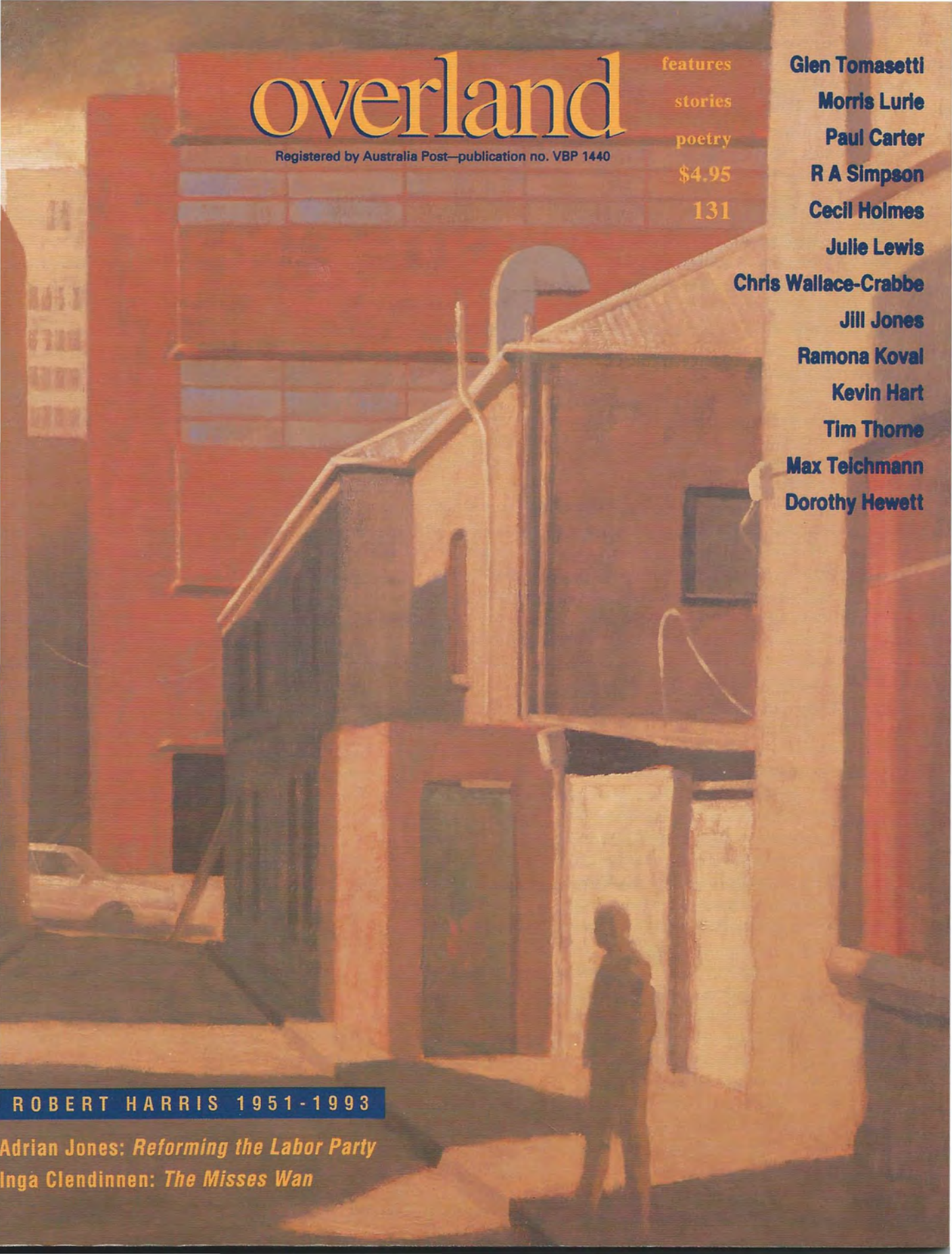

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Temper democratic, bias Australian

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Address all correspondence to:
Editor, *Overland,* PO Box 14146, Melbourne, Victoria 3000
Telephone: Editorial (03) 850 4347, Business (03) 380 1152
Fax: (03) 852 0527

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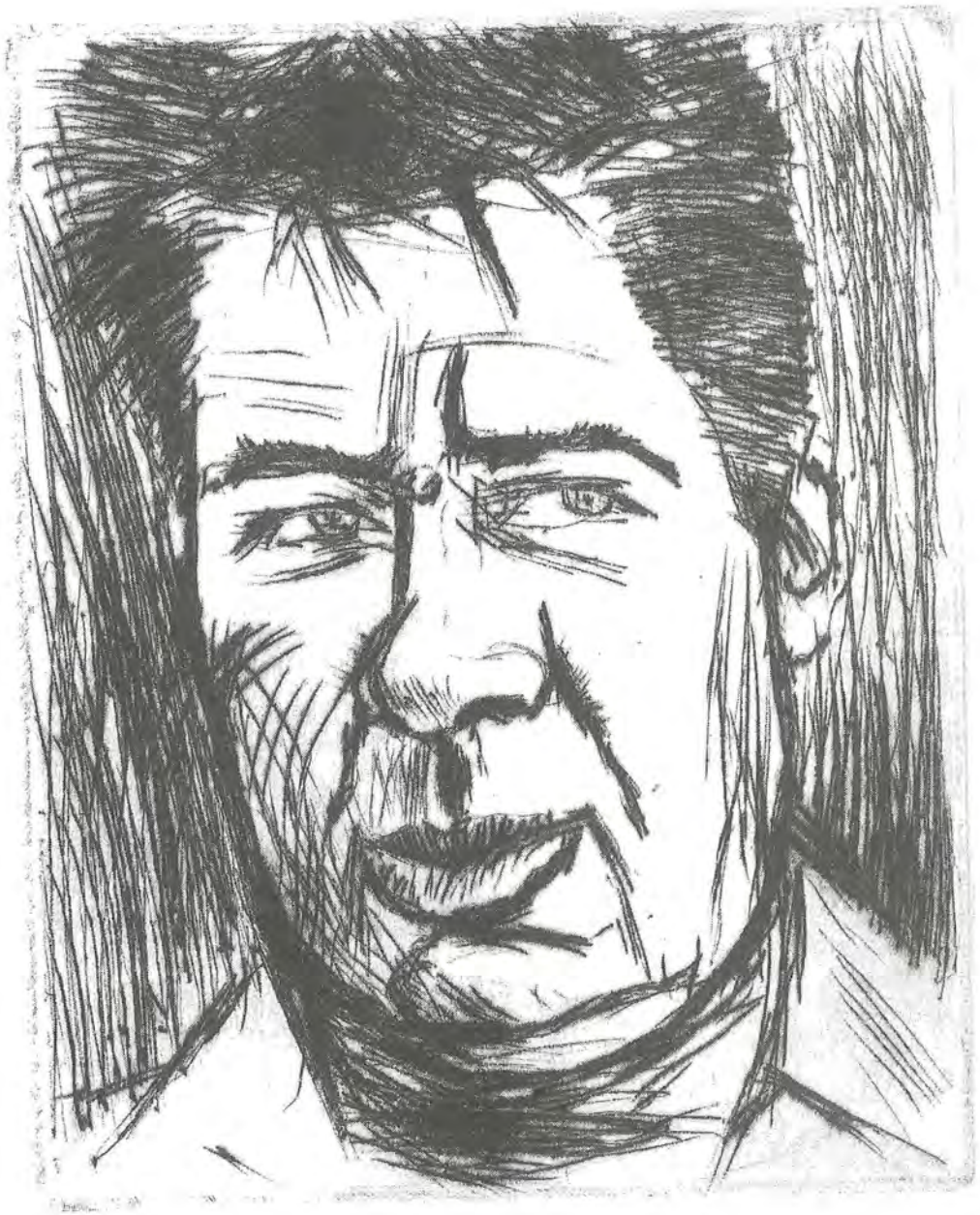
Drypoint by Rick Amor



Robert Harris 1951–1993

This issue of Overland *is dedicated to Robert Harris, who died of a heart attack in his Summer Hill apartment on 25 March this year. He was 42. Robert was a former poetry editor of* Overland *and a member of the* Overland *Editorial Board until his death. His last book,* Jane, Interlinear and Other Poems, *won the Victorian Premier's Prize in 1992.*

Robert Adamson sends us news that the publication of a 'Selected Poems' is currently being negotiated and should be available soon.

We are very lucky to be able to publish for the first time, in the following pages, excerpts of new works which Robert Harris was working on only shortly before his death: a note on his life recently written at the request of his publisher; an excerpt from the unfinished 'The A to Z of How To Be a Poet'; and the long poem 'Little Iliad,' *which Robert left completed and ready for publication.*

Autobiographical Notes

"Born 1951, to Valerie and Jack Harris. Early life spent at Brighton Beach, Victoria. One year spent in cane-fields outside Bundaberg. My, it was hokey, even for those far off days, 1960. Valerie Harris died in 1958. Family moves to Cranbourne, Victoria, 1961. Secondary education begun at Doveton High School. Left school in 1968. Took job as insurance filing clerk. Joined the navy in 1969, served one year, discharge with conduct VG (i.e., good).

"Behind this external information: I read Christina Rossetti and Browning in High School, the former by choice, and poetry began to claim me. It was to become a poet I left the navy, and everything since has pretty much been dictated by that vocation. There has been rather a lot of everything since, and for reasons I don't fully understand I find it painful to relate. Let me try, briefly.

"Eighteen months in a city commune, all very underground and alienated with lots of alarms and excursions. Some friendships from these days have survived and people try to stay in touch. Met there Jennifer Keck with whom I lived seven years. First visit to Europe, six months in 1975. Could be described as walk from Inverness to Athens. Visited Stadelijk Museum in Amsterdam, deeply influenced by an exhibition of Dutch and German concrete poetry, but not to be a concrete poet. It was more that the work in this exhibition showed the page as a spatial field as well as the vehicle for the line, and I enjoyed the rapidity of intelligence in these works. I explored this in a longer poem called 'Homage to Edith Piaf,' which is not a successful poem, and twelve years later it came forward again in the new poetry about Lady Jane Grey, as a motive in the visual organisation of my work. I think this attraction is a question of spirit, an edge in Modern European poetry that I love far more than the nightmare of surrealism, a question of lightness of touch and speed. Paul Klee meets Apollinaire. Home in time for 1) the death of my father, 2) the fall of an elected Australian Government. Minus Annus Mirabilis.

"1976. Moved to Sydney. Occasionally participated in minor editorial work on *New Poetry*. Worked in the usual dreary variety of jobs, and entered on the poet's long haul, the struggle for ones art and the personal struggle, too. Participated in various readings, organised some and founded Senor Press. 1979, separated from Jennifer Keck. Various liaisons, affairs, grand passions; the sense of a rejection of my work in Sydney which was then the national literary capital; the sense of a deep alienation in politics, in poetry, in thinking, even in temperament, began to develop. The best thing that happened in this period was that I read Herman Melville; the worst, or at least the single illustrative

detail of the worst, was a dinner 'somewhere in Sydney' where I, whose bed was perpetually on fire, became aware that my contemporaries were in love with cruelty, that a wit was now in charge, following the failure of parliamentary democracy in 1975, that made me want to throw up.

