who recycled selected smid-geons of all this drivel...none of these appear in the Horne collection of improving tales. All of them were lost at sea, along with the log. No – it's the economists and the journalists. Incidentally, Brian Toohey puts in his usual lucid, biting piece, reminding us of what a loss it has been to have this voice virtually silenced, while erstwhile journalist colleagues flourish by worshipping Ananias and the Calf of Gold. And our horrendous debt was caused by high-flying entrepreneurs, apparently. Who allowed

them, egged them on, and boasted of them as friends? Pinnocchio?

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*"Our horrendous debt was caused by high-flying entrepreneurs, apparently. Who allowed them, egged them on, and boasted of them as friends? Pinnocchio?"*

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The Manne–Carroll collection is a far more substantial thing, but alas, not a new book. Most of the essays have already appeared or shall soon be in other collections. I for one was misled by the pre-publication hoo-ha.

Since these books came out, some interesting developments have occurred, throwing light upon why the criticisms are appearing *now*. Labor is surreptitiously distancing itself from zero tariff cuts and level playing fields. After all, such policies have already turned Australia into a pub with no beer. *But*, the Liberals, meantime, are pressing on with these policies to the bitter end. If *they* persist, they'll come unstuck. One *doesn't* put people off when unemployment is already high; or tax the poor, especially the new poor, to help the rich, especially the new rich. One doesn't fiddle health care and social services to fix the Budget. This is not England, or, even, America – the timing is all wrong. The task for Labor supporters or potential supporters is to insist that the Labor leaders' retreat from full economic rationalist scenarios is not just a tactical manoeuvre, to be dropped after the election, but rather, signifies a genuine change of heart, a belated return of reason and order to our affairs.

The Manne–Carroll book is *not* governed by such expedience – these people have put their views, against heavy criticism, for a long time – Davidson and Stretton likewise. I hope they are pleased, now that the rice Christians are joining in.

*The fourth edition of The Macmillan Dictionary of Australian Politics by Dean Jaensch and Max Teichmann, entirely revised and updated. (\$29.95) was published in November.*

D. R. BURNS

## The Coming Of The "Contained Account" *Moonlite*, David Foster's Landmark Novel

*Paradox: A statement seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, though possibly well founded or essentially true. (OED.)*

DAVID FOSTER'S novel, *Moonlite*, was published in 1981, but an extract, entitled 'Hiphoray', appeared in *Overland* the year before. From the wealth of natural detail the extract began by offering, it could be inferred that Hiphoray was a quite minute Scottish Western Isle, a place remote, in most respects, from the country in favor of which *Overland* is biased.

On a typical summer approach Hiphoray is a blue shape in the distant mist, a submarine mountain with its peaks above water. Sunlight roving through the cloud illuminates hills of tropic greenness. The reason for this fertility is seen at close quarters: this is one of the great breeding grounds of the North Atlantic, a bottle neck in the marine nitrogen cycle. Visible for half a day, so small, so tall, so jagged, so green in a cobalt sea, the island has a reputation for distracting sailors. There is something here that exceeds the imagination...

With the exception of five hundred yards, the ten mile coastline is sheer cliff, rising over a thousand feet, bare for the first hundred and offering neither landfall nor shelter. Were it not for Village Bay, Hiphoray's harbour, this archipelago would certainly be uninhabited. It is far from any shipping routes, figures on few maps, and is visited only by the rent party, annually, weather permitting.

The outstanding feature of Hiphoray is clear, even in this extract from the extract. It manifests a state of self contradiction. Paradox is embodied in both structure and geographical placement. What distracts sailors and "exceeds the imagination" is clearly the quite excessive seasonal richness, tanta-

lingly glimpsed, something totally at variance with the habitual, intimidating vista of sheer cliff and ocean. Those cliffs, as well as providing the breeding grounds for the teeming birdlife, remind a viewer, even in the season of "tropic greenness", of the island's total exposure to North Atlantic blasts. Quoting from the page of the novel preceding the extract now, "To call these islands exposed is an understatement: the winter gales here lift the heather by its roots." And as with haborage so with husbandry; those who till the soil have been granted only the barest opportunities. "The crops must contend with the worst weather and shortest growing season on the planet."

The Hiphoray-ites, in keeping with this worst of weather, are slovenly and disheartened tillers. But, here, good and bad work together. The exposed position, attracting myriads of birds as well as making the farming soil so meagre, has encouraged the islanders to become perhaps the most accomplished hunters still living by their skill in the Western world at this time (the mid-nineteenth century).

A further major contradiction begins to emerge in the name of the island. "Hiphoray" sounds right for that part of the world. Acceptance of the word as a proper place name may, indeed, precede the awareness that one's leg is being pulled. In all the careful detail of the Hiphorayan way of life, facetious intention operates from right inside the expert detail. Noting this, readers of the *Overland* extract, the dyed in the merino wool ones anyway, could begin to see how "Hiphoray" just might belong within our national fiction despite the lack of any overt reference to the land of Oz.

In 'Act One', the first of the four parts of the novel, the compelling density of detail continues on beyond the extract, as newcomers, the very pregnant Flora MacDuffie and her father, Donald, both expelled from feudal Mugg (!), the nearest other inhabited island, settle among the villagers. The



men of Hiphoray, they come to learn, go on the cliffs mainly to catch the fledgling fulmar, for their flesh, the oil they secrete and their feathers. These birds are sitting ducks since the parents abandon them, fat with regurgitated plankton, when just about ready to fly. Catching them is, for these hunters with reflexes conditioned from childhood, simple and very dangerous work. While the two colleagues hold the other end, the bird snatcher "slips the rope around his waist, ties a knot of rash simplicity and drops over the edge". He signals his way down and up again with tugs. Accidents do occur. Since all ropes are family heirlooms, one does sometimes break, and the bird catcher "goes over". But "it's the mark of a man that he hold his bird and make no sound as he falls" (hundreds of feet onto the rocks and into the coldly surging sea).

Apropos the islander males' skill in moving about on these horrifyingly vertical heights, more scholarly detail is offered:

Born to climb, they climb before they can crawl, and good use is made of a boy's natural grip, by setting him out to hang like a sloth on a rope between cleits, (storage houses), from the day he's born. Yearling boys can scale a house.

Yet, stoically daring as the men of Hiphoray have to be in the narrative present, they do not face the same challenges as their forebears. "The Thumb" is the one such challenge still extant from the legendary past.

The Thumb is the only difficult cliff modern men still climb. It's a cliff on Stac an Armin, so named because of one section, where a man hanging by his thumbs five hundred feet above the ocean, must swing his body sideways and up to the next foothold. Traditionally a boy unable to scale this cliff is forbidden to marry. In actual fact he either scales it or falls in the attempt, which serves the same end.

The prose reads as objective and expert anthropological observation. Which means, in terms of the

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*"All this precise data...is bullshit, of the most expertly contrived kind."*

---

paradox informing the presentation, and as a moment's reflection tells one anyway, that all this precise data about the hunters' prowess is bullshit, of the most expertly contrived kind.

In Australian fiction the earnest delineation of character and situation has tilted, in notable instances, towards bullshitting (*vide* Patrick White's masturbating grocer and Randolph Stow's man-animal Tommy Cross), while Alan Marshall, Dal Stevens and Frank Hardy, the most recent and accomplished leg-pull artist of a long line stretching back to the bush balladists, have, together, ensured that the tall story has a respected place on the local narrative map.

In more recent times, however, their sort of explicit bullshitting has not been so readily acceptable. It has been seen as belonging to the post-feminist past, to those altogether grimmer times when total relief from the hard facts, through fanciful yarning, with a beer by the elbow, was a recurrent and essentially male need.

*Moonlite* may be important to some future study of Australian Sexual Predispositions, then, as the novel in which unequivocal bullshitting makes a respectable re-appearance on the literary scene, having undergone, like Saul of Tarsus, a renaming, to be critically applauded, now, as exploitation of the power of paradox!

And yet – granted *Moonlite* argues its way into Aust. Lit as an extended exercise in old style bullshitting under this new, paradox-permitting admissions policy; granted the final chapters take the young anti-hero, Finbar MacDuffie, Flora's albino and only child, to dig and drink and die on the same goldfields, (in "the New West Highlands"), as those where Richard Mahony set up his store; granted Finbar, once there, willingly spices his prim speech with laconic localisms (learning to signal assent, for instance, with the words "fuckin' oath dead set"); granted that he comes to lie, finally and prematurely, in the same soil as the Eureka dead; why is, nevertheless, the whole first and certainly most brilliant half of this 'Australian' novel concentrated on the humble lives of those who dwell at the furthest possible distance from the Great South Land, in the most obscure and outlying of the Scottish Western Isles?

'Act Two' and 'Act Three', in contrast with the first, are clearly pre-antipodean narrative, by reason of the much freer exaggeration, the much more exhibitionistic disregard of the merely probable practised in them. They accord with the final and frenetic 'Act Four' outcome in the "New West Highlands", which equals Australia, limitless land of the long white lie.

The beginning of 'Act Two' sees the arrival of the Reverend Campbell to undertake the re-Christianisation of Hiphoray, the faith apparently lost when pagan belief reasserted itself in the Middle Ages.

The islanders, with his active Presbyterian prompting, join History. Tourism, both valuing and violating their pristine apartness in a now familiar way, takes over the economy. The net moral effect is made visible in this list of uncomprehended, discarded gift articles:

It seems...perfectly natural the natives should continue to dispose of their rubbish and cast offs in the time honoured way...But whereas a heap of skin, bone, egg shell, excrement and offal, however offensive to the eye and nose, contain nothing the island forces will not eventually erode, the same is not true of the steadily mounting midden around each blackhouse of broken glass, cast iron firedogs, ivory chess men, wire pipe cleaners, porcelain ashtrays, mother of pearl tie pins, incombustible book bindings, keyboard instruments, lawn bowls, napkin rings, false teeth, copper taps, brass gas brackets and other artefacts the islanders can devise no use for.

If the islanders now, in 'Act Two', newly avaricious and wasteful, have broken from the ancient constraints, so too has the prose. Just such sequences of extravagant, exact and almost endlessly accumulating detail occur regularly from here on in.

As part of this restless, ceaseless informational outsurge, the limits imposed by time are also assailed and broken through. The cultural rape of a primitive people mounted by lens-clicking tourists is obviously more a part of our century than theirs. This coincidence of past and present anticipates the way such self-contradiction will run riot in the limitless antipodes, affecting the very idiom of common speech as already indicated.

Paradox is the general condition of existence for the book's anti-hero, young Presbyterian *picaro*, Finbar MacDuffie, sole fruit of Flora's womb. Circumstances send him southward in early manhood, equipped with some Scottish education and, thanks to the Reverend Campbell, all the deeper Protestant prejudices. Travelling overland, he makes for Newbridge, the medieval university city, and, more specifically, for Jesus Christ College. There, clad only, as is his primitive wont, in a plaid blanket, Finbar becomes boots to the more gentlemanly scholars, sleeps on bare boards and religiously refuses wine in hall while he pursues research of the most recondite sort in the theory of Light and, more particularly, the problem presented to Physical Science by the rainbow. Born and nurtured on Hiphoray he is the walking spirit of that place, an individual in whom contradictory states accord. He is voluble about damnation, in the oldest, Calvinis-

tic way, and then about refraction in what seems a highly developed twentieth-century fashion. As that suggests, explicative brilliance continues to be the book's chief feature – the detail offered by the technically expert, very argumentative Finbar always carries conviction.

Possessing a Presbyterian aversion to strong drink, this walking self-contradiction inevitably falls victim to the demon alcohol while still at Jesus Christ. Along with sobriety, he abandons belief in a Central Controlling Power. Thus, godless and a drunkard, he has the qualifications which will permit him to lead a normal enough existence among fellow diggers on the goldfields of the "New West Highlands", as far south of the equator as tiny Hiphoray is to the north.



"Boomtown" is a centre of eager avarice and drunken depravity built around the richest goldmines. Finbar journeys thither with a shipful of dispossessed fellow Scots. Acclimatising instantaneously, he becomes "Moonlite" at the whim of a stage coach driver who has "taken a shine to [him]". The name demarcates that softly, luminous area suited to his strange, strong, (albino) night sight, the domain of those ghostly mythic powers resident in Hiphoray which seemed to have seen him, since his birth as, in some sense, their creature. But, in contradiction of such spook stuff, the hearty coach bloke is also bestowing a moniker very like that worn by one of the all-time bushranging greats.

The spelling "Moonlite", shows twentieth-

century advertising techniques also lending their touch. Throughout 'Act Four', in this humanly chaotic, naturally limitless land to the far, far south, the narrative, as already indicated, disregards literary and temporal limits as flagrantly as the white inhabitants do the Ten Commandments, freely swiping runs of speech, pure ockerisms out of the twentieth-century future. Finbar, at leisure one evening, attends "a (musical) show" about which he is, later, totally dismissive, explaining "the chorus were as ugly as a hatful of arseholes, and the lead man looked like an arrowroot biscuit". The effect achieved by these insertions is one of double vision. The entire Boomtown shemozzle is somewhat us, oafs now as then.

But it is in leaping from squalid to surreal, from groghops to ghostly visitants, that the prose most graphically demonstrates the freedom which is there to be exploited in this land without limits. Finbar's physical and social decline, paradoxically, measures his renewed intimate awareness of those potent secret controlling spirits which still hold sway upon Hiphoray, despite the Reverend Campbell.

Way down here, where paradox, it is clear, rules as strictly as on Hiphoray, only the blacks, the most socially outcast group, have the power to invoke godly visitants. With the narrative moving towards climax, Finbar, now a compulsive grog artist, visits their squalid camp, seeking Sunbeam, his fellow digger, because he is "bustin' for a drink". Which means, since contradictory motivations typically accord, that he has come, thirsting for the truth as well, to those who are centrally placed in the spirit-directed scheme of things.

Black Sunbeam, sensing his friend's deeper need, recounts to him the local beliefs. And,

What worries Finbar most, are the pointed references to his own childhood in this...

The Host, for example, are spirit familiars in the form of birds. The Wawa, from the Hiphoray saga, is actually mentioned by name. Finbar retaliates by telling his story, implicating Sunbeam's home as the Land of the Dark Fairy.

In this scheme of things, it is now apparent space as well as time embodies paradox. Furthest apart is closest together. The same godly forces hold sway here as among the white primitives on Hiphoray. Which means that, to regain faith in and favor with the deities who watched over his island childhood, Finbar must, under Sunbeam's guidance, submit to the local blacks' magic. And so, at the awesome *and* very comical height, or depth, of his climactic expe-

riences, opposing charges, emitted by Aboriginal supernatural and his own delirium tremens, become the one current.

[The Rainbow Fella] rips him open with its big beak, webbed feet planted on his breastbone. Moonlite watches. It takes out his bones one by one, stacks them neatly on a dynamite box. Then it devours his blue-grey entrails. Moonlite feels no fear, no pain. To an alco in the horrors this is nothing.

The ultimate paradoxical truths unfold. The controlling supernatural powers can be invoked only by the lowliest placed of humankind. The whites of the tiny, drenched North Atlantic island and the blacks of the sprawling, scorched southern land mass, throughout pre-history, lasting, in both cases, until the late eighteenth-century, have been in the same intimate, placatory contract with those spirits which wreak their will through the workings of Nature.

This bond between those who dwell at global points furthest apart, each on the outer rim, has been somewhat foretold in 'Act One'. The village was deserted when the boat carrying Flora and MacDuffie arrived because of the fear the Hiphoray-ites had of catching the "stranger's cough", a fear which recalls, of course, the wholesale fate of the Aborigines, particularly those of Tasmania. The same Aborigines' intensely tribal identity is strongly echoed in the islanders', as advertised by their common surname, "McEsau", (emphasising, per Holy Writ, their outer-fringe status). Such commonality has been modified only slightly as the village expanded - "Today, McEsaus who live on the granite are called Gillie or Mary, and those who live on the gabro Murdo or Buntata".

The truth thus revealed to the one chosen, at birth, to receive it, Finbar is ready, after that vividly imagined rough handling by the Rainbow Fella, for the final apotheosis, his transformation into legendary being (equals grog soaked corpse). On the morning of the funeral, Life and Death, those two very contradictory states, coincide. While his physical body is presumably carried out, the newly mythic "son of the Dark Fairy" "walks with slow deliberate tread" to his "very strange (one passenger) vehicle". A six-horse team, hardly controlled by a teenage driver, burst recklessly through the obscure town streets and out into the open country. Such pace and power seems appropriate to the triumphal progress of a mythic being - as also to the quickest possible routine disposal of yet another alcoholic's premature corpse.