"By 1981 I was ready to jump. I converted to Christianity and, after about a year on the South Coast living in a tent and a former post office, studying the bible and probing into the question of a theological permission for poetry, I returned to Sydney and joined a charismatic, evangelistic church. That lasted till late 1985, when I was invited to return to Melbourne to become the poetry editor of *Overland*. On this question of God *vis-á-vis* poetry, it's traditional and almost required that a crisis be experienced, but try as I might to locate it I have been utterly unsuccessful. It makes as much sense to me as saying, feminists shouldn't wear make-up, or trade unionists shouldn't own suits. The principal terms are legal, aren't they? Someone shouldn't have the fun that I can't have.

"1986. Back in Melbourne. The poetry editorship of *Overland* kept sort of receding, though I did all the editorial work on issues 103 to 110 so far as poetry was concerned. The thing of which I am proudest was the publication of a poem from Gwen Harwood's *Class of 1927* in one of these issues. In 1987 I was confirmed as an Anglican. This took place up in the Dandenong Ranges in a church rebuilt after the Ash Wednesday fires had destroyed it and killed about half the congregation. After the ceremony one of the priests there showed me a brass cruciform that had been on top of the old building. It was heavy brass, about 10 inches tall, and in the heat of the fire it had bent almost horizontal. He handed it to me. It said, "Welcome, brother."

"1987–1990 I played three seasons of Australian football at competitive grade. I was thirty five or six when I started, and it was just by luck that I found a team where I could get a game. I'd had a lonely, intellectual adolescence and had missed out. It really was a blast, too. Nothing is quite like the concentration in the last quarter of a tight match. I was not notable for ability so I was stoked to get the umpires' votes for best-on-ground in one match, and deeply peeved when the club's magazine failed to record me as among the players who had missed games due to injury. "Robert Harris," it should have said, "ribs".

"During this period I had a job driving a hearse, which resulted in an essay which has been praised by Dorothy Green. It was totally normal to cart away dead bodies, and totally horrifying. One of my mates from the football club, a guy who tells stories of high adventure in Vietnam (he would have been two, roughly, when Australians were in Vietnam), but who made sure I got a kick at training when I was new there, lined up a job in the construction industry. I started as a builder's laborer and eventually got promoted to the lordly office of carpenter. I would still be doing this work were it not for the impact of the recession in Victoria.

"In 1989 I visited England, in connection with my poetry about Jane Grey, to walk the ground and just smell it. It was a good trip, one which made me desire to just forget Australia and its massive contradictions, and to start again, even with a new nationality. Look at it, a massive industry funds arts, and I can get a job driving a hearse. *That's* the real place of poetry, my poetry at least, in this country. Well I'm over that one for the time being. There is no going back, no starting again, and no escape. I'm here, and I'm writing, and I'm staying here.

Love,

Robert

"PS. All this is of course incredibly lopsided. In general, I don't like to talk about my life at the expense of my work, so I figure that as middle-background the life is OK. It's hardly the stuff of legend anyway. But, did I ever tell you that I ran with a heavy team of junkies in my late adolescence, worked for the great Ellis D. Fogg, eluded violent death with a laugh – and so on – and so on?"

The A to Z of How To Be a Poet

This book is a primer in, and an essay about, the vocation of poetry. I decided to write it after a conversation with a lady who broadcasts a regular radio program of poetry. I'd passingly mentioned Coleridge and was told, with a pale guilt and defiance, that she had never read any poetry written before 1970. Why be a chef and restrict yourself to one dish?

I have not set out to write a manual of technique much less an exposition of poetics. There seems an immediate need for a primer about the vocation itself; in attempting to address this need my intention has not been to dictate as much as to encourage the new and younger poets who represent the future of poetic art.

At a time when Australian letters are without a single, nationally distributed poetry-dedicated magazine these poets are negligently treated in the main. Apart from this I am now more than halfway through my life and there are matters of record to straighten out but if any young man or woman found my book good company in the beginning of their vocations in poetry I would be well pleased.

R. H.
Summer Hill 1993

E IS FOR EDITORS

Excerpt from the unfinished 'The A to Z of How To Be a Poet'.

FOR MOST OF US, children of the, at least passively, anti-poetic popular culture, 'editors' also means 'educators'. They are the ones who enable us to negotiate *canonical* poetic culture by adding to our reading and questioning our opinions. Most importantly, a good editor interrogates our composition, our poems, without imposing his or her intentions on it or trying to turn us into him/her self.

Whey do you need to negotiate canonical poetic culture? For one thing, this provides the reference points for the art. If I said, for example, Apollinaire is a poet I've discovered as being a long-standing influence on my own poetry, this would be a revelation to the handful of interested people who know enough about Apollinaire's poetry and are also interested in mine. For me, Apollinaire belongs to the anti-authoritarian side of Modernism and he instigates or encourages an interest I have in visual space. So canonical poetic culture (knowledge) enables us to talk about poetry without having to start every time from the first guttural music enunciated in a cave.

Another reason you need to engage the canon, that is, everything that has gone before as it is generally recognised, is that this canon is inevitably hostile to you. It is you who has to prove yourself, and not the other way around. You can't even understand why until you begin to find your way in.

There are editors in Australia, anthologists and the like, who try hard to reserve the canon for themselves. They do this by encouraging performance poetry in the certain knowledge that the less performance poetry has to do with the literate, expository side of the vocation of poetry, the more chance they have of surviving the modern era and transmitting their conservative values to the future untarnished by lively, challenging or penetrating thoughts or by poems which alter the political and social commentary. Most have said little about aesthetics or prosody for years.

Good editors are like diamonds. When you find one, if you find one, learn everything you can and don't be a prima donna. There will be times when your editor is wrong, but you will not learn to recognise these by taking mild criticisms hard.

I have been very, very lucky in my editors. One has been like ice and like fire. The kind of editor I'm talking about is the one who takes an interest in your work, who thinks about it and gets to know what you're at. The one person who should see your best new poem first. You recognise them sometimes by how you feel when they talk about poetry.

I met Robert Adamson when he walked into Readings Bookshop in 1974 and I scraped together a conversation with him.

Adamson took an interest in my work and over time began to interrogate its weaknesses without ever giving me the feeling that he lacked faith in the overall intention. He was particularly sharp (and still is) about the implications of words, the infiltration of stock phrases and stances which are a substitute for individual thinking, and he was quick to recognise better work as well. It was Robert who introduced me to the poetry of Hart Crane and who challenged me with Symbolism, including Rimbaud. This brief sketch of a complex editorial relationship ought to include something else: Adamson time and again, in the first years I knew him, challenged me to take words seriously and carefully to treat them with respect and yet never to be overawed by them.

The natural result was that for many years I was accused of imitating him, an irksome and silly criti-

cism that ignored, among other things, my involvement as a reader of Hemensley, Billeter, Kenny and other Melbourne poets who too briefly rejoiced in the title of the Melbourne Internationalists. The canon again and the paranoiac fear of Australian poetry criticism of the period that it might be somehow taken in; a fear that rests on another: our fear of being thought barbarians, the fear which makes us fly to stock critical phrases and stances and to cling to them for dear life when we 'are confronted with' a situation which calls for our views.

And there is something else, too. Adamson has been the object of a great deal of hostile criticism over the years, much of which has not been literary criticism but personal criticism based on hearsay, gossip and rumor. I can say that I have never met a critic more capable of fairness and justice in his assessments, more interested in the work of other people and generous toward it in time, layout and money, nor one who maintained a higher standard of rigour. On top of this, and apart from it, Adamson is a man of considerable feeling as well as intelligence and one of great personal kindness. His critics have not always deserved him.

From the admissive to the prescriptive I would like to turn to Barrie Reid. Barrie has helped a large number of poets to educate themselves, and he has done this as a great appreciator of personality and diversity. He, too, has the gift of taking people where they are, figuring out what they will benefit from reading. It was a friend of Barrie's who told me flatly that I should never reply to reviewers (it isn't dignified) and though I've often contemplated going into print to defend myself I've taken this on as general rule. Rules can always be broken but, though I've sent a few stiff letters in my time, I've found no need to break this one yet.

Barrie introduced me to Thomas Hardy and to Wallace Stevens, as well as being a mine of information about painting and a point of reference and inquiry in my reading and writing. For the young poets of the 1970s, if Barrie wrote back from *Overland* saying he like your poem, well, that was good for six months in the arid environments most of us were in.

He could be a very sharp critic as well, blunt and sometimes attacking, but you took all this because you knew that he 1) might be right, 2) was probably right, 3) was undoubtedly and regrettably right. You also knew that he had accepted the general presence of your poetry and liked it being there. As well as that he had liked you, advised you, and introduced you to new people and new ideas. Many a good poet owes his and her best work to the encouragement and the intelligent presence in Australian letters of Barrett Reid.

These, then, have been my editors. There have been others who have been helpful, generous and informative, but these are the two with whom, I've been most deeply involved in developing my poetry. It is right to struggle and argue with these close editors, to fight for a point, even to stalk off in umbrage. Friendship can stand all that if it's any good and so can an editorial relationship. If you are lucky enough to find editors like these you will also in time find points of divergence with them that relate to how you look at life in fundamental ways, and how you make your art. Never forget what you owe them and never let anyone convince you that

you owe them more, or different things, than you really owe.

During the time that I worked on *Overland* as a poetry editor there was a hardcore of about five poets who were in every mail with between two and five new poems. We always read them and we always returned them because they weren't very good.

Finally, I wrote individually to each of the five poets saying that they weren't having much luck with us, would they mind giving us a year off and perhaps reading this or that poet and perhaps trying to develop their poetry; we'd be very happy to publish them when a poem we did like came along. In the next mail there they were, all five, with the same machine-like precision that infected their poetry with nonage.

All of this is work, often unpaid work, and very discouraging it is from the point of view of an editor immured behind bales of poems that all have to be read, considered, accepted or returned. The best approach to magazines is to send two or three poems at a time, two or three times a year if you have the material ready. It isn't considered ethical to offer the same work simultaneously to different journals but there is nothing wrong with circulating a poem through a few magazines if you think it has been rejected unfairly.

I've found that poems which survive rejection, the ones that I get back and don't lose interest in, are the poems that tend to stand up well in the longer term. When I get poems rejected, that's what I look for: can I still read it myself? Does it stand up to any comment attached? Is any comment attached true and accurate but still insufficient to kill my poem?

floating fund

Barrett Reid writes: Matching the winter mood donations are down, but, given the state of things in general, I think that a total of $434 up to 2 June is not bad at all. REMEMBER ALL DONATIONS OVER $2 ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE. Specific thanks to:
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Little *Iliad*

1

Achilles is always going to be late.
Though Trojan women punish him with cake,
Hektor, true to himself, prepares
all the wrong moves and knows himself a fake.

(If adults may quote *The Iliad* in Australia
where the issue's often who own poetic culture.)
Their drab battalions were made of living men,
they claimed to think about that now and then

but sniggered at mis-spellings like 'Thebarton'
or hated it if some-one mentioned Cranmer.
Anachronisms! they'd cry with old mens' fury,
their virtue taught entire tribes to stammer.

So purifying their dialects and by stealth
in different ways they kept the same bad faith.

2

I hear by your silence I am understood.
Nothing is going to give us back the world
so hush now don't cry nothing now belongs
to us except our silent guilt and wrongs.

But hug the sonnet form as though a coast
the poem speaks of love its way, with several things
in mind at once, how can it be your body
and then again Patrokolos' on the beach?

Then all that fighting over an ideal cadaver
handed down, the screed of an ancient culture
until the volto sweeps through with its slow
insistent change of subject, through the surf

where make-up clothes real wounds in words
and actors fight for life with wooden swords.

3

AARGH, they snivelled, we don't actually get it,
they were notes (NOTES), several languages,
and all the signs of a free imagination
defiant of cultural managers.

How could he actually fail us like that?
Accessibility is our sweet concern,
shit I ... mean ... for cryin' ... m-a-a-a-t-e,
we want familiar ships that burn...

I want the folds in a dress that I can clutch,
games with Nursy, I like your feelings raw,
and none of that is asking over-much.

What we get's art, I ask ya, bloody art,
endless stinking work in a trireme's bowels
riddled with freedoms which you get or not.

4

Let's skip all that commission jive
sweet system of voluntary words and chords
tell them about two women in 24 hours
visiting us; how one gave and one didn't.

You needn't dance around in national costume,
avert to the tump, the village green
where Fords nose down and park to
watch a game,
just say that one gave, one didn't.

I must have the metabolics of a lizard
to feel so pleased with myself next day,
tell them about the two glasses, the empty bottle,
the bedroom left in generous disarray.

How spring returns despite all intervention;
how one face altered, one face stayed the same.

5

It was foolish not to have realised this
Till 20 years after good Captain Cordite
shot up the batteries in Haiphong;
every day after that stuff's just a breeze.

I was only ashore, a randy sailor boy,
nights in my bunk the NVA were deadly
little bastards, the modern electronic mines
hurtled up from the black sea-bed

POW SOCK BLAMMO lights out all go
ta-tas, ruttishness took my mind off dread,
dying was just a piece of piss
a nuance in our blunt argot;

the navy was the best war I could find
and fairly distant, danger was sublime.

6

Soon we shall make a new pact
with the reader. All smiles, all genial
easiness of friends. We shall re-admit
feeling and dispense with tact.

It will be as gladdened as a friendly wave,
aperçu after *aperçu* till your fave
trash reading has had our pleased attention,
together, like this, in mutual protection

we're not even conscious of. Also
we'll surrender up the sides, imperative
affiliations that have turned so much bad.
So let's hurry up and name all those who've paid

for narrative on the sharp edge of:
our savage heart, our counter-*Iliad*

7

For us it is always confinement reading them,
their motive was untutored might
and harmonies between a system and a system
might entertain but don't conceal that.

Like this one Right wing, that one Lesbian,
this one Trade-Union, that a front for Gays,
our dull comparative judgements roll along
with fine-tuned apparatus for dispraise
driving the wavelets along the moored black hulls.
And then it bursts through in natural light
a young re-unified image that extols
no more than memory where they heave and fight.

Or gaunt militia shade with Owen gun.
I'll tell you this, I was Patrokolos' son.

8

Now to take, and like, you as you are
(since they had narrative, not the formula)
allowing such stories as will break in break in
from the short song to charges of meaning

or we'll die. They had the energy
but they lacked finesse, that one cancels
out the other is internal
and it is a very long distress.

And only sometimes everything is real
as a photo that bursts into action but stays still.
So Helen (Lattimore) 'slut that I am'
like Paris ('68) but not Prague Spring.

Shame was excluded by the works they built,
be thankful for our better method: guilt.

9

Worse by far than the NVA (his voice
came through then from another time
asking itself if he meant the line above
or should have said 'as bad' or 'bad enough').

Worse or as bad were our side's deadly
old bastards; hating the young, post-war
democracy, skivvies, the mini, everything
that moved,
jealous of every ignorance that loved.

Who won that war's a mathematic fraction;
power learnt to sound like milk with two,
constructive as a middle-class emotion:
nothing at all to do with the blackest anger,

dual loathing and second-last-best-friend.
Get to know the victor, Agammemnon.

10

And so they churned their *untermenschen* on
to fight across the armour of a corpse
then what of H.D. and her Stesichorus:
the voice of desire in the public place

and all its fevered works a huge mistake?
Oh, certainly, they once glimpsed Helen's face
and scouts reported overhearing words
and all cartography said this was the place
for weren't the ticket scalpers out in force,
and nightly in encampments didn't they
plot re-arrangements in their parliaments
while song at evening drifted down from Troy?

H.D. thought that Helen was in Egypt,
because of that, 'the Greeks fought for an illusion.'

11 'I See By Your Outfit That You Are a Cowboy'

Stolen away to your private life from the midst.
And you read well, out on the raffish prairie,
a shepherd, with a shepherd's hut who kissed
the woman there who showed up at your door

not all that roughly, she in some disguise.
The two of you could do voices till the cows
sub-tended for the long trains ambled home.
And in her face you read her actual name

and knew her well and knew you did not know.
Odysseus guessed the nature of the game
which you did not, being dumb. Troy will fall
they said but Troy was slow. Their awful songs

were what-you-could-get-away-with,
    the flensing knife,
and other radar clutter. Get a life.

12

Ours were the strongest and the greatest
    ramparts,
still you must visualise hard to peer in,
apply the wealth from intellectual markets
suppress Judeo-Christian thoughts of sin.

Then you'd partially see us as we were,
talkative, dressy, in flashback and in clear,
a lawn with garden setting, from the car
doors trumpeting arrival, speech, a laugh,
high, the voice of a friend announcing
sharpness and flowers, known contest and calm
Substances? Sure, the old sun getting drunker
if pixels intervene and afternoon.

Then evening lounges through, that's narrative.
All our essentials were true, and relative.

13

Here on floor 12A despite the cards
luxury's not the object but wide enough
to make out radicals changing sides
when Castor (sic) and Pollux (sic) get tough.

It isn't slight, the woman watching thinks,
offices emptied, ministries changing hands,
rhetors ambling back through paragraphs
whose vagaries foreshadow full amends.

So males became an oppressive working class
a heart-rate something else in night-club gags,
the city's celebs. readied for what would pass
by cutting up paper, re-designing flags.

It was their headiest and most dreadful hour
but they knew gravy from a golden shower.

14

I do not know if escapee Ronald Ryan
murdered warder Hodson way back then;
his jurors' letters to Cabinet, pleading mercy
were concealed by Sir Rohan Dellacombe.

I do not think I'd much like Ronald Ryan
if ever I found myself banged up with him;
that's a very long drop, your Beakship;
I'm sure I wouldn't care for Dellacombe.

Did you know you say it 'coomb', not 'comb'?
My Dad, in fog, on the road to Dandenong
got caught in the Governor-General's motorcade,
till a clear patch, it was good, the old boy waved

when we pulled out, it was Casey, like a wraith
our Fiat vanished in this Commonwealth.

15 I'd Like To Call a Rock Band "Shallow Graves"

Turn up the gleaming jukebox one more notch!
Chrome spectacle inscribed on Compact Disc
2 dollars for 3 songs and while you watch
digital lights obey, the innards whisk

three kings of disorientation to the fore,
three fables that another hand selected
hours and hours, if not days before
and there you are, with ears unprotected

assailed by a band called Faith No More.
Suck *mana* from it if you really can
industrial-failed-derivative-literature
helpless as shadows when some extra falls

by overdose, gone down in the long repetition
as rote-catharsis follows the rote-seduction.

16.

Only the thousandth time to wave goodbye
having left your clothes on deck to wave your
hand,
dual nakedness in lone pornography
that graphics replicated to demand.

You neither arrive nor leave and yet you go,
the ports remember until a later train
deposits its load of hopefuls on the quay,
imploring Love, find or remember me.

Tell the executrix of my estate
my name shall rise like sunlight on the surf
that she must hurry if she's to be late
to meet me, gone, but waiting on the wharf.

(All the gods enjoyed this lingua franca
faenaient for the present, past, and future.)

17 Mr Cruel

Media broadcast his serial pornograph
(everyone says as little as they can)
something has gone wrong with Mr Whippy
the Piper leers, this isn't Hamelin.

A teasing girl in his childhood never guessed
pathology found her by poly-prosograph
Homicide gladly welcomed in clairvoyants
identikits said: a taller mesomorph.

The hill above the town was coloured green,
a bridge, a house, a sky-blue reservoir
after rain it always rose in Derwentcolour.
He was deft but only by bleak contagion

so here a river and there a vacant lot
gave back the little corpses that he left.

18

The hero tries to modify the song.
Achilles' action versus Apollo's coercion,
the known result, the-always-out-of-date
are things he must displace and generate.

You might as well breakfast, night-shift done
at a classical venue where the sign says EATS,
you might as well slip into the truckies' lingo
as bother the pattern, trace the old defeats.

You might as well talk sense to dunderheads
earn pay, juggle columns for a mortgage,
the wise are secret in their present deeds
devotion walks invisibly as courage.

Have surfaces; wind, glass, cutlery and steam
as morning lifts, great forms descend
all around them.

THE UNSPOKEN, WITH CORNFLOWERS

i.m. Robert Harris

In a skiff, anchored
on the edge of a mangrove
swamp, he gave me

a version,
an unpolished song,
something that might have

gone unspoken
in our bright life;
and there is no dark side

he told me: things
will glow, sing or die
though if we want them to,

it's all alive,
I just want to know who
owns the conversation

we may have someday, who
owns the dialogue
he repeated as

a flathead slapped
and shuddered
in the belly of the boat,

its pale speckles
flaring, the blue
barred tail fanning air,

who owns the words
as they hovered
with plump mosquitoes

and collided with
a whiting in flight
down a cadence of dancing

particles: our
hearts locked in their
cages of singing muscle;

it was concerning
this theme, he continued,
that I composed a tune

for the cornflowers
to sing, cut, sitting
on my table in an indigo jar

ROBERT ADAMSON

PAYING OUT

for Bob Harris

two corduroy coats in a fish & chip shop
'we wrap 'em in newspaper in kiwiland' I said
'we had a newspaper tablecloth' you told me
twenty years later I'd write
'we'd th thick innocence of pea-jackets'
I once walked th length of george street
looking in every pawn shop for you
born again, you remained rambunctious
a dancing bear's mystery is that
he obeys his master

that line of mine you'd keep quoting
'th empty horrors of th will'
we never wore watches but we noticed
how australians' history grew
from five thousand to sixty thousand years
in one generation
sudden as a flowering desert rain

we deposited poems in banks of sunlight
& stayed poor, as clear as water
over a stone heart
holed moons house owls
we saw resurrection
in a dance
dance was shorthand for eternity
no-one gives back a life
words aren't mirrors, reflections in glass
don't hold, they let pass
light coined by a world outside
love's image spent on its own tide

ERIC BEACH

TIM THORNE

Loss Of A Beautiful Part Of The Nation's Voice

NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO a young man wrote of death as "the inner machinery of the eclipse / which drops its nets between us."