"On the cliff, where one fully expects a weed, a massive tree bursts from a rock." Any remaining limits on narrative licence are similarly burst through as the text itself, disregarding all remaining naturalistic limitations, utters the closing narrative item, an exhortation which commences, rhetorically, "O New West Highlands!" The new nation to-be (as well as us here and now of course), is accused of an habitual hesitation, a self-doubting reluctance to free itself from the "Old Way". But a deeper, structural intention may also be discerned in the following.

Wilt thou hang forever pendant till Thy Thumbs  
concesce with the very rock?...Climb or let go.

The textual reference is, of course, to the legendary cliff on Hiphoray where, hanging by his thumbs, a man must swing his body sideways to cross the gap and continue the ascent. This rhetorical utterance is the endpiece to the extravagant welter of words which 'Act Four' has become. But it is making reference back to that starkly physical custom, so sharply and economically defined in the fashion of 'Act One'. It is effectively pointing up the gap between 'Act One', dealing with the intact Hiphorayan society, and all the remaining, potentially, then ultimately, New West Highlands-centred narrative. It is drawing attention to the grand overall structural contradiction which encloses every one of the others already noted.

Throughout Acts Two to Four, in anticipation and then in recognition of Finbar's sojourn in Australia-to-be, contradiction reigns, as natural and literary limits of all sorts are flagrantly disregarded. This same envisioning of Australia, in its entirety, as the limitless land, morally and spiritually, as well as geographically, speaking, has brought into being, all since 1960, the massive "visionary monster" novels – *Riders In The Chariot* (1961) and *The Eye Of The Storm* (1973) by Patrick White, and *Poor Fellow My Country*, (1975), by Xavier Herbert, to name three of the big four. These celebrate the vast land's capacity as the scene of visionary experience, and condemn, just as forcefully, and extravagantly, the incapacity of the grossly appetitive immigrant white population to comprehend any such mystical occurrence. The latter part of *Moonlite*, though replete in evidence of post-white settlement despoliation, does not as these three do, inveigh against Anglo-Australia. The tolerance it displays is akin to that motivating the fourth memorable monster, David Ireland's *A Woman Of The Future*, (1979). But certainly, the richly sordid detail of life, and death, in the New

West Highlands follows the sometimes recklessly revelatory all-seeing mode of all the Visionary Monsters. Their characteristically complex and colorful manipulation of concepts and associations, usually entailing a dense verbal play, is quite central here in 'Act Four' of *Moonlite*.

It is taken, indeed, to the limit. The later events are blatantly overlaid by the language used to render them ambiguous or enigmatic and thus significant. Yet, contradicting that apparent evidence of over-zealousness, the ironic note, underlying the virtuosity throughout, sounds more forcefully here. In local usage, the bullshit is more obviously part of the main mix in this last part. The final chapters tend to present, with a Fosterian flourish, this is to say, the *reductio ad absurdum* of all that envisioning rampant in the White-dominated local novel since 1960.

The impatience released in the final utterance may be read, then, as directed, not only at the hesitant socio-political entity (of now as well), but also at the dominant form of the local novel (1960–circa 1980), with its obsessive, increasingly static focus on "Australia", that word which opens up onto limitless spiritual and verbal extravagance. Economy must be practised, narratives must be closely structured, the gap must be crossed, mainline intention must turn one hundred and eighty degrees to focus, figuratively speaking, on the life of Hiphoray rather than the idea of Australia. The emphasis, in both manner and material, must be upon restraint, containment, limits. "Climb or let go" is, in this understanding, a literary directive. Everything, godly forces included, must be subject to finite measurement.

On Hiphoray, before the Reverend Campbell's arrival, the spirits of the dead, "The Host", held sway and ancestral order prevailed. Procedures were clearcut, stripped, by ancestral decree, to essentials, the way that material conditions were stripped to their basic essence by the gales, just as the (stripped) prose describes them. The opening of *Moonlite* (on Mugg, which endures the same blasts as Hiphoray), is as bare and basic as Lawson's sightings of western New South Wales. Containment is achieved, both domestically and narratively, despite the elemental exposure.

The livid hand of the old woman, prominently boned, comes to rest against the door of a turf hut, obscuring two sea-pies on the nearby shore. Leaves of grass and scentless mayweed, flourishing in the doorway, impinge on the woman's claw. Small crumbs of earth, veined with black grass root, break away from her nail and fall to

the ground. Her feet are obscured by a black woollen frock, japanned with mud and human excrement.

But perhaps the central beauty of *Moonlite* lies glimpsed already, in the way that Australian, export-quality bullshit transmutes to pure narrative gold in the detail, always clearly shaped, of those incidents which set forth the Hiphoray-ites' contradictory blend of servility and sheer courage. At the winter solstice when Bel (the sun) is at his weakest, the adult male McEsaus must offer their souls to the Host, who infest the gale force wind, if He is to recover. If they are contemptuously refused, the Host will have been placated and Bel may regain strength.

Ten yards away...is a gabbro slab...which overhangs a drop of five hundred feet. One by one the men crawl forth, make the sign of the sun on their breast, stagger to the slab and hurl themselves over. The Host seize them...lift them up bodily and hurl them back down the slab in scornful rejection. Who would not wish to be one of the Dead today?...

There is a patch of light. Bel is getting back in the fight...The cloud is clearing...

Gillie nine launches off the slab in his gannet slippers, and spreading his arms, hangs like a fulmar...watching the water a thousand feet below, finally spurned by The indecisive Host.

Inevitably, obediently, the next man goes "plummeting pellmell". MacDuffie, only with great difficulty dissuades the last scheduled jumper, a very young clansman, though "the gale has become a breeze".

"Never before," (says Gillie One later, guiltily) "have all the men failed to jump."

This seemingly-not-impossible event gains in credence by being viewed both closeup and as something

occurring in the narrative present, and at a distance, as something that belongs in time long past. The terse radio commentator's description ("Bel is getting back in the fight"), contrasts effectively with the remote, legendary figure who "hangs like a fulmar". The all-controlling force of self-contradiction, this is to say, creates in-depth episodic reality as well as extended, book-length consistency.

To practise further containment, to go further forward, in defiance of the monsters' omnivorousness, will entail referring back to this model of an earlier people with a closely shaped way of life in the earlier, more closely shaped part of *Moonlite*. But this earlier part itself looks back to the tall story achievements of Marshall and Stivens, particularly in being composed out of the same spare prose as those renowned illusionists used to pull off their tricks. Beyond that, since the Hiphoray-ites are hunter-gatherers more than peasants, may loom the inspiration of epic deeds performed in the Dreamtime.

But to delve, just so, in the deep backward, is to be in the act of moving forward to form the new Aust. Fict. front. And certainly the anti-monster motive, realised in this narrative, has most in common with the containment achieved in other near contemporary accounts, particularly those rendered by Frank Moorhouse (*The Electrical Experience*, 1973), Jessica Anderson (*The Commandant*, 1975) and David Malouf (*Child's Play*, 1982). Foster's was, thus, not the first Contained Account into the field, and it is far less pure a piece than Malouf's, as one example. But *Moonlite* is still the landmark-work, the mixed model which sets out the whole matter of the move forward in such an appropriately self-contradictory way.

*D. R. Burns, author of The Directions of Australian Fiction 1928-1974, is writing a survey of some genres prominent in fiction since 1970 particularly the Visionary Monster Novel and Fixed Limit Narratives.*

# Young is beautiful

by Lofu

Max was outraged about the way the oldies dominated the entire scene.

## I say give youth a go

Since there were many budding young artists & writers about, Max had much support.

Right!

About time

We need some fresh air

**Philip Adams**

hmpf. I could write a better column...

**Dinny O'Hearn!**

cor... I'd be wittier...

**Tom Shapcott...**

and why doesn't my stuff get published...

The day will come when we'll dethrone the old farts...

But we'll have to work at it...

MAX HAD T-SHIRTS AND STICKERS PRINTED

### GIVE YOUTH A GO!

HE DEMONSTRATED IN FRONT OF PARLIAMENT HOUSE...

YOUTH IS AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE

Young is beautiful

HE BECAME KNOWN AS A TIRELESS CHAMPION OF YOUTH

At the same time he did not neglect to develop his own talents.

There. The 16th and final draft of my novel. It's done.

But this is what the publisher (who was half his age) said:

Sorry, but we're committed to publishing younger writers.

YOUNG IS BEAUTIFUL

JOHN PRIOR

## Chum

I CAN SEE IT from the corner of my eye as I emerge from the shadow of the laundry – an irregular, black shape, narrower at the top where the little, yellow-pink oval, like an eye, seems to stare into the heat. Three days ago, when I first noticed it perched on the brick fence to the left of the incinerator, it was just an unsettling detail, something I forgot as soon as it was out of sight. Today, to my irritation, I catch myself concentrating on not looking at it. As I walk diagonally across the hot, concrete yard to the outside toilet I keep my eyes stiffly lowered, studying my slack-shouldered gait – my arms hang almost motionless, my head is tilted to one side – in my foreshortened shadow, moving hurriedly ahead of me on the dazzling concrete.

A fly is blundering lazily about in the stale heat of the cubicle. The latch is still broken, so I have to keep my foot against the door as I struggle with my trousers. Beside me, at the level of my face, someone has been drawing in orange texta on the weather board – a childishly stiff figure on a motor bike; the head is too small. I press my eye to a gap in the boards just above this: I can see the thing in profile.

It is cylindrical. The black shape occupies only a little of the surface on this side; the rest is an ugly, darkened yellow, blistered in places. The edge of the black shape shifts continually – an unpleasant, rippling motion – in the heat rising from the bricks. The dirty, yellow-pink eye gapes blindly across the yard.

Each fortnight since the beginning of summer, my sister, Vi, and I visit Mum in hospital. I am seventeen. I have just finished school, and am living in a one room flat not far from the biscuit factory where I work. At night I can smell the hot, sweet biscuit-dough as I lie, sweating, on the cool lino.

Mum is worse this summer than she has ever been. She has got fat – an ugly, shapeless fatness; something in her face has slackened. Today she is sitting on a burst, vinyl couch in the hot courtyard

behind the ward. Her make-up is all wrong – cheap, orange lipstick smeared out past her mouth, her eyebrows shaved off, and two thin, clumsy lines drawn on in brown pencil halfway up her forehead. She doesn't get up when we arrive.

I have brought her a carton of *Camel* filter-tips, and this is the only thing that seems to interest her. I watch her nicotine-brown fingers greedily fondling the wrinkled cellophane as Vi tries to ask her how she has been. *Turkish and American Blend*. The two hatched pyramids are like children's blocks behind the stiff, tan camel. Her eyes remain quite dull. The couch smells of cat's piss. You can see the rows of saucers – the milk already filmed and sour – just inside the fence, where the nurses feed the stray cats.

When Vi stops talking we sit in silence watching another patient – a young Greek – bouncing on a trampoline. He stares blankly ahead, his hands thrust deep inside the front of his trousers. A nurse – the one about my age who always stops to talk to us – is putting fresh milk in the saucers. Her short, orange hair hangs forward as she bends, and you can see how white the skin of her neck is. She looks up and smiles across at us. She is not wearing any earrings: there is a crescent of tiny holes where the cartilage has been pierced along the edge of her small, white ear.

Later, Mum takes the cigarettes in to her locker – a blank, plywood wardrobe, identical to all the others, beside a metal-frame bed with a faded, orange bedspread. I watch as she wraps them clumsily in a huge, ragged pair of cotton-tails and hides them under some singlets. I can see another cigarette carton there, several boxes of licorice allsorts. She spends the next hour introducing us to other patients, using us as bait to wheedle cigarettes from them. The calculation in her voice is like a hard, shallow whine. It is demeaning just to be with her. When the nurse with the orange hair brings Mum's medication – six tablets in a disposable cup like a tiny long-life milk container – I am too

ashamed to look up. I stare instead at her left knee where an ellipse of white skin shows through a hole in her stocking.

Afterwards on the bus, I think about Mum's face: it is as though I can glimpse some other creature looking out through her dead eyes, something horribly primitive, mindless. This is all I can think about as my thighs sweat on the hot, vinyl seat – whether what is inside her is inside me too. I don't say anything to Vi, but I know she is thinking the same thing.

The brick veneer is coming away from the front of the block where Vi lives. Adrian is standing in the car park when we get back, playing with something on the concrete – a dark shape, like a lizard, or a large, segmented insect. He has a string attached to it. It is only when we get closer that I see it is a toy, crudely made from concertinaed paper, colored with black and yellow texta. He tilts his head on one side and squints up at us.

"Where's your father?" Vi is irritated.

"Had to go." He makes the paper insect move towards me across the hot concrete – an erratic, scurrying motion. "Look what he gave me!"

Vi and Eric separated last year. Like Adrian, I don't really understand what went wrong.

I stay, ostensibly to play handball with Adrian against one of the garage walls, while Vi goes upstairs to sit and smoke. He is nine, still childish plump. He capers clownishly as he tells me about school, twisting his face into rubbery leers and squints as he mimics persecutors, teachers. The mannerisms, the precocity are new – all since Eric left; but already they are part of him. I stare at the fine violet veins under the white skin of his forearms.

Later he takes me up to the kitchen where the table is littered with colored pencils. He has drawn a battle scene on nine exercise-book pages carefully taped together: a vast tank – impossibly large – manned by Daleks and stiff, khaki-clad men in helmets like collanders (thought-control devices, Adrian explains), lumbers across a waste-land littered with bodies. In the foreground a Dalek lies on its side, burning. A man has pulled a little, shapeless, pink mass from inside it, and seems to be screaming as he struggles to tear it away from where it has fastened to his throat. A stream of little, crimson droplets, like tears, is running from his neck.

I stay as late as I can, helping Adrian design new attachments for his Daleks – flamethrowers, brain-probes – trying not to think about the thing inside Mum, about another fortnight alone.

There is only one window in my room – above the

aluminium table with its patterned, orange surface. Sitting there today I noticed that I can see the thing on the fence quite clearly: the little, jaundiced eye was staring back through the heat at me. I moved the table to one side but you could still see it. Now I am sitting on my mattress on the floor.

I still think of the room as belonging to the previous tenant. It is his furniture – the table, the two aluminium and yellow vinyl chairs, the striped mattress with its black, irregular stain, the featureless wardrobe exactly like the ones in Mum's ward. Even his pin-ups are still here – women crouching on all fours, or squatting in awkward, splayed poses – covering most of the end wall. The skin has darkened a dirty salmon-yellow with age, the nipples and areolae almost black – like rotten banana skin. I tried to scrape them off when I first moved in, but they have been there so long they are almost part of the wall. I thought of covering them with pictures of my own, but so far there is only one of these – a photograph of Japanese honeymooners I found in a magazine: they are buried neck-deep in hot sand, rows of pale heads dwindling into the distance, each one shaded by a miniature umbrella planted beside it; under the closest, a girl's milky white face, half hidden by opaque sunglasses, seems to be smiling at me.

There is still a box of his things on top of the wardrobe – *Penthouse* and *Hustler* magazines mostly, and a broken umbrella, a promotional thing from one of the breweries: there is an ugly, little, hydrocephalic man on the torn, yellow nylon, holding up a can of beer and winking.

I can see myself in the mirror beside the door: my face – pale, almost triangular above the transverse crack in the glass – is framed by the leached, yellow photographs. I have Mum's eyes.

Because of the way the building has been divided the only access to the four rear flats is through the backyard and the laundry. Mrs A says this is probably against the law.

I have been standing just inside the door of the laundry for almost five minutes, estimating the number of steps from here to the gate. If I continue to hesitate I will be late.

It is just at the edge of my vision: already the heat lends it an unpleasant illusion of movement. I will be less than a metre from it when I stand, struggling with the gate's rusted bolt.

Two cockroaches are crouched on a yellow scrap of soap beside my hand. They seem to be eating it.

The factory is a huge, corrugated-iron building on the edge of an empty canal. Filling the side facing



the service road are the face and shoulders of a woman – an ugly salmon-yellow like the pin-ups in my room – holding up a packet of biscuits. The other sides are unsettlingly featureless, painted an incongruous sea-green.

I start at seven-thirty. We all wear a sort of pink, nylon rain-coat and a pink shower-cap (to keep hair out of the mixtures). The Lebanese boy on the next machine still makes a scene about wearing the cap. On our first day he pointed disbelievingly at me when I emerged from the changing room.

“You’re not going to let them make you wear that, are you!”

I shrugged. Perhaps it should have bothered me.