That man, still relatively young, died last week and those who knew his work, particularly those who were fortunate enough to know him personally, now mourn the passing of one of Australia's greatest poets of recent times, Robert Harris.

Never a household name, Harris received the official accolades of the literary establishment only late in his career, the zenith of his reputation being reached last year when his fifth book, *Jane, Interlinear and Other Poems* won for him the Victorian Premier's Award.

The death of a genius always saddens us; when it occurs at the age of 42, obliterating the promise of an even greater contribution to the sum of delight that is the body of our culture, the sadness cuts more deeply.

When the circumstances of that death are what they were in the case of Bob Harris, there would appear to be a cause for more than sadness.

There is a popular, if somewhat dated, image of the creative artist as a kind of doomed romantic figure, forever testing his or her ego against the constraints of conventional society.

The abuse of alcohol or other drugs, a lifestyle which flirts with danger, a temperament unsuited to the norms of social discourse, a physique and disposition inappropriate for the demands of hard, physical labour: such are stereotypical hallmarks of the artist.

Nothing could be further from the reality of Harris's life.

Educated in the working class Melbourne suburb of Doveton, he joined the Royal Australian Navy on leaving school and later worked at a number of semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, mostly with an enthusiasm for doing whatever job he had to the best of his ability.

For the last few years of his life he was a furniture removalist, "driving," as he put it, "the streets of Sydney and climbing its staircases, carrying the sins of the city on my shoulders."

Robert Harris was a practising Christian and his faith not only informed his writing but led him to take a profound and practical interest in social problems.

His years in the navy had left their imprint in the prevalence of sea imagery in his poetry and in a fascination with Australian naval history.

The sequence, *Seven Songs for Sydney*, with which his last book opened, commemorates the loss of HMAS Sydney with all hands in 1941 and it does so not with the bitterness of old jingoistic hatreds, but with a compassionate understanding of the complex motivations and moralities that war compels.

Typical of the way Harris' mind worked was his choice of Lady Jane Grey as the central character in his most critically acclaimed work.

This relatively obscure, tragic figure from the troubled times of 16th century England, a 16-year-old pawn sacrificed in the power struggles of religious and political factions, seems an unlikely subject for a contemporary Australian poet with no formal training in history and no pretensions to an academic approach.

It was not mere whim, however, no desire to be esoteric for its own sake, which drew him to Jane and her fate.

He was attempting to show that there are matters of universal significance which reach across centuries and across continents and can affect us long after the ripples of the mere historical events have subsided.

In doing this, indeed in order to do this, Harris pushed poetic form and language to its limits, charging his lines with a lucid music that will sing on into the future.

He never thought that the world, or the Australia Council's Literature Board, owed him a living, but if he had secured the financial support that he sought

and that was granted to many lesser talents, he would have been able to devote more time to writing rather than humping furniture around and we would all have been the richer for that.

He may have lived longer, he certainly would have moved closer to friends and family, out of the Sydney flat where he lived alone and where his body was found by workmates some time after his fatal heart attack.

The eclipse he wrote of all those years ago has dropped its nets between us and Robert Harris. He will write no more.

His bluntly expressed, challenging, but always carefully considered opinions will no longer enliven those late night gatherings at which those whom Shelley called "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" discuss their plans and platforms.

Vale, Bob Harris. Australia has lost a beautiful and powerful part of its collective voice.

Reprinted from The Mercury, *Wednesday 31 March 1993.*

DAVID LAWTON

A Letter About Robert Harris

TIM THORNE'S MOVING ARTICLE (31/03) gave me sad news, that Robert Harris is dead.

I first met Robert when I lectured at the University of Sydney. He was one of two removalists who took some books and furniture from my house to the university. When we arrived in my office, he looked at my books and suddenly started a conversation about the origins of the legend of King Arthur and the meaning of the Holy Grail. His contribution was, I recall, considerably more interesting than mine.

I found him funny, modest and quite brilliant. After he identified himself, I later looked up some of his work and was surprised that I had heard comparatively little of him. I found that Robert was not only a remarkable removalist; he was an absolutely outstanding poet. His premature death is a disastrous loss to Australian writing.

We will do our best to ensure that his work is valued at its full worth, and that Robert's name becomes better and better known.

Reprinted from The Mercury, *5 April 1993.*

MORRIS LURIE

Barker and the Clattering of Black Wings

A MAGAZINE PHONES. Requests a piece. Well, this is the life. Not to hurl from warm bed when a bugle blows. Not to punch a clock. Not to eye the minute hand forever stalled in frozen subjugation reprieved in vow to eye again. Not to lapse into expected cliché of indiscretionary misbehavior behind the filing cabinets at an office farewell (the old dead make way for the new dead), the next morning an averted smile for the rest of your life.

(They still punch clocks?)

Sure, says Barker. When?

Tomorrow? Day after?

Sure, says Barker. No problem.

Except it is. Inexplicitly it is. Annoyingly it is.

Because nothing comes to mind.

Not a spark.

Not a flash.

Not the beginning scratch of a hint of the outline of a first fumbling idea.

Not even a notion so grossly ill advised its felling may make way for possible fresh light.

Nothing.

Blank.

Except not exactly that, either.

For nor will it go away, defeat, if you like, failure, never mind, at least peace, at least the still waters of resumed vacant peace.

Cats play prettily on the lawn from his window.

Astounding, really.

Barker is pricked.

Never before.

Barker is peeved.

Not in his history.

Barker is upset and unsettled.

Not a single previous once.

A long walk?

A drive up a mountain?

A cup of lemon tea?

Because Barker, this should be known of him, the construction of Barker, this must be known, the constituted lineaments he presents on battlefields, at conferences, the wind streaming the shredded flag, the doom crack of mirrored oak, the Barker in visible manifestation at trench and table both, and elsewhere, and everywhere, the many various geographies of his sofar globe, this Barker presents in distinct contradiction of his father's teaching, no one will want you, the old man said, no one will need anything you do, a father to say this! a not required son! thus Barker in gladsome embrace of all invitation, any invitation, a nun, a torturer, a harlot, a knave, whoever, whatever, his unfailing instant pleasure to provide.

Except this time.

(They still blow bugles?)

A cup of lemon tea.

Now, because this is real, actually happened, actually is (but don't be fooled, either way, all fiction is real, which is its purpose, which is its reason, which is its life), some disguise or invention will be now necessary, some clever use of metaphor brought into play.

Barker recalls (or invents) a dinner party.

A next handsome husband.

Assemblage of guests.

Who, the husband, apropos of what word said or if in fact any, certainly none by him, a mute albeit smiling presence properly placed at the table's head, flung himself of a sudden from the glittering room, dashed, in a second to be discovered, outside, the appalling scream of a starting motor mower the next sound heard, it high keening cry in the outside black night.

Oh, he always does that, she said, she shrugged, she smiled, she sighed, waving for more wine, his big-eyed blinking brilliant magazine editor wife.

It's his little way.

The best thing is just to go to bed and not even think about it and when you wake up in the morning there it is.

Except it isn't.

Barker sees from his kitchen window a dead bird on the lawn.

Those damn cats from upstairs.

Barker will phone her, admit he's somewhat stymied, ask perhaps to be rebriefed.

(But lightly, keep it light, no end of the world doom stuff here, which it isn't anyhow, which it's not, nothing like, certainly not.)

Perhaps talk around other contributions, what's come in sofar, in case there has, bound to be something, someone, establish the emerging picture, the general evolving shape.

(Make a joke, be funny, employ some wit.)

Perhaps she'll change it, suggest some other approach, an altered perspective, he's never worked for her before, look at it differently, first time she's ever asked.

What's to lose?

We'll talk.

Maybe extend the deadline.

Something will come up.

A buffoon, Barker's father, a clown, you couldn't take him anywhere, you never knew what he'd do next, what it would suddenly occur to him to say, God help you, you'd be sitting at the table, new people, a new house, he'd lift up the tablecloth, put it over his head.

Except he doesn't.

Nor does the editor phone him.

I thought this was important, says Barker.

I thought this was urgent.

I thought this was supposed to be wanted in a rush.

Barker recalls (or invents) an appointment at a radio station, he was doing an interview, promoting a new book. So first the business of where to park, and then the security at the door, being checked, signing in, and then through to the room where you waited, someone else waiting too, couple of minutes, shouldn't be long, speakers in the wall broadcasting your usual disaster, flood, homeless, famine, bombs, Barker avoids the radio, never listens, wouldn't have one in the house, and then someone comes out and asks the other person waiting would they like to come in, and Barker is puzzled, looks at his watch, looks at the clock on the wall, looks at the newspaper (another foul item Barker's life fastidiously excludes) thrown down by the departed guest, looks at the letter of introduction he hurries from an outside pocket, God and Christ, I've made a mistake, I'm a week early, it's not till next week I'm supposed to be here.

Barker sees (or invents) in her blinking big eyes an instant of the same uncomprehending startlement as her table of guests.

Or he played opera, another of his little ways, the loudest bellowing tenors at impossible volume, no one could speak, you couldn't say a word, his round face beaming his naughtiest smile.

A torn possum this time lies on the lawn.

Barker stands by the silence of his frozen phone.

ADRIAN JONES

Which Light on Which Hill?

Democratic Socialism in the 1990s

I AM GOING TO SEEM CHURLISH. I am defending the niggardly proposition that things are never so fraught with failure as when they seem to be frothing over with success. Think of 1987's 'World's Greatest Treasurer', and the bubble of bluster and bombast who gave us the "Recession we had to have".

Keating's magnificent election victory seems just the tonic for the 'true believers' he saluted on that startling election night when Don's Party didn't proceed to its expected debacle. But before the labour movement envelops itself, as only it can, in the smug cocoons of triumphs unanticipated and opponents unexpectedly routed, it should draw breath and reassess its situation. It is well to remember that things had seemed decidedly smelly before the fairies at the bottom of the garden made the odor of the other side suddenly seem so much worse. A prudent person would want to address the cause of his own stench, even as he or she may gloat at the public distress caused by the greater stink of the other fellow.

Like Cain's triumph in 1990, the euphoria of a federal victory, choreographed by the witch-doctors at John Curtin House, and conjured by the man who specialises in bullying parliaments, might yet become misplaced if it discourages efforts to reform the Labor Party and its parochial structures. We now have a Party of clever, aloof and arrogant Chiefs, and atrophying, sullen, and irrelevant Indians. Can any Party prosper, long term, on such unequal foundations?

Let me put aside for the moment the false dawn and adrenalin rush in the wake of the federal election, to beg you to consider matters more prosaic, but potentially more important. Some months ago I attended a small gathering of my fellow ALP branch secretaries from one of Labor's heartlands, the basalt-dusted, thistle-strewn plains of Melbourne's western and north-western suburbs. The meeting attracted a brace of stolid local parliamentarians and their staffers, who consorted with a grim-faced State Secretary and an over-anxious ex-state government minister.