Speakers are strung at regular intervals along the girders, so we can listen to the radio all day. Mostly it’s talk-back shows, requests. One program runs from one to four every afternoon: people ring up to recite poems they have written for their girlfriends, their spouses, then their requests are played. The disc jockeys all sound the same – plump men with unbroken voices.

I look after one of the icing machines. There are three chambers – two with a pink coconut mixture, the middle one with a tacky, red-black mixture, like jam: they have to be kept filled and flowing evenly. Any biscuits that come through faulty I have to discard into a large, plastic-lined bin. I didn’t mind the work at first: I would sit dreaming in the wash of machinery noise and talk-back radio, my hands, sheathed in spearmint-green surgical gloves, moving automatically among the warm biscuits. At lunch and in the tea breaks, when the migrant women hive off in groups and sit talking about children, television, I retreat to the toilets: I used to sit reading in one of the cubicles; increasingly, I just sit with my knees drawn tightly up to my chest, my eyes closed. There is something dark, unpleasantly familiar in the hot, yellow glow behind my eyelids.

I am washing my sheets in the grey, concrete tubs at the back of the house. I can feel it behind me – the little, yellow-pink eye watching me through the open laundry door. Later, when I hang them out on the makeshift clothesline – an old, metal bed-frame by the fence, strung unevenly with yellow, nylon rope – I can feel my hands trembling. I keep my head stiffly lowered, humming loudly in the hot silence. I can feel it staring at the back of my head – like a dark pressure boring into my skull.

Mrs A’s door is open when I reach the bottom of the stairs. She is asleep in the chair beside the kitchen table; her mouth is hanging open – a black, oval space. Past her head, I can see the cockatoo clinging to the wires of its cage as it makes a slow, obsessive

circuit. It is almost upside down. The fan on the table moves uselessly to the left, then back.

The four o’clock siren goes on and on; it is like a hot wire in the glow behind my eyelids. The women in their pink, nylon coats and shower caps, straggle, chatting, in little groups along the service road towards the bus stops. Others are still pouring from a narrow doorway in one corner of the blank, sea-green wall. I turn in the opposite direction along the wall, letting the fingers of my right hand trail across the burning corrugations. When I reach the canal, I swing down into the empty concrete basin. I have already followed it several kilometres south, almost as far as the coiling, silver stacks of the oil refinery with its plume of white flame. Today I turn north past the long, sinister railway sheds, shimmering in the heat. The graffiti is darker, more sexual, here: crude, bodiless organs, stiff, wall-eyed figures like coupling insects in their mechanical urgency. At one point someone has painted a huge face in profile across the floor of the canal: the long, oval eye is like a wound, or a dark insect crouching on the childish face. Nearby a small chalk circle has been drawn around a doll’s arm and part of a black, rubber lizard. I squat here, waiting. When it gets dark, when the little, yellow eye can no longer see me, I will get up and start for home.

The sickly biscuit smell fills the hot darkness.

Jones is watching television. I don’t know if this is his real name. I call him this because he reminds me of a photograph I once saw in a magazine: *Jim Jones opens the dispensary at Jonestown*. A tanned, muscular face, dark, receding hair. He always wears sunglasses – those yellow-brown lenses that darken or lighten according to the ambient light. Though his door is directly opposite mine, and we share the bathroom on the landing, we never speak. I see him in the corridor sometimes – in shorts, and a yellow T-shirt with a transfer of a topless Thai girl dancing on a bar; the caption says *ISURVIVED PATPONG RD*. Before I started work I would see him sunbaking in the yard on a folding, aluminium chair, his shorts pulled up in a V to expose his hips; that was when I saw the tattoos – superheroes and reptiles in yellows and reds and blues, that smother his shoulders and arms.

He watches TV in the dark, with his door open. From where I sit on the floor, with my door slightly ajar, I can see the screen – a lozenge of hot, yellow light in the biscuit rank darkness. He is watching a science fiction film about aliens shaped like giant cockroaches breeding humans in vast poultry sheds somewhere in the desert. Two of them are hunting

a man along an empty, concrete canal. He falls, and you can see his face filling the screen. I cannot hear him screaming because the sound is turned down. Now you can see them from a distance, crouching over his body, feeding.

There is an advertisement: a girl, wanly monochromatic against the garish background. The color is turned too high; the hot yellow bleeds from the screen around her. She has a pretty, heart-shaped face, very young. She seems to be looking straight at me, smiling.

It makes me feel lonelier.

It is more a daydream than a dream.

I am standing in the yard, staring uneasily across at the rubbish piled around the incinerator, where I can hear something moving. It is a slow, insistent sound – as though something buried under the papers is scrabbling blindly, unhurriedly to free itself. The thing is no longer on the fence.

I approach and push some rubbish away with my foot. Now I can see it – a large, hard-shelled insect, about eight inches long. It is not a creature I have ever seen before: it reminds me of a crab or a lobster, its black segmented body tapering at the back to a long, sting-like protrusion that drags behind it on the concrete. I can't count its legs. Something about its movements tells me it is blind.

I back away a little and squat to watch it, more curious than afraid. There is something horribly primitive, blind about its slow, scrabbling progress across the concrete. It only gradually dawns on me that it is coming directly towards me, as if it senses where I am. I transfer my weight from one heel to the other, and move to one side: almost imperceptibly the creature turns until it is coming towards me again.

I rise and take a few steps back. There are two bricks on the concrete: I place them like a low barrier in the creature's path. I watch, fascinated, as the eyeless, triangular head touches the barrier. The legs flail blindly as it tries vainly to mount the side of the brick. It teeters, and falls sideways; but almost at once it starts again a little further along, the head lifting, the legs flailing. There are more bricks by the laundry steps; I quickly bring two of these and begin lengthening the barrier. It is suddenly imperative that I make a complete barrier between the creature and myself.

This time, when I return, I notice that it has managed to pull itself much higher: the body, the flailing legs are almost vertical. If it topples forward, now, it will breach the barrier. Without thinking, I raise my foot and push it backwards.

It falls on its back, but somehow one of its claws has become caught in the edge of my thong. I shake my foot wildly, but already other legs are fastening on: I can feel their hard tips curling around the edges of the thong, digging into my skin. Frantically I try to tear the thong loose, now, but the dark legs are clamped vice-like along either side of my foot, the dark body tight against the yellow, rubber sole. I panic and try to crush it on the ground. Something cracks under my weight, some part of the segmented shell; at the same time there is an intense pain in my heel. A white fluid is oozing onto the concrete, but there is blood mixed with it, welling from somewhere under my foot.

I lift my foot, sick with fear: the thing is still there, clamped against the sole, white fluid seeping from a crack just below the triangular head. The abdomen is curled under itself, and I can see where the sting has pierced the flimsy rubber and penetrated deep into the flesh of my heel.

I am staring at my feet on the yellow lino, trying to work up the courage to cross the yard to the outside toilet. I can see Mrs A through her open door. She is sitting, as always, beside the cluttered kitchen table, her swollen legs up on a stool. You can see how heavy they are. Once she let me press my thumb into her calf: it left a deep oval pit like a thumbprint in wet clay. She is the only person in the flats I've ever spoken to.

"Are you alright, Mrs A?"

Her face is heavy, beaded with sweat. The fan barely seems to move the air.

"I'm OK, love... You could feed Tiny for me though."

I cross to the cockatoo's cage beside the sink. You can see the thing on the fence from here. I keep my eyes down, staring at the yellow margarine container filled with sunflower seeds: they are dark, glossy – like little, hard-shelled beetles.

"No work again today, love?" I can feel her watery, grey eyes studying me.

"It's my day off," I lie. For the third morning in a row I have been unable to work up the courage to cross the bare expanse of concrete to the gate.

A fly-spotted photograph of the Queen in a yellow suit, with a corgi on her lap, smiles at me from above the fridge. Her face is like an abstract mask, faded yellow, the tightly smiling lips black with age. The dog seems to be smiling too.

I had planned to mend the umbrella with the little, hydrocephalic man, but now I have a more urgent use for it. I spent all yesterday sharpening the metal tip on the concrete floor of the laundry. I will carry

it now, whenever I have to cross the yard to the outside toilet. I can see no way round this. The toilet on the landing has been blocked for almost a week. I can urinate in the sink in the kitchenette, but, even eating as little as I now am, I will still need to defecate at least every second day. Eventually, I suppose, I will have to go out to the shops, but I try not to think about this for the present: I still have a tin of sardines, and two packets of reject biscuits from the factory. I no longer seem to get very hungry.

I squat, sweating, on the lino in my shorts, my knees drawn tightly up under my chin. I am studying my eyes in the mirror on the opposite wall, searching for the dark, familiar shape. My face, almost lost in the thickly clustered photographs, looks thin, strained. My left ear, distorted by some defect in the glass, is huge – a yellowish, simian thing. Just beyond it a faceless Negress crouches on a yellow beach-towel. There is something in the photograph I have never noticed before: the exposed vulva, yellow-pink in the black flesh, gapes into the heat like a dead eye.

I will cover it later with a postcard.

Vi has come.

I can hear her moving around behind the pale green, fibro partition that screens off the kitchenette.

“I was worried about you, you know?”

I am sitting on one of the aluminium chairs eating Adrian’s chips from a greasy roll of newspaper on the table beside me: I hadn’t realised how hungry I was. Adrian is sitting on the other chair, kicking the heels of his school shoes against the floor, his hands in his pockets as he stares at the pictures on the end wall.

“I thought you must have been ill.” She has come back into the room, and is leaning against the end of the partition with her arms folded. She is wearing a faded, yellow frock that makes her look much older than she is.

“I’m sorry, Vi?” I am staring at my toes projecting under the dirty, yellow straps of my thongs: they have an unpleasant, waxy pallor, like something that lives in the dark. I notice how dirty my toenails are. “How’s Mum?”

She’s OK... That nurse was asking after you, the one with the red hair.”

“Did she?” I picture the neat, white ear.

“She seems to quite like you.” She crosses behind me. There is a sudden influx of light as the roller blind recoils. My eyes hurt: the yellowed pin-ups look ghastly, hyperreal in the harsh glare.

I am suddenly aware of it watching me from out in the yard. It is as though I can see, in the yellow glow behind my eyelids, what it sees: the back of my head in the lower left corner of the window, the two tendons standing out on the thin, white neck. I cross the room shakily and sit on the floor beside the door. Vi, I know, is now looking at me uneasily.

Adrian takes something from his pocket: it is the paper insect Eric gave him. I watch as he winds the white string around a clay bobbin under the crudely painted head. He makes it scuttle jerkily towards me across the floor.

“Put it away, Adrian!” Vi seems to sense that it upsets me. She is no longer staring at me. I can hear her moving around, tidying something on the table, picking up the yellow bedspread, the dirty sheets lying in a tight bundle beside the mattress.

“Someone rang from the factory, you know?” She stops again. “You won’t get your job back, not after leaving like that.”

Something about the rhythm of her renewed movements tells me that she does not expect me to explain. “Take Adrian downstairs, will you, and keep him entertained,” she says. “I want to clean this place up a bit.”

I stare at her, blank with panic.

“Go on!”

Adrian is already pulling the door open; he is making a face at me under his arm, a knuckle wedged in each nostril. My legs won’t straighten.

“Go on!” She pushes me out onto the landing and shuts the door.

I stand there staring blankly at my pale feet on the yellow lino. Adrian stands watching me, waiting. Eventually he takes out the paper insect again and rewinds the string. He makes it scurry in a semi-circle across the line, the concertinaed tail trailing limply. He rewinds the string again.

Something inside me goes suddenly taut, quivering. I walk past Adrian; I can feel how bloodless my face has become.

“What are we going to do?” He hurries after me down the stairs, struggling to push the paper insect back into his school shorts. I stop in the stale heat in the laundry. Adrian watches me silently as I take the umbrella from its hiding place in the corner behind the concrete tubs. There is a short, rusted curtain-rod behind the door; I hand this to him. I squat just inside the doorway so that my face is next to his:

“There’s something out there we have to kill!” My fear is beginning to communicate itself to him. He holds his breath as he peers around the bare yard.

“Where is it?”

We both stare along my outstretched arm at the little shape shifting in the heat: the black is more leached, blistered than I remember, the eye deader, more woundlike.

"Can it see us?" He lets his breath out slowly between his teeth. As I nod, I catch sight of my unprotected toes protruding under the yellow thong straps.

"Don't let it near your feet," I warn, slowly straightening. Adrian farts nervously: the warm, human smell is oddly comforting in my mounting panic. I am relying on his excitement, now, to carry me through. I raise the umbrella above my head: the black, bakelite handle is heavy, clublike.

Suddenly I am charging into the uprush of heat, the air burning my lungs:

"Aaargghhh...aarrrghhh..." The sound is thin, unconvincing – swallowed by the heat almost before it leaves my mouth. Adrian's shriller cry is just behind me. My eyes, wide with fear, are fixed on the yellow eye.

The handle catches it clean one one side. It is lighter than I expected: it sails effortlessly through the air and drops with a dull clatter somewhere on the other side of the incinerator.

We are both silent now. Adrian is closer to where it has fallen. Already he is stalking warily towards where it disappeared, keeping his feet clear of the litter of bottles, old magazines, around the base of the incinerator. I follow slowly, the umbrella lowered now, point first, waiting for the familiar shape to appear past the edge of the rubbish. There is nothing where I expect it to be – only the heat rippling from the bare concrete.

Adrian stops. I can feel his fear now: his face is pale with concentration; he seems to be jogging on the spot, a sort of silent, frantic dance to keep his feet clear of the ground.

"Where is it?" I can see nothing among the heat-swollen garbage bags.

"There."

Something is protruding from the dark gap between the incinerator and the fence: I can just make out the yellow, blistered surface. I move silently back to the other end of the gap, the umbrella raised now like a golf club.

"Push it through!" I hiss.

I seem him poking gingerly into the gap with the curtain rod. There is a dry, scraping sound, and suddenly it is there almost touching the toes of my left foot: the yellow eye is staring up at me. I bring the umbrella down wildly, catching it less cleanly this time, sending it scudding across the concrete to the end fence.

I am racing after it, the umbrella lowered like a spear, point first. I reach it just as it hits the corrugated iron, and lunge blindly with the sharp, metal tip.

Something crumples, then gives way.

Adrian comes up beside me. We stare at what I have done. The force of my blow has caved the face of the yellow cylinder in; the tip of the umbrella has punctured it just to the left of the eye.

"Let me see!" Adrian is bent forward, panting.

I can't talk just yet. I lift it gingerly on the tip of the umbrella and study what has darkened by mind for so long. Despite the damage, the black shape on the blistered, yellow label is quite recognisable: it is the head of a dog – a Scots terrier – the eyes buried in the soot-black fur. Where the muzzle narrows, the dog's yellowed tongue looks vaguely eyelike. There are four letters almost too faded to read, at the top of the can:

*CHUM*

Vi is opening the window of my room. I watch as she drapes the stained bedspread over the sill to air. Her arms are dark brown, very young, against the threadbare, yellow chenille. I'll walk down to the CES later, I think. I won't go back to the factory: there must be better things I can do.

Somehow Mrs A's cockatoo has got out of his cage: he is waddling across the iron roof of the laundry, his grey claws clattering on the hot corrugations, balancing between his half-opened wings. Adrian is beating the concrete with the curtain rod as he circles the crumpled can in a victory dance.

"Will you come to visit Mum, tomorrow?" Vi calls down.

"Yes," I say. I can picture the small, white ear with its crescent of tiny holes: there is a strand of orange hair looped behind it. "Yes." The cockatoo opens his wings completely as he reaches the gutter. They are much bigger than I ever imagined; I can see the sweat-matted feathers under them clinging in dirty, pink points.