Our gathering was glum, disturbing and vacuous. It seemed to me to represent a great deal of what has gone wrong with the ALP and its broader labour movement. The meeting's ostensible purpose was to introduce a circumspect young Labor candidate for a by-election in Doutta Galla province of the Victorian 'Red Morgue', the Legislative Assembly. To be sure, the illustrious candidate, now recompensed by his faction for past trials in federal marginal seats elsewhere, was expected to win, and win well. Jeff Kennett's party of public sector grim reapers and expenditure-slashers had not seen fit to offer a candidate.

But even the expected win could not dispel the gloom pervading the meeting. The reason, I think, was that no one wanted, or felt able, to deal with the miasma of the Party's situation. (We didn't know then that the fairies were going to win us an unwinnable federal election. But will they be solicitous enough to repeat the dose next time?) In today's ALP, the last thing a State Secretary, a parliamentarian, or obsequious factotum would want is for the rank and file to engage in discussion. "What's the point anyway?" you sense them thinking, "It's the balance on the Administrative Committee or at Conference that matter." The *apparatchiks* seldom bother with affairs at the Party's shrinking grassroots. And yet from time to time they realise they need them; who else will stuff leaflets into letterboxes and staff polling booths?

And so the people playing professionally at Labor politics come back to the branches cap in hand. But where is the rank and file's *quid pro quo* for its service? When the professionals 'come on down' to the rank and file it seems that their approach is to infantilise the membership. They carefully avoid the core issues of past failures and the measures needed to overcome them. So the procedure at this and so many other recent ALP meetings was to revert to the professionals' habitual trivia; to talk only about postal votes and the candidate's schedule of shopping centre

visits, and, above all, to concentrate all political attacks on the manifold evils of the larrikin, Jeff Kennett, and his radical government. After the disaster of a failed state government, the new Labor strategy seems to be one of drawing a veil over everything that went on before. Victorian Labor, guided by its *apparatchik* State Secretary, seems ready to nestle right back into the kind of marginalised, cockshy oppositionism popular with the Socialist Left in the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, federal Labor has suddenly rediscovered caring and sharing; ready, it seems, into the kind of smug stupor that has them postulating themselves as the 'natural' party of government.

This is a recipe for the lingering demise of Australian socialism. What is the point of holding office if one has no vision of what one is going to do with it? And why are we persisting with state *apparatchiks* and parliamentarians whose past visions and works are so spent and spurned? The problems confronting the Australian labour movement are as serious as any facing socialist parties and movements the world over.

The core problem is a want of ideas about the meaning of socialism. No one has any idea what democratic socialism means in an increasingly internationalised, post-industrial corporatist era in which communism and *laissez-faire* capitalism have both proved irrelevant. Every socialist party has seemed to lose its way recently. Mitterand (like Bannon and Cain) had to abandon what were once imagined to be distinctively socialist economic policies. Craxi (like other local politicians who must remain nameless) found corruption and nepotism easier than offering a coherent new vision. Now Keating is really asking Australians to accept the inevitability of a pool of unemployed sufficient to constitute the underclass we once derided in the USA and Europe.

Which light on which hill? The recent history of governmental naivete and managerial illusions of contemporary Laborism cannot be papered over. These failings are a reflection of a deeper crisis, a crisis of the meaning and the organisational conception of the socialist vision in Australian society. Before the age of Whitlam, there had never been such a crisis. Australian socialism was always a kind of labourism, itself a lowest-common-denominator expression of the ideas and the power of its constituent unions. From time to time there were changes in the political expression of labourism – think of 'White Australia' and 'Equal Pay' – but the Party was always the sum of its affiliated unions. Whitlam was the first to cut adrift from this, enunciating a very personal politics of charisma and federal adventism. Hawke copied the charisma, but substituted corporatism for adventism. Neither cared to clarify the meaning of socialism, or its relation to the Party's organisation.

Since Whitlam, ALP electoral and governmental politics have become more and more out of sync with the ALP's labourist history, ethos, and organisation. How can a party of the trade unions claim to represent the interests of the working class when most members of that class are conspicuous by their *not* being members of a trade union? Whose interests are really being represented if current Party rules confer half of the votes at Party state conferences on (usually) unelected delegations from trade unions? Whose interests are really being championed if these same affiliated unions tend to be atypical of the overall workforce, disproportionately representing workers who are adult males, and who work, full-time, in a large industrial enterprise or in the public sector?

Acknowledging these uncomfortable questions does not mean that we have to make an unpalatable choice between an American-style, Democratic Party 'impure' politics of untrammelled parliamentary expedience, or an English-style, Labour Party 'pure' politics of disciplined irrelevance. If we can complete the work which Whitlam began when he confronted the 'faceless men' who engulfed the Party, we can find ways of reconstructing the Party's organisation, history and ethos so that it can again prove capable of complementing its public policies and its professional politicians. Cherished doctrines now need to be reformulated or abandoned, much as Whitlam once helped Labor shed sexism, sectarianism, racism, and nationalisation. An honest socialist, for instance, must concede that the recent Victorian state government was financially inept. We have to search out the reasons for it in the mismatch of Labor's historical and organisational legacies with the demands of the present situation. If the Party cannot, or will not, reform its vision and its organisation, it will become a conservative (in the true sense of the word), knee-jerk party united only by its habitual defence of an increasingly irrelevant social order.

WE HAVE TO CONFRONT the paradox of the combination of the Party's federal successes and its dismal state failures. Who or what is to blame?

The blame lies first with the union and factional patronage networks which distort the (branch-based) democracy which is the long-term key to the party's survival. Second, there is the appeal of a kind of managerial pseudo-socialism which has

caused the ALP to lose sight of basic political realities and key objectives. The former is a disease of unrepresentative organisations, whose power is but an anachronistic residue of past greatness. The latter is a disease of unrepresentative people, whose success depends on factors, like electoral charisma and policy expedience, that may find few echoes in the party's ethos and organisation.

Even Bill Hayden's beloved Blind Freddie knows the fiscal failings of many state ALP governments. Witness Victoria's extraordinary sales and lease-backs, and the continual (false) assurances as to debt management. Moreover, Victorian (and SA and WA?) Labor was ruined by the simple-mindedness of its Joh-like faith in a building boom as an index of prosperity. Worse still, Victorian Labor was rendered comatose by ministers whose conspicuous virtue was that they were their faction's lowest-common-denominators, and who were often run by staffer-clones whose pursuit of future preselection precluded the kind of disinterested advice essential for leadership in government. In short, Victorian Labor was hoist with the petard of its own mediocrity, with the disastrous result that even a new Premier was precluded from removing discredited ministers. Yet it seems that nothing will be done to remedy these past errors.

Part of the problem is that factionalism has taken over the party, separating it from its grassroots, and cutting it adrift from the source of its creativity. Client networks prevail, and they are disturbingly devoid of intellectual coherence. The conspicuous failure of Joan Kirner's Socialist Left in Victoria to have anything original to say in the crucial matters of economic and fiscal policy is one sign of this problem. The faction had been shaped by a radical fantasy tradition of romantic gestures, distinguished by a knee-jerk anti-Americanism and an endorsement of any and every disgruntled minority; it had nothing original to say whatever on most mainstream issues of public administration with the exception of education. On the other hand, the Right has proved itself shamelessly pragmatic. How else could the Right ally itself in Victoria to the 'Pledge' or Far-Left 'Tomato' Left one week, and then ally itself with the ordinary Left the next? As with all patron-client networks, in the process of 'getting-on' truth will always come second to fantasy and flattery. To be sure, the self-same factions have given a degree of stability to intra-Party politics, but what good is this if it comes at the price of genuine representation, talent and creativity?

What is to be done? The factions will always exist, but their deleterious effects would be curbed if the Party policy-makers who were elected by actual Party members received the clear preponderance (say 75:25?) of votes in Party Conferences, and if even more voting power was given to local branches in matters like policy assemblies and preselections. If this came about, I wouldn't find myself, a local branch president, meeting my next Legislative Councillor for the first time *after* he was preselected. The members whom the so-called union delegates represent at State and (indirectly) at Federal Conference are seldom ALP members; furthermore, their so-called delegates are seldom elected directly by their union members.

"Current Party rules allow an unrepresentative tail of public sector Left unions to wag state Labor's increasingly mangy dog."

The Victorian experience makes me wonder whether perhaps it is time for the ALP to sever its formal connection with the trade unions, even if the informal links remain in the form of scores of unionists who decide that they want to join an ALP branch. Too many of the recent inflexibilities in Victorian public administration seem to have derived from the factional restraints unco-operative unions could exert on ministerial decision-making. To be sure, the federal experience has been more constructive in this regard – witness the Accord's unique capacity to spread the effects of a decline in national living standards as equitably as possible, and witness the success of waterfront reform. But the revenues and the remove of ALP federal governments has always meant that they have had more room to manoeuvre in this regard than beleaguered state governments. The Victorian Tramways Union's inability to concede to a fiscally-straitened Labor government the very conductors that they are now ready to concede to a Liberal-National government is a classic example of the problem. Similarly, the state government exposed its political bankruptcy when it mooted plans to privatise power stations because there was seen to be no other way to break the grip of their public sector power unions. Current Party rules allow an unrepresentative tail of public sector Left unions to wag state Labor's increasingly mangy dog.

I worry that Labor is slowly being reduced to an expedient, conservative party of negatives. Like Menzies in 1958, Keating ran a scare campaign about Evatt/Hewson's taxes. Who knows what will actually be *on* the agenda of the second Keating government

should he be returned to power. A promise to cut company taxation and lift (un-means-tested) child-care subsidies is not much of a socialist election manifesto. Like Menzies' tilt at Chifley's bank nationalisation, it seems that the Labor's myopic strategists think that the sullen, shell-shocked voters in Labor heartlands like Doutta Galla only need to be reminded of the recent depredations of the radical-conservative government, and they will flock back to Labor's fold. It has worked in the short term, but will it always be so?

I think that the malaise of socialism is greater than our poll-fetished Labor politicians imagine. Fixated on two-party-preferreds and popularity ratings, Party strategists have lost sight of the steady decline in Labor's primary vote over the last decade.

"...the malaise of socialism is greater than our poll-fetished Labor politicians imagine."

To be sure, 'the heartland' returned at the recent federal election, but who would be so bold as to assert that the ultimate result in the very last election is more important than the trend line of results in the four elections? What will happen if the ALP can no longer take for granted that the Democrats will be the DLP to their Liberals.

What has happened to the Labor Party and the labour movement – the Party and the movement which have, with a few exceptions like the early years of Menzies' second prime ministership, consistently set the agendas for reform and renewal in Australian society? The light has been blown out, and the only hill in sight seems to be the one modelled by the H. R. Nicholls Society in the 1980s for the new radical-conservative parties of the 1990s. Irrespective of the result, the electorate of March 1993 was underwhelmed, I think, by its choice between two kinds of enterprise bargaining and two yuppy visions of politics as some subset of managerial economics.