## ST KILDA SUITE

Cats are yowling in the summer alleyways  
And week-end Goths stroked by the sun  
Loiter outside the hock shops  
Waiting to pawn their coffins

Layer cakes in windows have more strata  
than Troy  
A promise of rich decay

I speak of Spenser and octets  
And you tickle terrapins through the glass of the pet  
emporium

St Kilda smells like a wet dog

In the Dalton Room  
A heavy mahogany sideboard  
Dreams of Queen Victoria and colonic irrigation

Luna Park frowns as a conductor on the shunting  
tram

A punting man cradles his radio to his ear  
Ignoring the grandeur of the biblical dusk

The sea wind tinkles yacht-rigging like some  
leviathan glockenspiel  
And I steal a kiss from the unknown soldier on the  
hill

Girls in bars lip prints of lipstick on champagne  
flutes  
Wear broken-hearted relief t-shirts 501s and boots  
of workers  
Divesting themselves of boy-friends  
As one might remove costume jewellery

With an earlobe the size of David Jones  
An XP Falcon the size of a stud merely keeps the  
hole open

And far from slapstick buffoons  
The coppers around the corner at the Watchhouse  
Motel

Acquaint the guests with the phone book  
By osmosis  
Through the kidneys  
Armed rob to knifing lawyerless to zealot

Among the condemned deco flats  
Perfumed with rubber and nihilism  
A cartoonist scribes a flower in invisible ink  
The great illustration of life goes no Thurber  
In the next flat a no-love lost couple share an  
affection

Disposed to ending mending walls of Frost  
Between them in their icy beds

"The Dead Poet's Society" rewinds on HER video

Love children barefoot and clutching musky  
Ginsbergs  
Purloined from the family bookshelf  
Swear never to return  
Stowing in string bags alarm clocks  
Liberated from the ancestral home

A minute Thor of lap lap and backpack  
Proclaims on the Pre-cambrian dancefloor of the  
Esplanade  
"Sarn Kilter iss bick gurfrent!"

Aloft a gay boy recalls a Patsy Cline tune  
And whispers his secrets to the moon  
With the lisp of an ingenue  
Awaiting on the dove-cote balcony  
A bespurred Romeo pouter cock circles in his mind

A cloud forms then rains  
The road stinks of the must of dinosaurs

To the feet of midnight bathers  
The sea floor is runnelled like vulvas

Below the flaming crown of the Westgate Bridge  
A debris of lunch boxes  
Is caressed by the passing shadows of container  
ships

Peering through windows  
One can see Greta Garbo posters and Tiffany  
lampshades dripping  
With drying jockstraps

Peering through windows one can spy  
Post-expressionist daubs futon rolls and Kafka  
novels

Leering through windows  
German sons perceive their credit is a figment  
to themselves

In the pub by the TAB  
Likened to Dante's wood of the suicides  
By the barman who quotes Proust to deaf  
Fitzroy supporters

In the chill of the cotton-candy air  
A chorus of carousel horses whistle a tarantella  
Through their wooden teeth

Hoovers are heard to serenade assassins in the  
Wolverine club  
The killers return each night to lick the trail of blood  
to the bar  
In this gingerbread abattoir barmaids wear  
peasant costume

In the lee of trees two lovers see the sun approach  
A carrillion of sparrows above their bed-sounds  
They crane their necks together like biscuit-tin  
kittens on ecstasy

Along the breakwater where the water laps like  
strawberry milk  
Angry penguins flap impotent wings in alarm  
As Goths shatter bottles and grimace behind Noh  
masks

Another night has dragged up the sea's bed  
And I must hang my dreaming nets to dry

PETER MURK

## TWO POEMS BY J. S. HARRY

### FOR ALL...(1987)

for all  
the human animal  
's ability  
to web its world  
with the structures  
of its thinking  
  
no human really  
knows why it dies  
  
any more than an insect  
  
half a world away  
under the Europe-winded sky  
  
picking insects  
on the ground of Scotland  
  
some grouse have already  
taken in  
their deaths and die  
  
swallowing insects swallowing fallout  
from Chernobyl  
  
pecking they have caught  
their part of the death of the earth  
  
swallowing  
are swallowed up in it  
  
innocent as the children of Poland  
eating food and drinking water  
from that deathrich Polish earth  
  
from their deathfed  
part of the earth  
  
as the children of Australia  
eat fruit jams from Poland  
  
as the peoples from Europe  
eat foods from the lands of Europe  
  
and drink from the river supplies  
Chernobyl fell into  
  
as the produce of Europe  
is loaded into scalebright schools  
of container-fish ships  
  
and insectwinged aeroplanes  
to travel out half a world  
away from the Europe-winded sky  
to feed the peoples...



# books

## Belonging to Language, Belonging to Being

Veronica Brady

Judith Wright: *Born of the Conquerors; Selected Essays* (Aboriginal Studies Press, \$22.95).

We're a long way nowadays from Shelley's romantic notion of the poet as "unacknowledged legislator". Not many of us read poetry nowadays and fewer still, I suspect, would expect a poet to have anything of political or social importance to say. But Judith Wright, I think, has. The importance of her book, moreover, lies precisely in its 'poetic' character, in the way it obliges us to look at history and society differently.

That may be the reason for the mysterious neglect of a book one would expect to be widely read and discussed; discussed because of the eminence of the writer and the ways in which these essays illuminate her poetry; and read, with pleasure, not only for the writing, its easy but stylish lucidity and its intelligently controlled passion, but also enjoyed for the photographs which illustrate it, sometimes acting as counterpoint, sometimes in harmony with the text, but always helping to create a sense of the polyphonic world-view Wright inhabits and writes about.

All of these essays are concerned, one way or another, with the land, not as it usually figures however, as the "Sunburnt Country", land of heroic pioneers and development, but as demanding of our solicitude and care.

As she points out, Wright is "a member of an increasingly rare species – a person of European derivation whose childhood was spent almost in ignorance of city life". The station on which she was brought up was her world, one in which she was in touch not only with the natural world but also,

through her grandmother, with stories of the pioneering past, and beyond them, of the Aboriginal people whose country this had once been. This upbringing was good for her as a poet. But it also shaped her politics. Her father, "one of the very few who knew of the unwritten history", pointed out to her the place at the edge of the tableland, Darkie Point, where early settlers had forced a whole tribe of Aborigines over the edge – the source, incidentally, of her poem 'Nigger's Leap' – and at other times she heard of Aboriginal ceremonies and found the Bora Ring on the property, and this also became the subject of a poem.

The essays, then, are preoccupied with these two strands, poetry and politics – the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt for the invasion – which also run through her life. The sense of intrusion, arising from the guilt, apparent even in the book's title, will not be to every reader's taste. Some may even feel they have been misled. Elegantly produced, with a beautifully evocative color plate at the head of each essay, this book promises to be yet another coffee-table book about romantic landscapes and noble savages. Instead, there are constant reminders of things that most of us prefer to forget.

Sometimes these reminders occur in passing, at the end of the piece entitled 'Learning To Look', originally written for the Wilderness Society calendar, for example:

Remember that this continent's first people, who own it still (for we have never bought it from them), knew that the land and its forests are the parents of all humankind. They lived within their biological means, and that is why Australia's cargo of precious species survived until now.

Sometimes it forms the crux of the argument, as it



does in 'The Landless People and Their Right to Land':

It has not yet sunk into the consciousness of European Australians that, in any definition but our own, we are indeed living on Aboriginal land. Neither by agreement, treaty, nor purchase have we obtained legal possession of Australia from its previous owners.

This is not the kind of thing most of us like to hear.

True to her upbringing, however, Wright's tone is always polite, never hectoring – some activists may accuse her of selling the pass for these reasons. Nevertheless, these essays are profoundly unsettling. They deal with the great taboo, the story of our treatment of the first Australians, and with our apparent inability to cope with the truth. Thus, Wright has firm things to say about her own difficulties, and those of others, in getting books published on the subject and, even more significantly, in affecting the government. Censorship takes many forms. In this country writers seldom go to gaol for their writings though occasionally a journalist does for refusing to reveal sources. Books are seldom banned, even in Queensland and Western Australia. But neglect is also a form of censorship.

Several of the essays consider this question of censorship, in the past as well as in the present. In 'The Writer as Activist', for instance, she discusses the fate of Charles Harpur, "virtually sent to Coventry for his opinions" in the mid-nineteenth century and of Katharine Susannah Prichard whose *Coonardoo*, dared, in 1929, to broach the forbidden subject of a white man's love for an Aboriginal woman. But these individual cases of censorship reflect a more general habit of mind. "Our history in this land", she writes, "...has been one of not listening, not understanding, looking after." Politically, this has meant a preference for words rather than deeds. Internationally we castigate others for their human rights offences while at home we ignore the plight of the Aboriginal people from whom we took this land by force. In this sense, Wright argues, "hypocrisy and disregard for human rights...lie at the basis of our society". So, noting that the Australian Constitution "specifically declared that no citizen of Australia should be deprived of his (her) property without compensation"; she points to the fact that the Aborigines have been deprived of their property "without any such promises and without any treaty or agreement".

Several essays canvass the issue of the treaty which the group of prominent Australians to which she belongs have been urging since the mid 1980s.

Obviously this is a contentious issue, even amongst those sympathetic to the Aboriginal cause. On the one hand, many Aborigines see no point in it, seeing it as mere legal talk, a distraction from the real issues of land rights, representation and compensation. On the other hand, lawyers point out that a treaty can only be signed between sovereign states – something white opinion will not concede to Aboriginal people who, in any case, were never one nation in our sense of the word.

Nevertheless the idea of some public, legal and formal acknowledgement of our debt to the people whose land we now occupy must be considered if we are to have international credibility in the matter of human rights. As Wright points out, Aboriginal people have been making their voices heard, if not here in Australia at least internationally. In 1985, for instance, the venerable Anti-Slavery League filed a highly critical report with the UN Commission on Human Rights. While it may be too strong to say, as Wright does, that Australia is sliding "towards general international condemnation", there is no doubt that there is growing international awareness of the plight of Aboriginal people and the shameful history of our relations with them.

In the same vein, the account here of the history of the treaty movement makes sobering reading – the change of name forced on the committee by the government from 'treaty' to the Aboriginal word 'marrakatta' (less specific legally and much more contentious generally, pointing to the unconscious

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*"they are concerned with questions which are not only essentially ethical but also essentially imaginative"*

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racism which has become the excuse for inertia), Cabinet's refusal to consider papers put before them on the matter, and the political cowardice of a Labor Party committed in theory to justice for Aboriginal people, but unwilling in fact to honor this commitment.

These are political essays, then, but political in a sense rather unusual today since they are concerned with questions which are not only essentially ethical but also essentially imaginative. Wright's poet's eye and the rural tradition in which she was reared give her a rich sense of the land itself, its animals and vegetation, as well as of its inhabitants. Using the evidence of scientists as well as of the first settlers she is able to give us a sense of the environment before the European invasion. She

quotes Elizabeth Macarthur's observation, for instance, that "the greater part of the country is like an English deer park". Aboriginal ways, Wright argues, were based on "ecological rather than mathematical laws". In comparison, white settlement was "ecologically farcical". Thus the account of the effects of settlement, unusual in its knowledge of as well as feeling for the plants, animals and soil itself, is both illuminating and devastating. She does give credit where it is due – Leichardt, for instance, was an "ecologist before his time". But on the whole she finds the first settlers guilty of ignorance, ineptitude and greed:

Those who followed in the land explorers' tracks were seldom qualified or interested in identifying the components of the plant and animal products of the country – it was sheep pasture that concerned them, and even there they were inexperienced.

The myth of the pioneer is an aspect of the myth of development. It is also essentially masculine. As Joseph Furphy knew, the successful pioneer was an economic conquistador; "a man who never spared others, in contrast with the forgotten pioneer who never spared himself, but, being a fool, built houses for wise men to live in, and omitted to gather moss". As a woman, however, Judith Wright sees things differently. She has a feeling for the victims of power. These essays are about losers rather than winners, Aborigines and the environment, the soil itself, as well as the species which our preoccupation with what D. H. Lawrence called the "business of money-making, money-having and money-spending" have endangered. Yet, warm-hearted, as they are, these essays are also clear-headed, well-informed and intelligently argued.

For some tastes, the tone may be too personal to be politically effective. But one of the inadequacies of our politics may be its disregard for the personal, the predominance of abstractions, what Habermas calls "system", over people, "life-world". The public realm has lost the "power of illumination" which Hannah Arendt argues was originally "part of its very nature", so that, for many, freedom from politics is one of the basic freedoms; yet to retreat from the world and one's obligations within it in this way is to make tyranny much easier, as Arendt also pointed out.

With each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in between which should have formed between [people].

Wright would agree. For her "causes" have to do with people and with the environment seen as a living organism and that is why she has not only sympathy for, but also empathy with, Aboriginal people. This is evident even in passing remarks, phrases like, "By the time Australia was brought under the yoke of tribute to Europe"; for instance, or "the snarling jealousies... against Aboriginal land claims".

To some, comments like these might look like prejudice. In my view, however, this ability to interweave the horizon of our society with that of Aboriginal culture gives a richer understanding of the issues, notably in the essay on the development of the idea of the wilderness and on the problems facing non-Aboriginal critics of Aboriginal writing. The interplay between the two horizons is both creative and convincing, the positive aspect, if you like, of prejudice seen as a clear view of one's own belief which is also open to what is different.

The social and critical sciences then, may have something to learn from the poet with her deep and physical concern with language as a way of being in the world, open to physical and psychic possibility and difference. It may sound pretentious to quote Paul Ricoeur in relation to these essays which are so unpretentious and apparently untheoretical. Yet Ricoeur's proposition, that "belonging-to language provides the universal medium for belonging-to being" explains, for me at least, their peculiar power. If this power is troubling it may be an index of the distance that exists between our culture and the way the world and people actually are.

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## Astley on the Move

Janine Burke

Thea Astley: *Vanishing Points* (William Heinemann, \$29.95).

Thea Astley has seen the literary world change dramatically since her first novel *Girl with a Monkey* was published in 1958. Now there are glittering prizes, big advances, triple book contracts, swish agents and a circus of festivals. There are also literary personalities.

In the Seventies, when the books pages of newspapers were still dull as ditchwater and readers were hard put to find an Australian novel on a bookshop shelf, the names of Australian writers were known



only to a loyal few. It's heartening to wander in a bookshop these days and be confronted by a whole wall of Australian fiction. Writers have made this possible, helped along by some astute publishers and the Australia Council.

By the Eighties, confidence in local talent had grown. Readers were curious about the writers they admired. They flocked to readings and festivals. Australians are great readers - and buyers - of our own books. It's just a pity there are so few of us.

For decades, Astley's fiction has been well received. Her biographical note in *Vanishing Points* lists prize after prize. Yet she has not been feted like Elizabeth Jolley whose tale of bitter rejection followed by immense success, coupled with a redoubtable charm, had journalists tripping over themselves to get to her front door. Or Helen Garner, or Olga Masters.

It obviously hurt because Astley has often alluded to it. Yet I wonder why she is not satisfied with her niche, as one of Australia's most respected authors. The literary lion is actually a very rare beast (outside America) and few of that most private of creatures, the full-time writer, can bear the spotlight for very long. To be a celebrity is to be recreated in the public image, for public taste. Astley is not so easily consumed.

Her prose is difficult. She is not known for

kindness or niceness or ease. Yet I feel her relationship with her readers has changed. I can remember, several years ago, struggling through *An Item from the Late News*. I felt that I was out to dinner with a brilliant and demanding companion who wasn't going to let me off the hook for a moment.

I opened *Reaching Tin River*, Astley's last novel, with trepidation. What did Thea have in store for me this time? Largesse, humour and a cracking pace. An invitation to share. I was in for a rollicking time because there is one thing that Astley never does and that is underestimate her audience. She allowed Belle an adventure of ironic self-discovery. She allowed her heroine to fail. The final scene where Belle sits, in an apparently aimless frame of expectation, is exquisitely realised, poignant, underplayed, apposite.

*Reaching Tin River*, along with *It's Raining in Mango* began to give Astley the wider audience she craved. With *Vanishing Points*, her second book published by Heinemann, that audience will increase again.

Thea Astley has faith in narrative and in characters. I'm not suggesting hers is a literal realism because her view of life is too sardonic, her eye cocked for the weird, small gesture that undoes the norm. Life continues to surprise Astley. Hers is not the prose of neat answers and fulfilled expectations. Her characters are on the move, heading who knows where. Chance and circumstance play their part. So do sudden reversals, painful memories, fits of valor and moments of sheer, mad heroism.

*Vanishing Points* takes shape as two novellas, the longer 'The Genteel Poverty Bus Company' concerns Macintosh Hope, an ex-academic who becomes a terrorist of the Great Barrier Reef. Mac's battles using classical music as a weapon with an island resort whose noise disturbs his own little bit of paradise are witty, edgy and sharply realised. Mac is on the run from the twentieth century yet he cannot help confronting it, judging it and thereby being engaged by it. His despairing response shapes the pattern of his increasingly fraught and quixotic existence.

In the second novella, 'Inventing the Weather', Julie Truscott abandons her kids and her unfaithful, real estate husband. The tone is assured, bitchily accurate and blackly funny. At times it's also rhetorical and declamatory. An assumed sisterhood between female characters jars while divisions between gender are little short of schismatic. Astley has the skill to create an unlikeable character with whom the reader can vividly identify but the novella moves with such speed Julie is often reduced to a series of smart remarks and rapid-fire responses to

situations that zip past like landscape from a train. I wanted to cry, "Slow down, Thea!" because when she does, brilliance occurs.

Astley is an expert at investing the fragment with meaning. It's the force behind her characters and her method of constructing them. Julie and Mac have the freedom of movement only a generous writer, relaxed and in control, can give. Astley is not a puppet-master. Once her characters assume dimension on the page, she follows their trajectory. Though sometimes it can give her landscapes an unbalanced effect, for her characters can be feckless and scrambled, and almost always unsure, the final picture is convincing, because Astley puts her own belief in humanity so very much to the test. She questions notions of triumph and failure, worth and use, commitment and betrayal. Hers is a world of very personal quests and victories. The self, idiosyncratic, frail and often unreliable, is the last resort and the final goal.

*Vanishing Points* is Thea Astley's thirteenth work of fiction published in thirty-four years of continuous production. She has also raised a family and taught full-time. Yet despite the high regard which Astley is held here, she still finds it hard to get published overseas. No Australian writers except Bryce Courtenay and Colleen McCulloch have "made it big" in London or New York, and therefore none enjoy the real money to be made from large print runs.

I feel lucky to be an Australian woman writer. Unlike the visual artists, I have many role models, older women of powerful intellect and imagination whose talents remain so vigorous I can barely keep up with reading them, their output is so prolific. A woman painter of forty is not so privileged.

At Adelaide Writers' Week a few years ago, I walked with Gwen Harwood from our hotel to the tents where the festival was held. By the time we reached the tents, I had a stitch, a red face and could scarcely breathe. Gwen, utterly unpuffed, chatted scablimely about Hobart and mutual friends. "How do they do it?" I gasped to Drusilla Modjeska, similarly daunted from a 'stroll' with veteran New Zealand writer Lauris Edmonds.

The Eighties world of Ozlit is a different place, with its multitude of contacts and opportunities, from the tough climate where the generation of Astley and Harwood created, not only their art, but their sense of themselves as writers.

*Janine Burke's most recent book is Field of Vision, A Decade of Change: Women's Art in the Seventies (Viking). Lullaby, her fourth novel, is being completed under a Literature Board Fellowship.*

## Twenty Years of Mucking About in Arts Policy

Barry Jones

Justin Macdonnell: *Arts, Minister?; Government Policy and the Arts* (Currency Press, \$95).

The price (\$95) is a major hurdle to jump over but for people who have been directly or indirectly involved in the evolution of Federal arts policy, especially arts funding in the period 1968 to 1987, *Arts, Minister?* will be an essential purchase.

It should be said at once that the book is intensely interesting and generally well written and useful.

Macdonnell has been in arts management for twenty years, working for the Australian, South Australian and New Zealand Opera companies. His company has carried out development work for a variety of clients, including the Australia Council.

A note underneath the copyright details indicates that the book has been subsidised by the Australia Council.

Ostensibly an account of the stewardship of eight Ministers for the Arts, either *de facto* or *de jure* and with a variety of titles, in a twenty-year period, he deals in such detail with establishing the Australian Council for the Arts and the evolution of its apostolic successor the Australia Council that it is not always easy to distinguish between background and foreground.

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*"He urges the abolition of  
the Australia Council...  
I don't think his case is convincing"*

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He urges the abolition of the Australia Council and assumption by the relevant Ministry of all arts funding and policy making, suggesting that he is prepared to bite the hand that feeds him. I don't think his case is convincing.

The eight Ministers (carelessly, on page 3 he calls them "those nine men") were John Gorton (1968-71), who also doubled up as Prime Minister; Peter Howson (1971-72), who served under Billy McMahon; Gough Whitlam (1972-75), also Prime Minister; four of Malcolm Fraser's Arts Ministers, Tony Staley (1975-77), Bob Ellicott (1977-81), Ian Wilson (1981-82) and Tom McVeigh (1982-83); and Bob Hawke's first Arts Minister, Barry Cohen (1983-87). (Michael Mackellar who held the post of Minister for Home Affairs for a month in 1982 is not included.)

His portraits are very shrewdly drawn. Whitlam's role was dynamic but also very 'correct' in the sense that he kept at arm's length from his creation, the Australia Council. Tom McVeigh, the only National Party Arts Minister comes across very sympathetically. Barry Cohen was more deeply committed to heritage issues than his immediate predecessors.

Macdonnell relies very heavily on taped interviews with six of the Ministers (Whitlam and Ellicott being the exceptions). Dr Jean Battersby, Executive Officer or Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Council for the Arts/Australia Council 1968-75, was also interviewed in depth but the material is used to her detriment.

Since the last interview, with Barry Cohen, took place in August 1987 it is puzzling that the book should have had a gestation period of nearly five years.

Other major players, H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, Timothy Pascoe, Donald Horne, are examined on the basis of published material.

I should declare an interest. I was a member of the original Australian Council for the Arts from 1968 to 1972, and some of its Committees. Later I was on the Australia Council's Film Board, chaired the Film and Television School Board and sat on the Australian Film Development Corporation. I also had the unique opportunity to debate arts policy in the Parliament.

The author treats me very generously and his account of things I was involved in is accurate. However he goes too far. The second speech quoted on page 239 was by Moss Cass, not me.

Apart from the price, the bad news is the extraordinary inaccuracy and carelessness in proof reading, which inevitably casts doubt on the book's reliability.

Names are recorded with reckless abandon: Melbourne publisher Michael Zifcak is given as Yitzak, art dealer Georges Mora as Morat, journalist Neil Jillett as Juillett, arts administrator Peter Bahen as Bain, Billy McMahon's secretary Ian Grigg as Greek, the MP Brendan Hansen as Les, Ross Tzannes as Ralph, and the electorate of Macmillan as McMullin.

On page 67 there appears a half-page slab from *The Howson Diaries*, *The Life of Politics* edited by Don Aitkin (1984). There are nineteen variations from Howson's text, including Greek for Grigg, Lawler for Lawlor. As the acknowledgements suggest, the material must have been dictated onto tape and then transcribed.

Some of his mistakes are gratuitous, the result of trying to provide too much information. Cohen left the Ministry on 24 July 1987, not 12 July. He

asserts that Gorton was Prime Minister as a Senator for forty-six days. Not true. Gorton resigned from the Senate after twenty-one days as Prime Minister to contest a seat in the House of Representatives. Staley never rose "to Cabinet status" (like me, he was in the 'outer Ministry'). Bob Ellicott's term as Minister for Home Affairs (i.e. 'the Arts', to which Environment was added) was 1977-1981, not 1980. Jerzy Toeplitz, first director of the Film and Television School was an eminent critic and historian, not a filmmaker.

Macdonnell has missed one interesting saga of the Hewson years: the shredding of the Music Advisory Committee's report, 'The State of Music in Australia' (July 1972), one of the best-kept secrets in our cultural history. This was written by Sir Bernard Heinze, John Hopkins and me, based on research by Roger Covell. Its demise is mentioned in *The Life of Politics* (page 845). The ABC was upset and did not want the report published "as it would cause them a great deal of worry, with which I entirely agree". The states were even more upset about references to music in schools. Jean Battersby was particularly anxious, believing that its publication would unleash some furies at a time when only the election of a Labor government could save the Council.

He argues that "no one has come up with a coherent argument as to why the arts are so fragile that they require special treatment, at arm's length from the Government of the day, which cannot be

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*"This is at best a half-truth,  
and at worst misleading."*

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accorded to other areas of public administration". This is at best a half-truth, and at worst misleading.

The Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council which fund the highest level of Australian research are also accorded "special treatment" and administered at arm's length from the government of the day. So are CSIRO, the learned academies, universities generally and the Australian Institute of Sport. Governments hold the power of appointment to arts funding bodies and the annual Budget determines the size of the envelope. Governments make a value judgement that orchestras, opera, ballet and film have a value in excess of the box office return in the short term and take a leap of faith that they will be vindicated in time. However, he is right to note a failure to evolve any coherent philosophy about arts funding. Australians have a

great gift for mucking around. We tend to 'back' into policy formulation in a spirit of enthusiastic ad hocery, then find we have set binding precedents.

Susan Ryan and Bill Hayden thought very seriously about arts policy and might have effected radical change, by giving more funding to community-based popular arts and less to the 'flagship' companies. In 1983 their translation to Education and Foreign Affairs respectively kept them out of the arts area.

Macdonnell is right to emphasise the importance of John Gorton's role. Gorton inherited both the idea of the Australian Council for the Arts and a particularly strong-willed chairman, Nugget Coombs, from Harold Holt, but he was determined to do things his way. His strong national feeling was reflected in a determination to promote a film industry since, as a child, films had helped form his own view of the world. Whitlam paid tribute to Gorton's pioneering role. However, Macdonnell fails to grasp the extraordinary role of Dr Coombs who chaired the Council magnificently and held it together during the excruciating 'de-Gortonisation' period under McMahon.

*Barry Jones is National President of the ALP, writer, MP and ex-Minister, now serving on UNESCO's Executive Board in Paris. His Sleepers, Wake! (1982) is in its 18th impression.*

## Confident Mastery

D. R. Burns

Thomas Keneally: *The Place Where Souls Are Born* (Hodder & Stoughton, \$29.95).

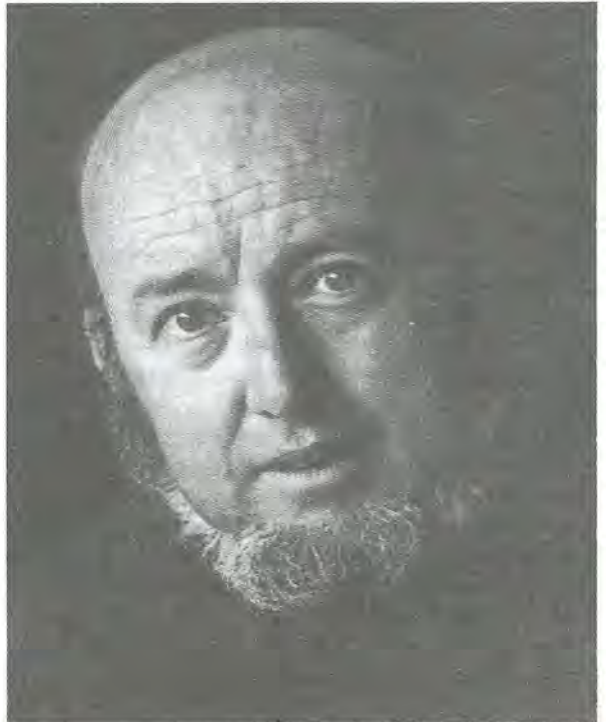
*Woman of the Inner Sea* (Hodder & Stoughton, \$32.95).

The first of these describes "A Journey Into The American South West", to the desert lands and mountains of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. The second is a novel set in Sydney and far western New South Wales. Read in succession they vividly illustrate Thomas Keneally's mature powers.

Looking, as his habit, ever outward, to make rapt survey of the rise and fall of those vast south-western ranges, our multi-focal man peers backwards as well through time to find the same undulating process at work in the human histories of the peoples who farmed for long centuries on the vast mesas, particularly the most magnificent, the Mesa Verde, "enormous in spread and height". Here, from something like the first century A.D. the *Anazasi* sowed and reaped and built for more than

a thousand years, leaving behind, to be discovered by the wandering cowboys of quite another epoch, "their beautiful apartments socketed in...under canyon walls." "Their industry, like the industry of all vanished people who got a temporary and very clever purchase over a difficult terrain, brings tears to the eyes." Or, in the case of the notably not vanishing Mormons, a grin to the lips, in recording how their leaders abjured polygamy while holding to the high moral ground on which Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had embraced it. "The Lord had ordered it and the Lord had discontinued it." A picture of the Mormons' achievement is offered in the same three-dimensional manner as all the other enduring prominences, human and geological. An ability to endure in the dry upland air was certainly a prime quality of the most celebrated females - Elizabeth "Baby" Doe, intrepid second wife of Horace Tabor, first of the silver kings, and Susannah Bransford who took over the mining interests of the first of her four husbands when he died of the grog, and, by 1902 was worth \$100 million.

The same rooted enthusiasm for the extensive aspect of human experience creates, in *Woman of the Inner Sea*, the social expanse of older and very new Australia, circa 1990. Like a *dhurrie* rug laid in a renovated front bar, this is richly woven, right up to date and grows progressively more smelly. The



heroine's very supportive Catholic priest uncle, as one illustrative figure, faces a possible five years for the extensive laundering of his SP monies.

The central plot is a great triumph which keeps the reader near blind to what becomes obviously obvious only in the right place, the not-quite-last pages. The same marshalling control shows, at surface level, in the (Keneally copyrighted) way violence breaks out on the placid page, in anatomical progression, so to speak, as when a mere nose mashing against kneecap is followed by a comic sequence which issues in the nose masher's pelvis being knocked out of whack. Bodily parts, human lives and property, complex financial shonkiness on two levels, man of God's not-very-good name, heroine's peaceful, maternal habit and svelte figure, all go splat in their separate ways, revealing a totally expert grasp, not only of the mechanics of disfigurement and annihilation, but also of the way such horribly final, all-hope-obliterating calamities can, in context become, for the not so impure in heart, the merely sequential parts of a hope-restoring scheme of things – a transformation not always part of Keneally's earlier surveys of the commanding place violence holds amid human efforts to make sense of circumstances.

The authorial presence, persistently surfacing to address the reader, in a cajoling, Dickensian fashion, as "dear book buyer", seems aimed to revivify the classic narrative ways of Henry Fielding and James, as well as to double-whammy certain academy-based critical fads, (a), by revealing the wrongness of "deconstructionist" doubts about the relevance and even the very existence of such a being, and, (b), by being in no way representative of those well-favored "post-modernist" fictionists whose lurking, critically scrutinising presence about the borders of narrative events brings the objective reality of these into doubt. Here, on the contrary, our commentator's anxiety to shield the reader from a premature awareness of certain events, emphasises their quite momentous reality. On page seventy-three of two hundred and ninety-four, we have a direct refusal to reveal what Kate Gaffney-Kozinsky, the "woman", mother of two small children, daughter-in-law of the toughest Polish-Australian in the construction and waste-disposal business, is being told by her father, Jim Gaffney, "builder of Sydney's first hyper-cinema" – the substance of the phone call information he received in the privacy of the manager's office at the place where they've just been dining.

A book devoted to the celebration of the immutability of life and the persistence of joy would be

destroyed amidst by what Jim told Kate. It will, at some stage, be delivered to the reader, but...

In consequence of 'it' Kate, clearly divested of her treasured mother role, and after some hospitalisation, deserts an (equally faithless) spouse and heads off, by train, to lose her present identity in western New South Wales. "Either I do this or I shoot myself", she writes to her inoffensive Anglo-Oz lover. She alights at random in the town of Myambagh, somewhere short of Bourke, gains the going barmaid's position at the Murchison Railway Arms, and a large "pyramidal" daily drinker, nicknamed Jelly, as her nightly wraparound. She lets her hair get "raggier" and munches on "fat marbled steak". She wishes to induce a state of high-cholesterol forgetfulness, to "clog in her blood" the memory of her mother-in-law's frightful accusation – more centrally, the totally destructive way in which it has got right home to her.

Being settled now on one of the world's great flood plains, Kate battles away as mere sandbag filler when, in God's good time, (half quoting *Hanrahan*) down comes the blasted rain. Her wobbly lover, become Prometheus, embraces his elements directing destiny as the river swells out over the levees, a fitting background to the arrival of the furies, a single male one in this case, with weightlifter's shoulders and killer instincts, bent upon passing to Kate certain papers from the Kozinskys for signature. Fleeing like Orestes before her, Kate heads even further out west. And, (in defiance of overmuch narrative leaning towards that sort of classical high seriousness), this is not only with Gus Schulberger, a decent little bloke, a product of Soldier Settlement days, but also with Chifley and Menzies. These are, respectively, the kangaroo and the emu Gus has rescued from a cruel stager of patriotic tableaux on the Gold Coast.

The great flat immutabilities of western New South Wales, including breakfast, dinner and tea at the Murchison Arms, effectively counterpoint the now fast-moving sequence of retribution and cleansing. This sees, finally, back in Sinney, the avenging angels, ones with permanency and super-annuation, close in on the genuinely and incredibly wicked while Kate lets slip her great burden (as the reader was promised she would), per medium of the most objective findings imaginable.