WE CAN'T GO BACK to the socialisms of the 1890s (too macho and racist), of the 1930s (the state no longer has the Keynesian ability to dictate the trend of the economy), or of the Whitlam era (our trading position is now insufficient for that kind of largesse). The Party is thus facing a crisis graver than the Victorian state landslide of 1973 and the federal one of 1966 (when the electorate was not so much hostile as indifferent to Labor), and as grave as the splits of the 1950s (when the sectarian, racist and macho traditions of Australian labour were exposed as outdated) or the conscription referendums (when the interests of empire clashed with the interests of self, sect and nation).

The core problem is that the Party is now bereft of a viable long-term institutional foundation. It is the victim of its organisational anachronism, and of its professional politicians' Olympian divorce of policy-making from its class and social foundations. Except at the peak-council level, the lowest common denominator of unionism is no longer capable of cleaving the polity into anything other than unrepresentative fractions. Meanwhile people are becoming more and more wary of the extravagant claims for all manner of managerial rationalisms. They distrust the kind of politics which is so divorced from their everyday life and experience. The crisis seems to run deepest in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, but that is only because they have had long-serving, alienating state governments. As in the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s, however, this crisis of ethos and organisation has the potential to shipwreck the Labor Party nationally and blight it for a generation.

What is to be done? The first part of the solution is the kind of rules reform outlined above to relax the grip of unions and the attendant, unrepresentative politics of patron-client factions. Let a hundred flowers bloom by forcing Party elders to represent their members. Let the Party be the sum of the people who care enough about it to actually want to join it. The second part of the solution calls for a re-emphasis of some of the classic features of labour politics after an era in which they seemed to be submerged in the pseudo-apolitical rhetoric of economics and management.

Class interests and class politics are still as relevant as they have ever been, as most ordinary wage and salary earners can testify with the resurgence of unemployment and under-employment, and with a decade-long decline in the real value of the dollar and of the spending power of wages. But while federal and state Labor governments have done their best to spread the burden equitably and to enact reforms to try to restore Australia's trading position, they have also been prone to lose sight of the essential realities of reform in a free but unequal society.

The core idea of socialism is still valid: namely Babeuf's idea, born of the French Revolution and crystallised in 1848, that it is all very well to be free and equal in law but that won't be much use unless one also ensures equality in schooling, care and property. It is this idea which makes Australia so very different from that other great settler society,

the USA. Our polity is essentially a 'social' one. It takes for granted the need to back civil equality with a measure of actual equality. We were a nation of undeferential convicts and ardent immigrants, eager to transcend the kind of European social orders which could ignore a potato famine and frustrate hopes kindled by 1848 and Chartism. The US polity, by contrast, is based essentially on the individualist, declamatory values of the great revolutionary Declarations of the eighteenth century. In recent times, however, Labor politicians seem to have convinced themselves that it is possible to build a just, equal and free society without redistributing property. (Perhaps it is to be expected that a democratic party run undemocratically might also espouse the kind of anti-socialist socialism whose only beneficiary was a burgeoning public sector.) Thus the last Victorian government's vaunted Social Justice strategy degenerated first into an exercise in managerial streamlining, and then second into a cover for cost-cutting. A similar story might be told about privatisation, integration and de-institutionalisation. Federal Labor has performed better than state Labor in these regards, since it has succeeded in entrenching the Medicare levy, enacting superannuation reform, and inaugurating a capital gains tax. Yet everywhere there is a strange shyness about the benefits of taxation. Labor politicians chime in continually with the US political talk of 'no new taxes', or 'no increased taxes', when they should be promoting the kind of continental European political talk which explains the benefits of taxation in providing services and improving infrastructure.

Labor has tended to pursue instead the cringing gimmickry of 'quick fixes', like the hoopla of Olympic bids, and multifunction polises built by Japanese construction consortia. Our politicians have deluded themselves that sustainable economic development could be somehow imported or borne on cranes like some cargo cult. If we wanted to build a multifunction polis why didn't we try to build one ourselves? Did we truly expect the Japanese to give us theirs out of the goodness of their hearts? Our science and education 'industries' are of world standard: which other sectors of our economy, apart from mining and tourism, attract considerable Asian participation? We might, for instance, build Institutes of Advanced Study in a few capitals, and with offers of scholarships and premium salaries, we could staff them with the best, and attract the most promising students. From there we could build up our links to local and international industry and commerce. We might set our engineers and fitters the problem of building their own Very Fast Trains, and ask them to lay the track linking all the capitals.

By doing these things, we might also regalvanise the economy and re-ignite the confidence of the nation in the way that the Snowy did. But it can't be done by parties such as Labor, especially state Labor, which think that government is a question of management not leadership, parties afraid of justifying new measures of taxation and constructively redistributing wealth, parties incapable of saying what they are for, content to say only what they are against. It is time for Labor to redefine the light and the hill, the better to ensure that greed is once again replaced by justice at the heart of the Australian imagination.

Adrian Jones teaches Russian history at La Trobe University. He is an ALP local branch president, and thrice-exasperated State Conference delegate.

Bev Aisbett

CECIL HOLMES

The Political Detainee

"THIS IS AGNES DE MESA." A pause, then: "Cecil, I must inform you that there has been a change of plans for today – the Authorities have denied us our projected visit to Camp Crame, but we are permitted to go to Rizal Jail, and we must leave shortly, within the hour."

The tone is brisk, the call peremptory.

A church bell tolls uncertainly, without harmony; below, some girls in their teenage frippery move hand in hand towards Mass; the tide of traffic has receded and the little yellow taxis lie along the ruined sidewalks, like driftwood; a television tower appears through the thinning pollution; a tricycle, passengerless, passes by, bell tinkling.

Sunday morning.

There is no gainsaying Agnes – whether it be to join a hunger strike for some imprisoned peasant leader, a candlelight vigil for a beleaguered professor under house arrest, or a fund-raising function at Manila's National Press Club.

She is director of the Task Force Detainees, involved with the needs and problems of, at the last count, 699 politicals held in custody in 110 penitentiaries of the Republic.

So to 44 Banahaw Street, a compound in the suburb of Cubao. It is shared by other like-minded bodies, the Alliance of Human Rights, Amnesty, the League for Human Development, Association of Human Rights Lawyers – the usual high wall surround, yet with none of the customary broken glass or barbed wire on top. Nor is there a security guard. The gate is open for one and all – an address that proclaims its innocence.

The Asia Watch Group arrives, intent, impatient, anxious to get moving, some twenty or so. They will "document conditions". A middle-aged Dutch couple who, like myself, will tag along, have just arrived from a northern winter, pale and fretting in the heat.

Agnes, whom I know from previous visits, is as ever bustling about, bird-like, briefing her charges, head cocked like a small magpie, listening patiently to some query.

She has served a couple of years in the Martial Law time of Marcos and has a brother in some remote detention camp. It is a custom to disperse politicals to break down family contact.

The hired Jeepney turns up and we pile in, a dozen or so on either seat, facing one another.

A pause at some traffic lights and the Indian, who has been staring at me warily, suggests we identify ourselves. Indians are often uncomfortable with Australians in foreign parts, uncertain whether we are to be categorised with the British ex-colonial masters, or simply ex-colonials like themselves.

"After prevailing for three centuries, the Spanish left a duo of legacies to the Filipinos – ugly churches and plain jails."

It's quite a round robin of the East – Burma, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand. No Chinese. Beside me is a sliver of a girl, probably about thirty, eyes like a dove, huge spectacles. "I am from Sri Lanka, a Tamil," she pipes up. I gaze down, impressed. A smile back. "Yes, a Tamil, a Tamil Tiger."

The morning holds promise.

We move on, I stare back into the Edsa Avenue traffic, into the sullen face of some rich kid who has been given the run of the family Merc. on Sunday, to get her out of the way.

After prevailing for three centuries, the Spanish left a duo of legacies to the Filipinos – ugly churches and plain jails. We now approach a sample of the latter, without relish; perhaps some of my compan-

ions have even tasted the penal experience. But why the name Rizal? He was the founding father, the George Washington of the nation who, in 1896, having been stretched on the rack for some time, was led blindfold to a Spanish firing squad. Such sour humor to call a jail after him, especially one now containing politicals – eleven of them, mingled with some three hundred common criminals.

Guards, armed and indolent, pass us through without checks. The structure is circular, one-storied, whitewashed dirtily in the slovenly manner of the country. The Warden, behind a high rostrum-like desk, hands down a long roll of paper upon which we inscribe names and addresses.

He descends and courteously proceeds with a guided tour – perhaps his seniors have issued a ukase that these people are to be treated with care, busy-body radicals perhaps, but nonetheless citizens of powerful neighbors who may run to their embassies if ruffled.

The Dutchman says: "The last time I was in prison was just after the War – for a year." A collaborator, but a minor offence if he only rated a year. No matter, he expiates himself now.

We move slowly in a circular manner past each dormitory cell. Compressed within are some eighty social rejects. Bunks stacked up against the ceiling, untidy, feebly lit, the occasional shriek of some crazed occupant.

The stench of disinfectant pricks the nostrils.

The Warden murmurs about the nutritious meals, the frequent medical attention, the exercise of conjugal rights once a month, when wives and girl-friends are permitted. I have a Dante-esque vision of a hundred writhing limbs in the dim recesses, along the piled bunks; the cries, the grunts, the shouts of derision from the desperate celibates.

On their yellow legal pads – for most of them are lawyers – the Asia-watchers jot down the words of the Warden, ask no questions. The place impacts on the senses harshly, confuses thought.

An inmate flings himself against the bars, cries out: "They've stopped the women, the bastards!" He repeats the imprecation, rattling at the bars. The Warden contemplates him silently, perhaps thinking well, when I've got rid of these do-gooders in a couple of hours or so, I'll have to give you a bit of hurry-up won't I? But he merely says to us, "Poor fellow is off his head, take no notice."

I recall a scene in a Polish film. Someone from the Swedish Red Cross has been permitted to visit a concentration camp, in 1942. A woman prisoner steps forward to make a protest; the SS Camp Commandant says to the Swede, she's mad, and the inspection is hurried on. Later the woman, bare-breasted, is having a branding iron applied. A gramophone plays a Strauss Waltz. Agnes had told us in her briefing that a favorite mode of torture in this male institution is the application of electrodes to the genitals. Accompanied by flamenco?

We perch on some benches in a reception room, await the detainees. The Dutch couple, a bit shaken, have retreated to a corner. I will merely eavesdrop.

They drift in, the eleven. The guard leaves, a door slams. A Philippine haiku says:

> Prison
> is the sound of the guard singing
> as he walks away,
> his keys dangling.

They are thin, pale, clad in the shirts and shorts they might have been arrested in years before – no prison uniforms in this country; roughly bandaged arms and legs, broken teeth. They blink in the sudden bright light, seem disoriented, move moth-like, uncertainly, stare at the strangers before them.

And they're youngsters, kids almost, in their twenties.

One thinks of political detainees as old shell-backs like Rudy Salas or Satur Ocampo, getting through their fifties, whose lifetimes have been spent between incarceration and leading guerilla bands, the New People's Army, up in the mountains. Ramrod-backed by an unrelenting ideology, sustained by the knowledge that they are legendary, even fabled, figures among the masses.