Outer detail services the inner sequence here as throughout. The reach across country is so extensive and the push through social entanglements so strenuous, because Kate has to make it in the area where there are no clues at all. The visible ones must

be made complete use of. Keneally, basically on the inward track here as he was in *Schindler's Ark*, reveals the same confident mastery. Some might now call this completeness of response to the outer dimension for subversive inner purposes, genius. This reviewer is ready to.

*Woman of the Inner Sea* indicates anew how phenomenally underrated Keneally is by most of our academic surveyors, including the feminist ones. Kate appropriately makes an appearance in the Keneally *œuvre* in succession to Joan of Arc.

*D. R. Burns, a sometimes involuntary student of Thomas Keneally's work for twenty-five years, regards as his own best short piece the review of Bring Larks and Heroes he wrote for Nation in 1967.*

## An Isolation: Women Writers 1930-1957

Susan Lever

Carole Ferrier (ed.): *As Good as a Yarn with You: Letters between Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw and Eleanor Dark* (Cambridge University Press, \$49.95).

The period from 1930 to 1960 now seems to be the era of great Australian letter-writing collections; before the telephone and improved transport systems made ongoing correspondences obsolete, but near enough to the present for whole wads of letters to survive in readable condition. Scholars working on Australian literature of this period can read their way through the voluminous Palmer correspondence, spend their days on Miles Franklin's letters or follow smaller tributaries through the papers of Frank Hardy, Judah Waten and hundreds of other collectors and writers of letters about literature. Given the mass of such correspondence, Carole Ferrier has decided to concentrate on publishing the letters between six women writers during this thirty-year period, using Nettie Palmer's correspondence (the main source for Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home*) as a source of supportive material rather than making it part of the collection itself. There are numerous points where the letters published here will touch on matters which other scholars have noted or seen from different perspectives.

Despite the prominence as novelists of Katharine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark and the others, this remains Miles Franklin's book. It begins with two letters to Franklin from Prichard, and ends, after Franklin's death in 1954, with a single 1957

letter from Barnard to Devanny describing, among other things, Barnard's enthusiasm for Patrick White. This seems an appropriate marking of a new era in Australian literature, because Franklin's presence as a literary eminence for the first fifty years of the century also represented an attitude to Australian writing which White may be seen to have displaced. Ferrier honours Franklin by quoting her epigraph from *My Career Goes Bung* in the final note: "This tale's as true as true can be, for what is truth or lies?"

Furthermore, Franklin writes the most amusing, interesting and human letters in the book. That habitual punning, slangy language and studied iconoclasm may be irritating in her books, but, in her letters, it projects a mind which is lively and sympathetic to the concerns of others, even up to a few months before her death. As Prichard keeps telling her, Franklin has a brilliant mind and excellent instincts, yet her lack of education or any kind of systematic approach to knowledge, cries out in everything she wrote. Far more than Furphy, she represents the untutored Australian genius, and she lived through a period when her lack of learning could only be a handicap. Franklin is clever enough to know this, and her comments on Marjorie Barnard's superior learning and the attitudes of the young bloods from the universities show that she felt her own deprivation acutely.

Barnard's letters are the most intellectual and direct in this book. She understands that writing is not simply the self-expression which seems to direct Devanny, but an activity requiring intellectual as well as emotional commitment. So we find Barnard writing to Eleanor Dark after the publications of *The Timeless Land* and *The Little Company* in an effort to pinpoint precisely where these novels have failed. Not for Barnard the friendly letter of compliment and flattery; she notes the similarities between Dark's work and Barnard Eldershaw's *Phillip of Australia* and *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, only to worry away at the "cold potato" results. She tells Dark that her characters have "attributes but no BO." Perhaps there can be no surprise that this interesting correspondence falls away very quickly. It is a loss to the book, because on the evidence of these letters, Barnard is right when she says "We don't really talk about our books enough among ourselves."

Elsewhere in the correspondence Prichard and Franklin tell each other how much they admire each other's books while condemning in passing the efforts of others, including *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* and *The Little Company*. This is friendship, not literary criticism or discussion, as any reader of Prichard's tedious *Golden Miles* trilogy must know.



While Franklin heroically battles on with her book of essays on Australian literature (published posthumously as *Laughter, Not for a Cage*) she is aware that the professionalisation of Australian literary studies is about to render her an amateur. It is this amateurishness which seems to bother Barnard in both creative and critical writing, but in the atmosphere conveyed by the book, a truly professional approach to either kind of writing would seem arrogant. It is not simply the obvious frustrations detailed in Modjeska's book – the need to work for a living, the lack of financial and emotional support from family and community, the condescending attitude to women – but the frustrations of writing without critical and intellectual discussion. There is very little of this discussion going on even in these letters by writers to writers.

At first I was surprised by the formality and apparent superficiality of the letters, with their details about servant problems and health, and I was unsettled that the Second World War seemed to mean little to these writers beyond paper shortages and having to do the laundry. There is hardly a word about the political implications of Hitler's war, or the impact of it on Australian families. Devanny, whose communism is like a religion, cheers for Stalin, but only Franklin lies awake at night worrying about her nephew joining the Air Force. Perhaps, this is a sign of the age of the writers during the War (all in their late forties or older), or a product of their middle-class backgrounds (only Devanny can be called working-class, and her communist commitment makes her professionally so). As time passes, and the letter writers get to know each other better, more personal and urgent concerns begin to emerge – though a reader may feel like a voyeur reading Marjorie Barnard's account to Jean Devanny of her affair with Frank Dalby Davison. Devanny is no intellectual, but she draws intimacy out of her correspondents; her own, rather bizarre confessions incite them to solicitousness and self-revelation.

Geography emerges as an important factor in the lives of these writers. Franklin is trapped in the suburbs of Sydney, Dark is ensconced in the Blue Mountains, Devanny heads north to Townsville, while Prichard lives in the countryside near Perth – a position, which Devanny suggests, may be a good place to write but not to live. They all feel isolated, as if physical distance is keeping them, not only from each other, but from the life which is the source of their writing. It is ironic that Dark's house, Varuna, and Prichard's house at Greenmount have now become writers' retreats, though isolation remains something of a problem at each. The final

impression of the book, then, is of frustration, unachieved potential, and loss. To my mind, most of these writers wrote dreary, forgettable novels; these letters confirm that they were aware that their work did not match their aspirations.

Carole Ferrier's editorial work and the publication values of this book are so good that they invite a certain quibbling pedantry. Barrett Reid has pointed out that Barnard (p. 116) repeats communist propaganda about the "Baillieu money" being used to fund publication of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, and that the biographical note on Sumner Locke Elliot is outdated. My own quibbles would be that the 'Rabbie' which excited the Scotsman must surely be Robbie Burns (p. 148) and that Ferrier, because of her concerns about the population explosion, is a little harsh in accusing Franklin of racism. But we so rarely see an Australian book produced with the care and detail of this book, that such quibbling is a luxury.

*Susan Lever is the author (as McKernan) of A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War (Allen & Unwin, 1989). She is working on a study of feminism and realism in Australian fiction.*

## Community Radio: New Voices in the Neighborhood

Michael Dugan

Phillip Edmonds: *A Station on Track; 3CCC the First Ten Years* (3CCC, Station Street, Harcourt, 3435, \$15.00, \$17.00 posted).

My favorite community radio station is Melbourne's 3RPH which broadcasts primarily for the print handicapped. Much of its airtime is spent on the reading of articles and interviews from magazines and newspapers and I find it an excellent station to listen to while engaged in mundane tasks. It also has a weekly children's hour which encourages children to creative activity – something almost unique among children's electronic media.

Each week the children's hour half an hour is edited (the Melbourne interest items being the first to be axed) and the resulting half-hour program is sent out to be broadcast from community radio stations all over the country. This community radio networking developed during the 1980s and means that a program initially broadcast to a small audience can ultimately reach a large one. Publishers are happy to supply books for review and for prizes to 3RPH's children's program because they know

that an Australia-wide audience will hear about them.

Community radio, like so many other good things, was an initiative of the Whitlam government. After the establishment of ethnic radio stations in Melbourne and Sydney in 1975 the then Minister for Media, Moss Cass, offered twelve radio licences for community groups to take up. The first true community radio station was Melbourne's 3CR which went to air in 1976. By the late 1980s there were a hundred community radio stations broadcasting across Australia.

Comparatively little has been written about community radio in Australia and I would not be surprised if Phillip Edmonds' book is the first substantial study of an Australian community radio station.

3CCC is an FM stereo station operated by the Goldfields Community Radio Co-operative and based at Harcourt in Victoria's central goldfields district, not far from the much larger towns of Castlemaine and Bendigo.

The station began broadcasting on Anzac Day 1982. However, this was the culmination of years of work towards gaining a licence, technical equipment and a body of enthusiastic volunteers to run the station. As is the case with many community initiatives reliant on voluntary labour, one person stands out as initiator, activist and motivator of others. In this case it is Dr Jeff Langdon, Director of the Castlemaine Education Centre, who, in 1977, translated the suggestion that the Centre produce some educational radio programs into the concept of 3CCC.

Once Langdon had formed his vision of a community radio station he became tireless and almost fanatical in striving to realise it. He recruited supporters, many of whom were to make major contributions to the station's development, pursued funding, established a framework for management and, as Edmonds states, "became a bit like a bulldog in his desire to achieve his licence".

To focus here on Langdon's role is not to ignore that others were centrally important to the creation of 3CCC, and Edmonds gives credit where credit is due, with the singular exception of himself. However, without Langdon, it is unlikely that the station would have eventuated. He was its inspirer and catalyst in gaining the support of others.

Edmonds presents not only the history of 3CCC – the involvement of many different people, the development of programs and programming policy, internal wranglings, pitfalls – but also outlines some of the ethical and philosophical challenges the station has, inevitably, had to face.

These include defining 'community' and deciding what sort of programming would best suit the station's community of listeners. A program that became too satirical led to reprimands for its two presenters. Edmonds comments: "[this] issue among others highlighted the problems of definitions in the boundaries of 'public decency'. Did an innovative public broadcaster merely reflect the prevailing ideas of 'decency' or attempt to inject new agendas into the community?"

Another question Edmonds asks is "how do you discipline unpaid volunteers?" The matter came up early in 3CCC's history when a disc jockey presenting a wild man image, similar to America's Wolfman Jack, caused "many incidents of on-air swearing...and drinking in the studio". Jeff Langdon supported the disc jockey but, eventually fearful that the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal might be monitoring the station, its Board of Directors axed the program, the only effective form of discipline it could take.

The question of station politics has also come up from time to time, both in terms of programming and as to whether the station should take a political stance. Those against adopting a political view quote the example of 3CR whose politics have occasionally brought it into bad odor with sections of the public and the government. (At one time when 3CR was in conflict with the Federal government over its attitude to Israeli/Palestinian issues, Liberal minister Neil Brown refused to allow a Public Broadcasting Foundation grant to be paid to the station. Instead the money was reallocated to 3CCC – perhaps a reward for being non-political!) It is, of course, impossible for a community radio station depending on volunteer announcers to keep political matters completely off the air, but the station never adopted a hard political line. Edmonds cites "unity in diversity" as his basic idea of station policy.

Edmonds also goes into the internal politics involved in running the station – a factor that is inevitable and everyday in a co-operative of many members.

Community radio is no longer seen as an experiment but is now accepted as an alternative to the ABC and the commercial radio stations. In the ten years it has been broadcasting 3CCC has managed to attract 25 per cent of radio listeners in its broadcast area. This is a considerable achievement given the strength of its competitors. As Edmonds says, it has "shown it could survive and grow as a co-operative during a period of gross privatisation and social alienation".

Edmonds, who has participated in the running

of 3CCC since 1984, has written what comes across as an honest, realistic and unsentimental history of the station's first decade. His is a story that no doubt will sound familiar to those who have participated in the operation of the many other community radio stations in Australia. For any organisations contemplating taking up a community radio licence this book is required reading – if only because it will help them avoid many pitfalls. However, it is more than a book for those involved in the field. It is a document that will be of interest to the social historian of the future and an interesting and very human account of a recent addition to the fabric of our local history.

*Michael Dugan is best known as a children's author. He also writes poetry and has published several books about aspects of Australian social history.*

## Pop Music Postmodern

Michael George Smith

Philip Hayward, (ed.): *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism; Popular Music and Australian Culture from the 1960s to the 1990s* (Australian Cultural Studies/Allen & Unwin, \$19.95).

The message of the cover of the debut album by Geelong-bred, Melbourne-based rock group, Goanna, *Spirit of Place*, released in 1982, is quite unequivocal. Burnished in red and gold, the colors of outback Australia, the art deco design recalls those postage stamps of the 1940s celebrating the triumph of aviation over the "tyranny of distance". At the centre of the design is a blood-red Uluru. The iconography, the band's choice of name, the issues it chooses to address, the emotions and images its music evokes all indelibly stamp this group as *Australian*. As if to ensure there can be no mistaking the earnestness and authenticity of the band, the back cover carries the endorsement of no less a personage than the late Professor Manning Clark: "Australians are beginning to find an idiom in music which will do what literature and painting have been doing for a long time; namely, help us to understand what it is like to live in Australia."

On the face of it, one would assume that this is one of the stated intentions of the collection of essays under review, edited by lecturer in drama and mass communications at Macquarie University, Philip Hayward. While I make no claim for either Professor Clark's understanding of contemporary popular music culture or Goanna's place within it, the fact that the band only rates a cursory mention

as one of a number of bands that eventually "make it as recognisably Australian" (p. 92) in a nostalgic essay on youth culture in the 1950s and 1960s contributed by Craig McGregor, says as much about the shortcomings of any collection of essays attempting to tackle so vast a subject as it does about the inevitable bias contained within many of them.

The diversity of topics addressed in the thirteen essays contained in *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism* proves just how vast a subject the contributors are tackling and within the context of short, specialised discussions, for the most part they each have merits. Apart from an introductory essay Hayward looks at the phenomenon of the Bicentenary and how he perceives some popular acts reflected its assumptions in their videos, Marcus Breen presents an unashamedly biased analysis of Australia's record companies, John Potts addresses the problem of an increasingly calcified approach to music programming on radio, Sally Stockbridge discusses the role of television and rock music, Graeme Turner tackles the venues that have nurtured the bands, Louise Douglas and Richard Greeves almost make a case for the impact of the Vietnam experience and the counter-culture on rock, Vikki Riley zeroes in on her own small purview of the rock world as experienced in Melbourne during the eruption of punk, Simon Steggels and Idena Rex examine the contexts of Midnight Oil and Kylie Minogue respectively, and Andrew Murphie and Edward Scheer look at the dance party phenomenon, one that ultimately shows just why, as a whole, the live music scene in Australia is dying. Whether these writers like it or not, it is becoming

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*"popular music...is no longer  
the lingua franca of a generation"*

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increasingly irrelevant to young people as a form of cultural expression. According to the notes on the contributors, nearly all of them are involved in a journal called *Perfect Beat*. Collectively, the book reflects this in its continual reinforcement of a small coterie of opinions which tends, for me, to seem more or less myopic in certain senses, depending on the topic under discussion.

The central problem is the almost universal rejection, vilification or simple contempt for either "mainstream", "commercial" or, worst of all, "pub" or "Oz rock", defined variously as "an anachronism", "reactionary" or "male, heterosexual, aggressive rock". While the desire to bring into the foreground

the multiplicity of contemporary music forms that are *not* "Oz rock" – from indigenous to women's musics – is an admirable enterprise long overdue, to dismiss so summarily, so patently *central* an expression of so large a part of Australia's youth – either because there is perceived an already extensive amount of analysis on the form, or that the form is so creatively devoid of worth as to warrant nothing more than contempt – is to marginalise the discussion too stringently. As it is, there is disunity amongst the contributors, some of whom *do* recognise more in the form than mere "male arrogance". Without at least *some* intelligent (and not merely élitist dismissal) discussion of the form, the point of the *reaction* to it by some of the marginalised forms under discussion seems overstated.

I'll return to Goanna to try and explain the point. All the contributors accept that rock and pop as it is practised in Australia is based on imported forms, basically American, derived from black popular music, essentially blues, R&B and rock'n'roll. The elements that have been added by Australian musicians that are recognised as imparting something uniquely 'Australian' include Irish folk and Aboriginal traditional music. Both these elements are in the Goanna repertoire of sounds and signs. The band's songwriter, Shane Howard, was the first 'pop' or 'rock' musician to put the case for some form of redress with regards to the rights of Australia's indigenous peoples on the top of the charts, with 'Solid Rock':

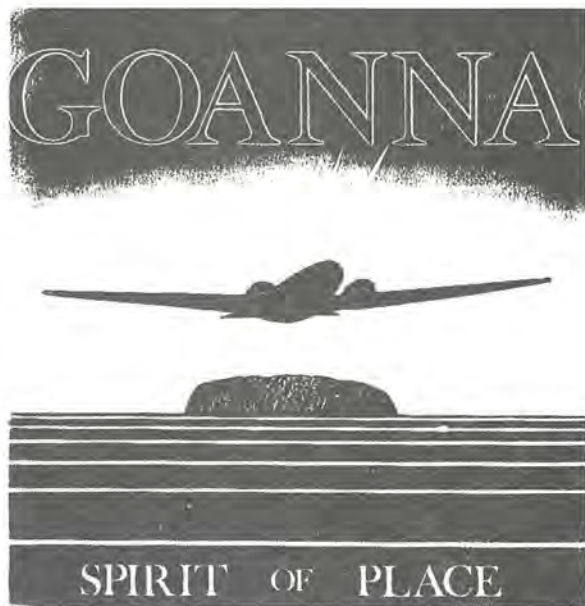
Don't tell me that it's justified  
 – 'Cause somewhere, someone lied, someone  
 lied,  
 Genocide

That was eight years before Midnight Oil and 'Beds are Burning'. Now a solo artist, Howard continues to explore the relationship between black and white cultures and this vast country, basing himself on the banks of a river in far north Queensland, far from the trappings of the rock industry. Yet his work, like that of Redgum and a dozen other bands mixing folk and indigenous forms with rock in an attempt to "find an Australian voice", does not rate consideration.

Since Goanna was patently *not* Oz rock, sporting two women in the lineup patently *not* serving as objects for sexual exploitation but as legitimate, respected musicians, it must be the obviously illegitimate co-option of the question of indigenous land rights that is the problem. In fact, the relationship between Aboriginals and Midnight Oil is presented as *far* more contentious in the intriguing

essay by John Castles on Aboriginal rock. It must then be due to the obvious commercial success, though shortlived, of the band. This underlines another basic problem that all too many commentators on the music industry have suffered since the "punk revolution". Essentially, the argument is that almost any music not motivated by a defiant attitude of independence from and contempt for the major record companies and mass audience acceptance is necessary arbitrary, vacuous fodder for the masses and therefore unworthy of critical analysis by virtue of its inherent irrelevance.

The result of this is as severe a cultural cringe as anything Australia has suffered in the past in other aspects of popular and serious culture. To dismiss Oz rock as commercial or "heritage rock", as described in the essay on pop music on Australian radio by John Potts, is to dismiss the influence of those bands on the more "credible" acts of today, such as that of the archetypal rock band, AC/DC on thrashy three-piece The Hard-Ons, who recently recorded a version of AC/DC's anthem to Oz rock,



'Let There Be Rock'. The charge against Oz rock as the province of white, Anglo-Saxon males is proved absurd by the fact that The Hard-Ons include a Sri Lankan and a South-East Asian in their lineup.

The most interesting essay in the collection, for me, is that by Vivien Johnson on the role of women in rock. What makes it truly extraordinary is her thesis that the whole pub rock and therefore Oz rock thing, that is deemed contemptible as much as anything for its chauvinistic attitudes to women, may

well have come into being through the actions of the women themselves. Citing the desegregationist actions of two women in ignoring the rule against women in the public bar of the Regatta Hotel in Brisbane in 1965, Johnson presents an intriguing case for the development of pubs as venues, and the music created in them, through the growing liberation of women in their public appreciation of music and movement. It's only a pity she chooses to cite the English all-girl band The Slits, pre-eminent in the punk revolution, as the obvious best example of how women in rock have been empowered by denying any attempt by their audiences at objectification. Chrissie Amphlett, fronting a very traditional Oz rock combo in The Divinyls, is by far the strongest local example and one that has overcome all the inherent chauvinism of the "great Aussie pub/beer barn" venues.

Unfortunately, there isn't enough space to present a fuller critique of this collection, which is thankfully not, in the main, a tome "written by pedagogues for pedagogues" as my editor feared, though in the essays of Hayward himself and a couple of the other contributors, the approach comes perilously close. The one point I *would* like to make, however, in closing, is that, ultimately, the one thing all the contributors seem to have failed to understand is that, no matter how central popular music – whether generated locally or overseas – might be to them, for the greater populace, it is no longer the *lingua franca* of a generation. Superseded by all manner of other forms of 'entertainment', from computer games to graffiti crimes, contemporary music is becoming increasingly peripheral to the experience of youth culture which has become so fragmented – as different groups seek out sounds that distinguish them from other 'tribes' of youths – that *no* contemporary popular music form can be said to express any general ethos uniquely Australian.

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## A Painful Unlearning

Tim Rowse

Barbara Henson: *A Straight Out Man: F. W. Albrecht and Central Australian Aborigines* (Melbourne University Press, \$39.95).

Her subject's growing appreciation of his cultural

impotence – this is the theme which emerges in Barbara Henson's fine biography of F. W. Albrecht (1894–1984), leader of the Lutheran Mission, Hermannsburg, from 1926 to 1961. Henson's strategy is to let this realisation come to the reader through Albrecht himself, not from any critical, interpretative moves of her own. For the most part, her material is drawn from Albrecht's own prolific writings to friends, bureaucracies and members of the Lutheran congregation. To these sources she has added some personal reminiscences, the most important of which are those of Aboriginal people (mostly men) long associated with the Mission.

Many of these Aboriginal comments (italicised and attributed only in the endnotes) serve no purpose other than to add some texture and 'color' to a narrative centred almost wholly on Albrecht's documented ruminations. However, the late Nahasson Ungwanaka's testimony, that Albrecht was a "straight out man" ("you will not shift him"), sketches the cultural stand-off which made it possible for the Aranda to love their *ingkata* (spiritual leader).

That's why they all loved him, because he took a lot of good things, fruit and things, and he shared them every time, wherever he went. But they thought, if he hear about their life, what they still doing, they were afraid of that, because he was straight-out man – OK, you're doing wrong thing all the time. That's why they had strong feeling about him, he was bringing good things to them, he was also growling at them for other bad things. They loved him, but they were afraid of Albrecht because he was a straight-out man, that's why.

"[The] other bad things" were chiefly two: Aborigines' indifference to the work ethic; and their continued practice of indigenous spirituality.

Albrecht's "straight-out" way was to work himself to exhaustion in order to look after the material needs of the Aranda, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara, Pintupi, Warlpiri and Anmatyerre, and then to expect his beneficiaries' compliance with an alien cultural order. Nahasson, ordained Pastor and cultural broker, states the limits of Aboriginal reciprocity with such giving, and so defines an Aboriginal domain: ready to love, they were loath to obey.

The material frailty of the Lutherans' Hermannsburg mission impressed Albrecht in his earliest years there. From 1926 to 1929, drought strangled the region, diminishing the natural food supply in the Western MacDonnell Ranges to such an extent that rations could not fill the gap. Famine

and scurvy wreaked a climax of death and misery in 1929, before the rains came at that year's end. Tapping the nearby Kaporilja Spring, in 1935, and setting up a garden and a milking herd, the missionaries' minds came to be focussed on the material preconditions of their evangelism.

To some colleagues, notably the (absentee) Mission Board Chairman, Pastor John Riedel, this sometimes seemed a dereliction of Christian duty. Poignantly, Henson shows Albrecht's patient persuasiveness. Indeed, some of Albrecht's most informative writing, her archive, was provoked by the adverse political climate in which the Mission labored until about 1942. Thereafter, the Army and then the Native Affairs Branch saw more value in what Albrecht had been trying to achieve, so that, but the late 1950s, he had the luxury to reflect on the more subtle and immovable adversities facing Aboriginal culture itself.

It is at this point that Henson's biography starts to deliver the insights that will make it indispensable to the study of Australia's colonial and Christian histories. For Albrecht's life is an essay on the limits of colonial evangelism.

The desecration of Manangananga Cave in 1930 was the emblematic high point of the Lutheran assault on Aranda spirituality. There, on Pentecost Sunday, objects bearing sacred designs (*tjurunga*) were denounced as like unto the sacred calf, and brought out into the open to be seen and touched by the uninitiated – actions until then punishable by death. We have to imagine for ourselves the conditions which made it possible for Albrecht to get away with this. But surely they included a fresh sense of cosmic disorder, occasioned by long drought and hitherto unseen scurvy. Hermannsburg had already, since 1877, been a sanctuary from the guns of pastoralists and police; was it not also, now, an (imperfect) shelter from the cruelties of unbountiful Nature? Albrecht was not wrong to insist that Christian soldiers would march better on full bellies.

But there was nothing to guarantee that the congregation which accepted Manangananga's desecration would henceforth turn away from all pagan practice and belief. While some Aboriginal people may have become exclusively Christian, others accommodated Christianity. That is, many people chose to respect Albrecht's wishes by not disclosing the spiritual continuities to which he had so clearly shown his hostility. Ceremony went underground. It seems to have taken Albrecht about thirty years to acknowledge in writing both that it was in this way that his authority was respected and that their spirituality was entitled to his respect.

According to Henson, he was helped to this revaluation not only by the sheer persistence of an Aboriginal culture which he had once diagnosed as close to exhaustion, but also by the Ernabella

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### *"Ceremony went underground"*

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missionaries and by Ted Strehlow. At Ernabella (established in 1937) the Presbyterian policy was not to condemn native beliefs, but simply to demonstrate the Christian way and to teach literacy and other skills. A long dialogue with the Presbyterians and visits to Ernabella gave Albrecht a practical appreciation of the various ways of evangelism. As for Ted Strehlow, he urged missionaries in the 1950s to accept Aboriginal spirituality as an ineradicable reality and sought in his writings to expound its meanings.

The result of such revisions was that Albrecht, like Strehlow and Elkin, became a critic of the practice of assimilation policy. In Albrecht, this was expressed in uneasiness at the pace at which Aboriginal people were coming to be treated as individual citizens, able to work and earn and make their way with little reference to the bonds of kin and country. This made him a 'conservative', at odds with the 'enlightened' and 'progressive' argument which then promoted the relaxation of 'paternalist' oversight.

Since the 1930s, Albrecht had tried to delay Aborigines' entry into the cash economy. By the 1940s, the Mission had set up a number of trading posts (at Hermannsburg, Haasts Bluff and Areyonga) where people could trade artefacts and dingo scalps for the Western commodities which they had begun to value (tea, sugar, boots, clothes). As cash welfare benefits were introduced in the late 1950s and 1960s, the Mission extended these retail services by means of a hawker business, staffed by Albrecht's son Paul. People need not go to town to get or to spend cash, and so were less exposed to the anti-Christian and anti-traditional temptations, prostitution and alcohol, they reasoned. The Hermannsburg artists were the first to break free of this hinterland economy, making their own cash sales in town, in defiance of Mission and government guidance. Albrecht came to regret the success of the 'Namatjira School' and played an important part in the conviction of Albert Namatjira for supplying alcohol to others.

Henson's account persuades one of the humane good sense grounding Albrecht's 'paternalist' critique of the pace of assimilation. Indeed, some

Central Australian Aboriginal spokespersons have come to be critical of the damaging speed with which Aborigines were liberated from the protections against alcohol abuse (though they wrongly imply that government policies entirely determined that speed). How to invoke non-Aboriginal law, now, in the fight against alcohol abuse has recently become a point of controversy among Aborigines and non-Aborigines, making it harder to delineate older polarities between 'paternalist' and 'progressive' positions in the discussion of Aboriginal civil rights.

The more he saw, the less he knew. That the dynamics of Aborigines' adaptation to colonialism could become *less* predictable to a sympathetic long-term observer is attested by Albrecht's attempt to explain 'communism' to a class of Aboriginal men in 1965. He found that these men understood very little of the Australian economy, seeming to believe that "there was an unlimited supply of goods available. The only question was one of obtaining them." Albrecht, all too familiar, after forty years, with Aborigines' unwillingness to internalise a Christian 'work ethic' of "no work, no ration/money", was still "unpleasantly surprised" by such cultural insularity. With good reason could he write, in 1959, that to transform Aborigines required relying "on God for guidance, rather than follow our own ways of thinking".

If only God's guidance would be manifest in something less complex than the practices of men and women. As Henson shows so well, Albrecht's wisdom evolved as a negative capability, a painful *unlearning* of the cultural assurances which had made him such a dedicated missionary in 1926.

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## Lloyd's Last Word

Richard Ely

Lloyd Robson: *A History of Tasmania. Vol. II, Colony and State: From 1856 to the 1980s* (Oxford University Press, \$85).

Volume One appeared in 1983. In 1985, in *A Short History of Tasmania*, which significantly devoted only about a fifth of its pages to the period before responsible government, Robson in effect signalled the major themes of the second volume. The spectacle of Tasmania's occupation by Europeans, he declared, was "one of transplanted Britons clinging

to and emulating the institutions of the colonizing authority, modifying them only insofar as allowed by the forces of the market place and those who exercise hegemony". The general pattern, therefore, "is largely that of colonialism, conceived in terms of the exploitation which the word evokes". The *Short History*, in sum, was an attempt to draw together, into an integrated portrayal, the imperial outreach of the restless and expansive British society, "suffused with the ideology of Christianity and increasingly equipped with powerful technology", and the evolving reactive pattern of Tasmania's colonial deference and emulation. Colonial interests *were* asserted against those of Britain, and a "local character and style" *did* evolve, "not a little associated with the important fact that the colony/state was an island", but Tasmanian assertiveness against Britain, as later against Canberra, largely remained expostulatory and equivocal – certainly too often so for Robson's taste.

Concisely and sometimes brilliantly, the *Short History* sketched the history of Tasmania in these terms, and this *tour de force* induced in many the expectation that in Volume Two of the big work these rich themes would be expanded and enriched.

That has not altogether happened. *A History of Tasmania. Colony and State: From 1856 to the 1980s* is a work of genuine scholarship, often enlivened by Robson's sardonic but humane wit, but, for all its bulk (663 pages) this is in some important ways a lesser work, even a thinner one, than the *Short History*. It is thin in tending to offer factual foreground without interpretative background. Almost entirely missing, that is, are themes and concepts by reference to which one can offer an answer to the question: What, overall and generally during the past hundred and forty years, has been happening in and to "the tight little island"? Volume Two expands – sometimes copiously – the factual substratum of the *Short History*, but leaves the larger Tasmanian story (or should one say nest of stories?) uninterpreted, unexplained.

The command-ideas which have probably contributed most to the discursive contours of Tasmanian history (Imperial and Australian 'needs' as successively postulated; the sacredness of a 'stake' in the land; local versions of liberalism, egalitarianism and collectivism; the twentieth-century progressivist developmentalism of which the HEC remains a powerful populist symbol; and, in recent decades, the new middle class's sacralisation of wilderness and ecological balance) are noted rather than defined, even implicitly. To read Volume Two with the greatest benefit one must shuttle back and forth between it and the *Short History*.

This is not to say that Robson's second volume, taken on its own, lacks readability and scholarly quality. It is fluently written; it is organised with neat, although mechanical, chronological felicity; it makes good use, with due acknowledgement, of a very great deal of research more or less buried in theses, journal articles and monographs; it sometimes rises from skilled collage to phases of creative synthesis or argument, as in Robson's portrayal of the impact of the 1930s depression in Tasmania, or his analysis of the economic problems facing Tasmanians in the first third of the twentieth century. For those who hate the *Mercury*, deeply deplore the influence of the Tasmanian Legislative Council, and are alternately angered and saddened by the long Tasmanian religio-cultural hegemony of Britishness, Robson will bring pure joy with his repeatedly elegant verbal shafts.

Its limitations are as they are. The completeness of Volume Two – it begins with 'responsible government' in the 1850s and ends with the constitutional crisis of 1989 which issued in the Labor–Green accord – is, essentially, formal rather than substantive. Whether one fairly can blame Robson for this is another question. It would be more correct, in my view, to see the volume as the hurried, perhaps desperate packaging of what, at the time of Lloyd's untimely death in August 1990, remained work-in-progress. How Lloyd would have conceptually refined and enriched this study – how far, especially, he would have met the ultimate historical challenge to wed together the very general and the very particular – had he lived longer, one cannot say. Yet for what he does offer many of us have and will have cause to be deeply grateful.

*Richard Ely reviewed Volume One of Lloyd Robson's A History of Tasmania in Overland 96 (1984) pp. 56–59. He teaches history at the University of Tasmania.*

## From Being Into Song?

Geoffrey Dutton

Kevin Hart: *A. D. Hope* (Oxford University Press, \$14.95).