But these – these can only be student activists. A campus demonstration, a street march or two, fingered by an informer, some planted evidence (usually a revolver), whisked off to a police station, a mix of criminal and political charges spelt out, and years turn over before even a semblance of a trial may begin. They are being nipped in the bud.

The Asia-watchers, working in pairs, select their candidates, begin interrogations. I know time is of the essence; they've come a long way and must maximise results, which will go into the files of Amnesty and lie before the eyes of UNO committees. Yet there is something coldly detached, even ruthless, in the way they tackle their subjects, who may even be wondering how their survival will be affected by providing revelations. The Tamil Tiger, a loner it seems, has picked some young man but is making no notes...

He sits down beside me – a little older than the rest and in even worse shape. Legs heavily bandaged, sores on his hands and arms, watery-eyed, coughing. There is a smile, though, and an introduction: "I'm

Arnulfo Milliondaga, I'm the leader of our group here."

I wonder why he has sought my acquaintance. "I like the company of Westerners, also you are an older man." I ask about his family. "I have a wife and when I was arrested – on the ninth of November, 1990 – a baby boy of six months. I was charged with murder on two counts, for being accessory to the assassination of two policemen, accused of being the driver of the car which carried the gunmen. I haven't a licence, I can't drive. I was nowhere near the place of the killing."

Indeed, he recounts, his case has been brought before the courts on four occasions; each time the judge defers it. The prosecution produces no evidence nor makes out a case. Two years on and Arnulfo thus languishes, unconvicted, in the limbo of Rizal Jail.

"I was a construction engineer, well paid. I liked my work. Our company was contracted to build a new hotel in mid-town Manila – I had over a hundred men under me." Hard-hatted, scrambling about the scaffolding high above the great city, dispensing orders, solving problems – the sense of power must have been exhilarating.

"But I always kept in touch with my old university friends, from the Marcos days; we used to meet often at the Trellis [a well-known rendezvous for radicals]. I have always been on the Left, more so now. I would not join the National Democratic Front, take up arms, that would be too hard for me. But street-march, demonstrate, yes, until we rid ourselves of the foreigners and feudalists.

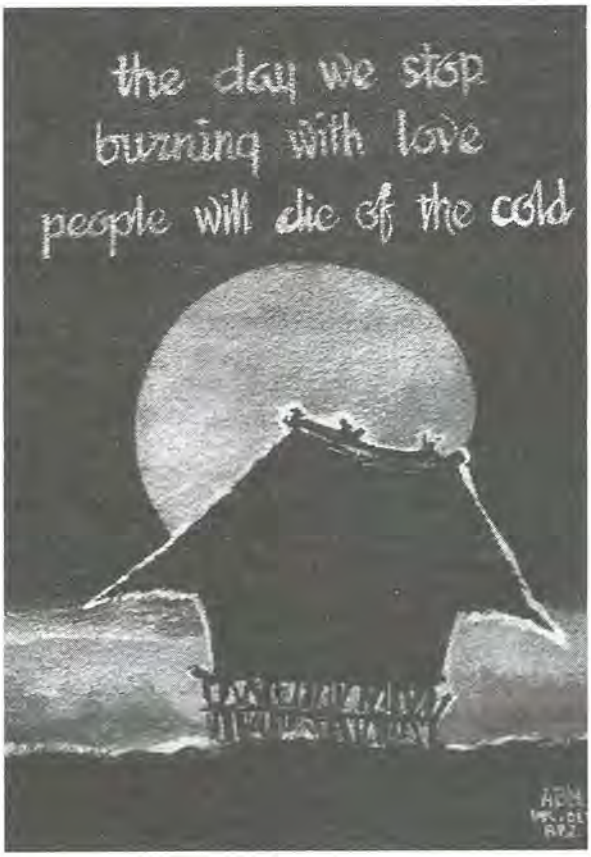
"So I was seen to be dangerous – and when I was arrested leaving work one day, charged at the police station, the torture began immediately. I was put in an oil drum and rolled around the yard. They stripped me and thrust an iron bar up my anus, my genitals were shaved with a blunt razor, electrodes stuck to my nipples, then my head was held under a tap, making me feel like I was drowning. I guess they really believed I had murdered the two policemen – such was their information. Next day my wife brought the human rights lawyer, Rafael Aquino; I came before a court, Judge Molina, who sent me here to await a trial that never happens, though we plead for it."

The Asia-watchers continue with the interrogations and the Tamil Tiger is haranguing her subject, who is bobbing his head in eager acquiescence. What are her enjoinments? The Dutch couple listen intently – I must tackle them later.

The Warden is still perched high on his rostrum, a couple of guards munch take-aways, stare at a basketball game on TV...Arnulfo is relaxed, awaits some more discussion. How would an intelligent active man of twenty-eight see out his time in this environment, between the occasional torture sessions, the futile court appearances – which have to be paid for ("My wife has sold most of our possessions, even wedding presents") – family visits and such rare occasions as today?

Dialogue with fellow inmates would hardly be zestful, games of chess unlikely.

"I have taught myself to paint – to be an artist."



He grasps my arm, walks me past the acquiescent Warden, towards the dormitory cells. Still clutching the bars is he whose imprecations not long before had so startled us. Arnulfo chatters to him in the vernacular and the miscreant bustles off into the recesses.

"He is my friend Renato De La Cruz. He protects me. In this place – as I quickly discovered – you need such a one. The authorities hate him for his boldness. When he is free, not often, he leads a street gang of thieves and pickpockets. When I was at university I read about the working class, but never knew them. When I went to work I became a member of the employing class. Now I begin to understand – Renato and these others – the *lumpenproletariat*; the

word these days, I think, is the under-class. But they are programmed for life, from the day they are born. Only now do I begin to discover, and learn respect."

Renato emerges from the lower depths, favors me with a wink and a grin, and I am pleased. How we all yearn for acceptance – even in such a place.

A parcel is thrust through the bars, and Arnulfo unwraps the paintings – two of them. One complete it seems, the other a 'work in progress'.

The first is really a learning exercise, a child-like drawing of a thatched hut in an empty landscape, a large moon glowing. A legend in the corner asserts, "The day we stop burning with love people will die of the cold". In the bottom corner the artist has inscribed his initials, "A.B.M.", then "POL. DET." and "R.P.J.", Rizal Provincial Jail.

"I got some sawdust from the workshop, ground it finely and mixed it with a tube of black water-color paint my wife brought me. This I spread across a piece of plywood and backed this again with strips of sugar cane. So over this stippling I laid the simple image. It is not much good but maybe this one will be a little better."

The unfinished work was accompanied by these words:

> Even birds endowed with wings to fly
> when caged struggle to be free,
> how much more will a fair country
> not aspire to be liberated.

In the foreground large, strong hands pull back jail bars; across the horizon passes a flock of birds.

Perhaps as an engineer with some architectural grasp he can approach visual art with a sense of discipline. And maybe the very uncongeniality of the surround squeezes out the creative urge, intensifies it. But for a distinctive style to emerge?

However, Arnulfo does not aspire to be a serious painter; this is simply therapy.

Would he like to sell his works? I haven't much money and I'm off to the Provinces for six weeks, but suppose he leaves a couple with Agnes and I'll pay her what I can – something for the family, 800 or 900 pesos, maybe? He is taken aback, such a notion surprises him and my gesture, while involuntary, is not – I hope – merely charitable.

That's settled, they're wrapped up, handed back to Renato, who is delighted to be involved in all this, and we return to the Reception Centre.

Agnes has turned up with large pots of steaming food for both the detainees and the visitors; as leader of the group Arnulfo supervises the dispensation. I feel I have had enough – I need to get back to the hotel room and deal with notes and recall. The Dutch couple join me. I ask them about the exchange between the Tamil Tiger and her detainee.

It was what it appeared to be – she had listened to a description of the conditions then began urging the young man to do something about it. Get the others organised, stage a strike of some kind, a protest, get word to the media. Give the authorities a hard time.

And the young political had reacted positively. It was not only the deprivation of conjugal rights, but the food was wretched, medical attention haphazard. The inmates were brooding.

Two mornings later, on Tuesday, I waited at Manila Domestic Airport for the flight to Bacalod Negros Occidental. On page three of the *Daily Globe* there is a piece headed: RIZAL JAIL INMATES ERUPT OVER CONJUGAL VISITS:

> Some 80 detainees of Cell Block Number 2 staged a noisy barrage in protest over suspension of overnight conjugal visits...Jail Warden Col. Wilfredo Laganzon (retd) quelled the protest by ordering tear gas canisters to be lobbed amongst the protesting inmates. However the barrage was resumed again three hours later by which time the media had arrived and also Rizal Governor Casimiro Ynarez. He soothed the inmates by promising a return to conjugal visits and also assignment of full-time medical staff and increase of food allowance from 12 to 20 pesos a day.
>
> The Jail houses 280 but Cell Block No. 2 contains members of the dreaded 14 K Gang led by the notorious Renato De La Cruz who has now been placed in solitary confinement. This block also houses a number of political detainees.

Six weeks later I am back at 44 Banahaw Street and Agnes has indeed got Arnulfo's two paintings ready. I pay over the 900 pesos.

She is in the midst of briefing a large Japanese delegation, from the Teachers Union, who are preparing for an encounter at some penitentiary – introductions, small bows, smiles, we are well if briefly met, foreign friends in Far Parts.

Cecil Holmes is a well-known film-maker. One Man's Way, *his autobiography was published by Penguin in 1986. This essay is from his new book* Mask of Smiles *to be published by Penguin later this year.*

RAMONA KOVAL

Mirka Mora's Walnut Cake

MIRKA MORA IS A Melbourne-based artist who came from Paris after the war. She is known for her beautiful fantasy creatures, which adorn her paintings, and for her dolls and sketches, as well as a wall at the Flinders Street station and even a Melbourne tram. She ran the Mirka Cafe in the 1950s and later the Tolarno restaurant, with Georges Mora.

Mirka Mora opens the door to her terraced cottage in St Kilda, a doll's house. We squeeze past the entrance into a corridor stacked with paintings – some framed but most unframed – book, toys and furniture, on both sides of the hall. There is even less room to walk than there was a year ago. She has been busy working.

We are in her kitchen now, and there are dolls and crockery and antique lacy tea-towels here, and miniature cooking utensils like the tiny food processor that she winds up with delight. The disorder evaporates as the eye sees the neat system she has for putting implements away on upright trays that hang from the sides of the cupboards, the ingredients in place in small cupboards, the stacks of dishes and wooden spoons and trays. It is clean and there is a place for everything, but there is just so much of everything and so little space to put it.

Newspapers line the floor, and Mirka shows us how they can be replaced with a swoop of the hands, out the back door. Start again! Instead of a refrigerator she has a Coolgardie safe, with a black plastic bat sitting on the top. She likes bats, and says that when I am an older lady I should have bats too, because the little boys in the neighborhood love them and will always want to visit.

Mirka squats on the floor, her eyes level with the wooden butcher's bench that she wheels out into the middle of the floor: it takes up all the available space.