Kevin Hart has written, within the limits of space (125 pages) imposed by the new Oxford Australian Writers series, a stimulating book on A. D. Hope. Despite being an Associate Professor of Critical Theory, he does not try to fence Hope in with theory; he has a wide range of knowledge, his style is lucid, he has a sense of humor, and above all, he

is a good poet himself who can understand Hope's belief in the preeminence of poetry.

Hart usefully unglues labels like Augustan, Romantic or satirist and shows how Hope is all these and a lot more, at least in intention. However, following James McAuley, he wants to affix a label himself: Orphic. I don't think it sticks. Despite Hart's efforts to draw parallels with Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus', Hope has neither the tenderness, the fineness of mind, the spirituality or the technique of a truly Orphic poet like Rilke. (The same epigraph, incidentally, from one of the 'Sonnets', appears in both Hope's last book, *Orpheus*, and in Hart's book.)

Hart's failing is an inability, or disinclination, to follow up his own leads, and to write about the poems in terms of their ideas or messages, without considering their quality as poetry.

A rereading of Hope's poetic opus prompts the question: is he a professor or a poet? One remembers W. H. Auden's deadly remark: "A professor is one who talks in someone else's sleep". (From the viewpoint of modern poetry, it is incredible that both Auden and Hope were born in 1907.)

Hart had Hope's full cooperation in writing this book, but one area was taboo, in his notebooks or elsewhere: his childhood. Hope has defended his total reticence about his childhood as a preservation of sacred springs from the pollution of enquiry or analysis. This is personally legitimate enough, but very odd for a poet; it would certainly have baffled Vaughan, Wordsworth or Keats, to name only a few.

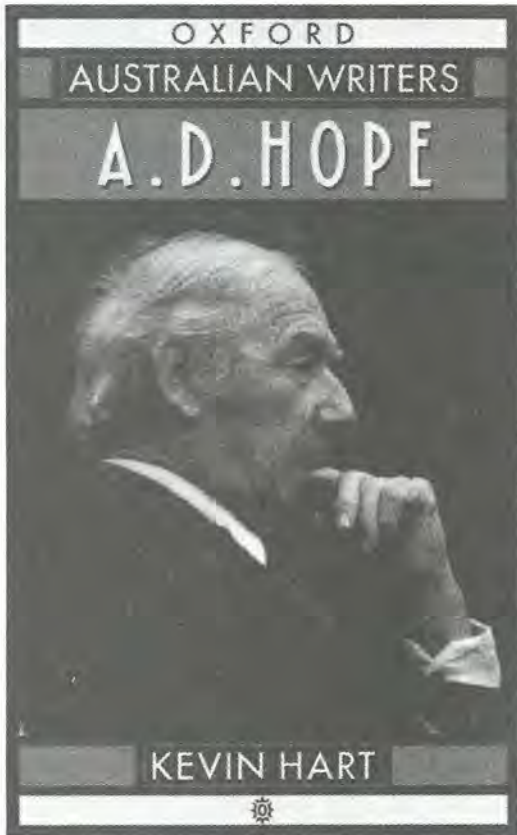
Hope has an adventurous and enquiring mind, although his capacity for rejection is high. There is surely something deeply deficient in a twentieth-century poet who is not just indifferent but actively hostile to Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot, who are at opposite ends of the poetic spectrum. Nor has Hope showed any interest in modern American or English poetry. Hart enthusiastically follows Hope's ideas through their habitats in classical, Biblical or scientific works, but he seldom stops to ask whether they are expressed in a valid and enduring poetry that matters to a contemporary reader.

Great claims are made for Hope by his admirers. These claims demand examination. One does not wish to be rude to a distinguished old man, although one can't help remembering how mercilessly Hope has dished it out over the years to other Australian writers. Anyway, it would be false to Hope's whole career to imagine him flinching from examinations.

Hope has said himself that he likes poetry to be "plain, lucid, logically connected, syntactically



exact, and firmly based in current idiom and usage ...For all that, I do not share the current prudishness about poetic diction"; and he goes on to say that a poet should be able to use "the resources which poetry has accumulated which lie outside the range of merely colloquial speech". This sounds fair enough, but it reveals the craftsman rather than the



is written in a mechanical, literal-minded way; it is unsubtle and without suggestion". But once again, Hart does not expatiate on this subject. For instance, he writes about the content and ideas of 'The Damnation of Byron' without questioning its quality as a poem, which is abysmal as well as being, in its "versified prose", a travesty of a great genius. The whole poem reeks of what D. H. Lawrence called sex-in-the-head. Norman Lindsay immediately springs to mind. Then, to one's astonishment, Hart actually quotes Lindsay's approval of Hope's "freed use of an erotic or bawdy key", also mentioning that Hope wrote an introduction to a collection of Lindsay's dreadful drawings, *Siren and Satyr*. It is surely somewhat of a stigma for Hope to be the Norman Lindsay of Australian poetry.

Hart discusses Hope's erotic poetry and his attitude to women, and even attempts a brief defence of the latter. But the truth is that Hope is as far from genuine eroticism as is Norman Lindsay. As Donald Friend once remarked to me "Have you ever noticed that Lindsay's men have pricks the size of peanuts?"

Hope goes to the opposite extreme. Human pricks are not big enough for him. Pasiphae is fucked by a bull, and she "Felt the wet pizzle pierce and plunge". (Actually bulls' pizzles aren't all that big.) The Countess of Pembroke, after watching a stallion at work, plonks down on all fours and yells to a nearby groom "Leap me like the stallions, drive it hard and high;/Butt, butt into the buttocks and scream like a horse when you 'die'". Eve, also taking it from behind, feels "the spurt of seed within her" and is "Split upwards by the sexual lightning stroke".

In each of these three major fucks in Hope's poems the lover mounts from the rear and so never sees the woman's face. At high speed in four pages at the very end of his book, Hart refers to the fact that women are associated with "dismemberment and monstrosity...so many assemblages of breasts and vaginas, legs and bottoms" and admits that "the depreciatory vision of women...informs all his writing, whether overtly or covertly".

This is surely a painful admission. And yet on the last page he can write that "love can be irruptive, dark and exorbitant; and yet there can be no community without love". For Hope, the only viable response to this endless movement of desire and partial fulfilment is celebration, and the true poet is the one who can say with Rilke, *Ich rühme*, 'I praise'.

Hope has written many poems about sex and passion, but he is not a poet of the love of God, man or woman, and so when he praises love it is as mechanical as his celebration of the power of poetry. In Rilke's wonderful 'Orpheus, Eurydike,

poet. Hart admits this: "For him, questions of form fall under the sign of craft". Hope's often twisted and archaic syntax, his almost unchanging use of metre and rhyme (often very bad rhymes), and his pastiches of other poets' styles betray the user of 'resources'. He does not liberate his verse within his tight metrical structure and rhymes as do a Rilke or an Akhmatova. What Hope can do when he really loosens up is apparent in his most beautiful poem, 'Hay Fever', and in the hexameters of one of his latest works, 'Western Elegies', which (*pace* Hart) are closer to A. H. Clough's *Amours de Voyage* than to Goethe's *Roman Elegies*.

Hart is brave enough to quote, at the beginning of his book, Robert Gray's comment on Hope: "I find Hope's poetry to be actually versified prose. It

Hermes', she is *Die So-geliebte*, the one who is so much loved. And in Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus' the poet calls to a young woman, who like all women is a sister of Eurydice, *Dich*, 'you'. In Hope's poems the man always takes, and the woman is praised for giving. There is always a me, but never a you.

And maybe this is linked to the failure of Hope's mechanical poetic syntax to contribute to praise or celebration. There is a hint of the reason for this in one of Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus': 'O diese Lust, immer neu, aus gelockertem Lehm!' ('Oh this joy, ever new, of loosened loam!'). There is little of this springing joy to be had from the moulded clay of Hope's poems. One suspects that Hart, although an acolyte, is aware of this.

*Geoffrey Dutton's latest book is Country Childhoods, which he edited for the University of Queensland Press. It was published in September.*

## Sudden Resonances

Des Cowley

John Jenkins: *Days like air* (Modern Writing Press, \$6.00).

We tend, more often than not, to consider the prose poem as a peculiarly French phenomenon; Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Pierre Reverdy, René Char, among others, spring instantly to mind. Poetry in English has proven particularly resistant to the introduction of the prose poem into its own traditions, although it remains a teasing thought that things might have been otherwise had a writer of Eliot's stature left us with a major prose poem along the lines of the one he so admired, St John Perse's *Anabasis*.

John Jenkins' most recent book of poetry, his fifth individual collection to date, consists of a series of brief prose poems, each carrying its own title, but which should more rightly be read as a single sequence, as one poem. It is a poetry which addresses itself directly to poetic concerns, to the very acts of perception and memory, and, equally, to the nature of the language we find ourselves dependent upon for such acts.

The language of the poem itself is almost deceptively simple, as if striving for a clarity amidst the complexity of ideas with which it engages itself. A brief note appended to the text tells us that *Days like air* was written over the ten year period 1981–1991, and that a small section had previously appeared in the 1984 publication *The Inland Sea* (Brunswick Hills Press). The draft in question, a

poem entitled 'The silence around a glass of water', acted as a kind of coda to *The Inland Sea*, a poetic statement of intent. Its simple prose statements, coming as they did at the end of the book, provided a contrast to the more highly wrought language which preceded. The poem seemed to be trying to define, in the clearest possible way, something of what had gone before:

I wanted to make something transparent – with all the beautiful products of chance, which liberate. Something with clarity and depth, like an argument about perception, full of the sudden resonances poetic language affords to memory.

One thinks of the way Yves Bonnefoy's opening line to his early prose poem 'Anti-Plato' acted as a prologue to the important body of work which followed: "The question is, this object..."

Objects are important to *Days like air* – "light, scattered with objects. Yet each is a thing in itself." The seashore is the setting for much of the sequence, the objects referred to rather than described being those everyday ones we might chance upon during any walk along a beach – seaweed, rocks, the skeleton of a bird. I was reminded during my reading of the late works of the painter James Gleeson, whose sketching trips to Peregian Beach in Queensland provided him with the seashore imagery so central to his 1980s canvases. The predominance of seashore imagery in both Jenkins' poetry and Gleeson's paintings signals a return to the origin of forms, the site at which the daily erosion and renewal of forms mirrors the poetic act itself; where, in Jenkins' case, words, as things (which are equally not words), are our only means to both re-invent and re-invest the world with meaning. It matters little, as the poem states, that this beach – already a metaphor – has no fixed place. The central concern lies with this shift towards metaphor, where, regardless of whether we are at "Shoreham, South Melbourne, St Kilda, Bondi, Cape Tribulation, Koh Samui, Mana Island, Grossard Point, Waikiki, Skiathos", one wave stands in for all waves, each one merely mirroring its outline within the word itself.

*Days like air*, besides containing, for this reader, some of Jenkins' most assured writing to date, is also notable for being the first book publication to be issued by Modern Writing Press, previously known only as the publisher of a magazine style broadsheet. In what are almost daily referred to as "these trying and difficult economic times", one can only wish this new venture well.

*Des Cowley writes and lives in Melbourne. He is co-editor of Overland Extra.*



## WRITERS IN PRISON

## P.E.N. Report, 11

### NYI PU LAY, MYANMAR

A group of seven Burmese writers were arrested in Mandalay on 25 December 1990 on their return from a trip to Pagan. They were taken by train to Rangoon. Six were released the following week. One was sentenced to ten years for "contact with illegal organisations".

The charges against Nyi Pu Lay under Sections 17 (1) (2) of the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act are believed to be a pretext to imprison a popular satirical writer. It is thought that the only possible evidence against him was that, in 1984, he had allegedly sold a ring belonging to a member of the Burmese Communist Party.

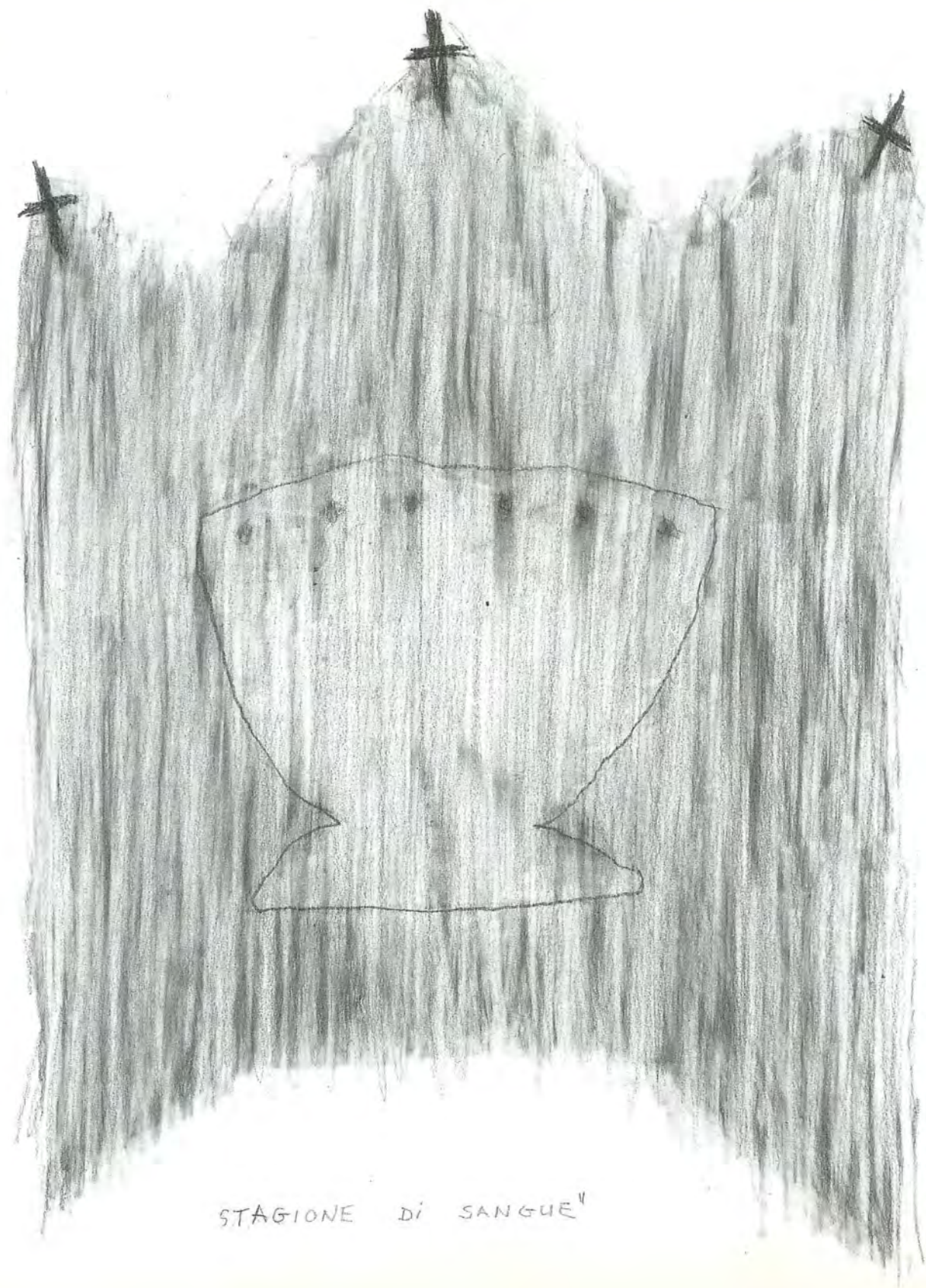
He was initially held in Rangoon's Insein Prison, but was moved to Thayet Prison in central Burma in December 1991 with several other political prisoners. He does not appear to have benefited from the amnesty announced by the government earlier this year.

Nyi Pu Lay was born in 1952. He comes from a family of left-wing intellectuals. His parents are both writers and his father and one of his brothers were detained for political reasons. The brother, who was a member of the Burmese Communist Party, was killed in the 1970s.

Nyi Pu Lay only started to write in 1985. Before that he was an artist and he often illustrated his short stories with his own drawings. He is also a talented football player and cyclist. Nyi Pu Lay is married with three children.

One of his stories, 'The Python', is thought to be an allegory for the way rich Chinese businessmen, drug traffickers and gunmen are perceived by locals to be buying up Mandalay, forcing up prices and forcing out the native Burmese.

*Overland* readers are invited to direct appeals for the release of Nyi Pu Lay to: The Chairman, State Law and Order Restoration Council, Yangon, Union of Myanmar.



STAGIONE DI SANGUE<sup>v</sup>