"It's a walnut cake, and it's from my childhood, and this is how big I was when my mother and my auntie made the cake, and this is how I saw the pile of walnuts, and the pastry. It was a sheer childhood delight, because the cakes were delicious, but I cannot separate the cakes from the two sisters.

"I loved my auntie very much. Her name was Aunt Mimi, and my mother was called Tsipa – Mimi and Tsipa Gelbein, which means 'golden bone'. I am always curious about the names – golden bones, what could they have been? Perhaps blacksmiths or jewellers?

"My mother was born in Rumania, near Odessa. One day I met this fantastic conductor, Zubin Mehta. He came to the Tolarno restaurant, and he looked at me and said 'You are Rumanian'. And I was stunned at how he could know this. But he was right. Mirka comes from the name of my Rumanian grandmother.

"My grandfather was a painter. He painted carts and all his sons did the wheels. My father came from Vilna. He had twelve sisters and he was the thirteenth child. Can you imagine, a boy and twelve sisters? I must go to Vilna one day to see if there are any descendants there – it could be. But I would have to learn the language.

"At home they spoke French, Russian and Yiddish. They spoke Russian when they didn't want us to understand. I don't speak Yiddish, but I think I know what it means, and I always read the Yiddish dictionary, and I recognise a lot of words and that is very moving. I'll show you that I've got it next to my bed, because that's what you're made of, the sounds in your ear as a child.

"The cake was probably from Rumania, it is a very simple cake. They made it every Saturday afternoon. I remember once that friends were supposed to come for coffee and this famous cake. I remember that night vividly because my mamma cooked some chicken soup – or perhaps it was rabbit – and my mother said to her three daughters and to her husband, 'Don't talk while you eat or else you will swallow the bone', and no sooner had she said it than

she swallowed a bone herself! It was terrible. My father tried to remove it with tweezers, and it wasn't possible. Anyhow, the guests finally arrived, and the ambulance arrived, and my father had to take my mother to hospital, and we were left with the guests and the cake.

"My sisters were called Marcelle and Salome – can you imagine such a beautiful name as Salome? I am the eldest, but they were always more reasonable than me. When I was thirteen they were twice my size, and I couldn't understand how my little sisters could be taller than me. That really unsettled me terribly."

Mirka is trying to remember just how much of the ingredients to use. She shuts one eye and then the other, as if trying to judge perspective in a painting.

"When you cook, you have to be a gambler."

"That is when I'm dangerous Ramona – that's when I'm a gambler. It goes with my mood. Like the tonality of a painting. Do you want a green or a greener green or a yellow green or a blue green or reddish green. It's very tricky. But I'm going to weigh this up and have a certain structure.

"In this little kitchen there is not much space, but everything is in its place. You have to be very organised if you are a painter – people never understand this – because otherwise you don't know what you are doing.

"My aunt and my mother were very close as they were the only two girls in Paris from a big family. My mother even found my auntie's husband for her. He was a professor of Esperanto, and quite a scholar. As a child I never liked him very much, he was too powerful, and I didn't like him coming close to me.

"He was brilliant, and when the Germans came to Paris he went out in the street in his underpants, and he was arrested and put into a mental home. Right throughout the war. And after the war he just rang all his friends at the Sorbonne, and they said 'Oh, he's all right!' and he came out and got another wife. Because my poor auntie was taken to Auschwitz and he saved his life. He should have saved my auntie's life, but didn't.

"I saw him after the war a little bit. I remember his second wife got pregnant, and my uncle didn't want her to have the child, and in those terrible days, in 1946, the poor woman couldn't have an abortion, so she went to the top of the wardrobe. I remember her jumping from there onto the floor three or four times. Of course it never worked, it was an absurdity.

"The cake period was when I was small, and I would listen to the two ladies talk about how bad their husbands were. I've looked at many recipes for walnut cake, but none was as simple as my mother's. Or as simple as my memory of it!

"You don't crush the walnuts at all – this is what

I remember – that's the beauty of the cake, that they were still whole once they were cooked. See how beautiful it looks! Do you think we should add some rum to the walnuts? My mother would not have put in rum. Let's put some rum in it. And make a wish.

"There seem to be a lot of walnuts here, but it's a childhood memory, and let's face it, the memory is the walnuts! A memory is like a dream, if it's out of order it doesn't matter, but for any good cook this is too much walnuts. But because I am the cook, and because I am the cook I am, that's how it will be.

MIRKA'S WALNUT CAKE

Pastry:

300g continental flour (fine)
175g white sugar
3 eggs
75g butter
15g vanillin flavoring (Dr Oetker's)

Mix the ingredients together in a blender to form the pastry. You can add extra flour if the mixture is too sticky. Roll it out on a pastry board until the pastry is 3cm thick.

Walnut filling:

70g butter
70g brown sugar
500g walnuts
1 small liqueur glass rum

Melt the butter and the sugar together in a copper saucepan until the mixture has the consistency of caramel. When the mixture starts to bubble, add the walnuts and then the rum, and stir over a flame. When it is thoroughly mixed, add the walnuts to the pastry. Wrap the pastry around them, making a cigar shape. Brush the top of the cake with a mixture of an egg yolk with a tablespoon of walnut oil.

Lift the cake onto a flat baking sheet that has been basted with walnut oil, and bake for 20 minutes at 210°c.

Ramona Koval is a Melbourne writer and broadcaster best known for her ABC radio program. A selection of her radio interviews published as One to One *(ABC, 1992) featured many writers such as Drusilla Modjeska, Elie Weisel, Fay Weldon, Π.O., Fay Zwicky etc. Her next book,* Too Many Walnuts; Jewish Cooks, Jewish Cooking, *which will include this story, will be published soon by Heinemann.*

Bev Aisbett

on the line

IT IS TIME TO SAY GOODBYE, as editor, to contributors and subscribers of *Overland*, to whom I feel so grateful for so much. It has been a quarter of a century since I joined the *Overland* team. My name first appeared on the masthead of *Overland* No. 39, Spring 1968, and I sign off with No. 131. Pity I did not make the century. The grapevine has spread the news that I am very ill – but before this I had already written to the Chair of the Overland Board that it was time for me to retire as editor. Perhaps this was a premonition. Twenty-five years is too long for anyone to be reading huge numbers of manuscripts.

I was first invited to join *Overland* by Stephen Murray-Smith and Ian Turner. Ian had known some of my work from the Angry Penguins days. Stephen asked me to be poetry editor and I accepted, on condition that my choice would be final and unquestioned. I was always grateful to Stephen for accepting this draconian request. Curiously enough, in my first issue, I rejected a long poem by a well-known writer who was a very close friend of Stephen. Stephen was shocked by my rejection, but after some discussion kept to his word; and we never again had an argument, although I'm sure some of the poetry I published was not to his taste, as it was probably not to *yours*. Later, my involvement in the magazine grew, I suggested covers, feature articles, reviewers, etc. My relationship with Stephen was remarkable and was one of the great friendships of my life. In talking or writing about Stephen, and also about Ian Turner, many people neglect to mention the great sense of humor they both had. This, I am sure, kept our friendship remarkably clear of dispute.

My pleasure was always in publishing new writers, young or old, and seeing their writing develop through publication. This, incidentally, created a huge correspondence, and sometimes it seemed as though I was the only friend of a thousand would-be poets. One soon learned that a kindly note of encouragement could not be given lightly. It inspired lengthy replies which I sometimes failed to answer, although I certainly tried hard enough.

But more enriching even than the connection with so many writers were the friendships by letter with so many readers of the magazine. Some of these friendships, with people I have not met face to face, go back twenty years or more. They remind me how wide and varied and surprising are habitual readers in Australia. Most of them are not well known; they live in suburbs and country towns, and I imagine they are great patrons of their local library. I have learnt not to underestimate their sophistication and wit. On occasion they put the boot in rather hard; but, on reflection, sometimes deservedly.

I hope this extraordinary tradition of close relationship between magazine and reader continues. To this end, I see a high priority in attracting young readers. For this reason, I started *Overland Extra* some years ago. It has been well received but I have never had the time to spend on promotion and public relations that would make the changes in *Overland* more widely known. This is a task for my successors.

In this issue we honor the memory of one of Australia's finest contemporary poets. My friendship with Robert Harris was a long one and, even though he died young, I am proud to have printed his poems for more than twenty years.

I would have liked to write a longer piece but illness and a lively column do not sit well together.

Farewell and thank you!

Barrett Reid

INGA CLENDINNEN

The Misses Wan

In those days, in our street, neighbors didn't go into each other's houses. Kids had to be messengers, I suppose because we were meant to be too young to notice anything much. We'd go flying like skinny pigeons between the back doors with notes asking to borrow half a cup of Rinso until Friday or whatever. So when Mum decided to buy her eggs from the Wans – they kept chooks at the back of their yard – I was the one who had to fetch them.

The Wans were our local gentry. People used to say they'd come down in the world. (I'd imagine the three of them swaying from a hot-air balloon and sinking gently to land in their front garden.) When I asked my mother, she said they'd been "big people in the country", which didn't make much sense either. But I could see they were different from everyone else, because they never borrowed anything or talked over the side fence, and they never went to the shops, but had everything delivered.

So twice a week I'd open the latch on the white iron gate, edge through (it was a bit off its hinges), click it shut, go down the narrow side path to the kitchen, tap on the flywire door and, when it opened, hold out my note. The eldest sister, the one I called the boss Miss Wan, was always the one who came. (She ran the house, and looked after the egg money and the grocery order and things like that.) She was long, thin and always dressed in black, and at first I was scared of her. The one I called the middle Miss Wan might have been the youngest – there were still some red streaks in the grey hair sticking out under the old hat she always wore, and she was sort of gangly, the way some girls are – but the third sister was tiny and quite pretty in a dim sort of way, so she was the one I called the baby Miss Wan. She looked after the vegetable garden and the fruit trees. Sometimes she'd sneak a furry biscuit or an apple as wrinkled as her cheeks into my hand, as if she didn't want the boss Miss Wan to see, but she wasn't really worried. Whenever they were together all three would be suddenly gay, pleased with each other, like little girls at a party, and the baby Miss Wan would be the merriest of the lot. She just enjoyed secrets.

It was the middle Miss Wan I liked best. I suppose she was what we used to call 'a bit backward'. Perhaps she couldn't even talk – I don't remember her ever speaking – but she'd tell me what to do with little tugs and pats of her big red hands, and jerk her chin when she wanted me to look at something. (My mother was always telling me that pointing was rude, but I couldn't do without it, except at the Wans.) She'd beckon me into the chook yard, give a few high clucks in her throat, and her pet bantams and the big Rhode Island Reds would come rushing up squawking and squabbling over the handful of wheat she'd give me to scatter. If I was there early enough she'd let me scoop the morning bran mash into the feeding trough, and she'd guide my hands into the laying boxes, under the soft shifting feathers, until I'd touch a heavy shell, and gently lift out the warm egg, and she'd smile right into my eyes like a baby.

Sometimes grownups would try and pump me about the Wans, but I didn't tell them anything, partly because I liked being the only one to know what it was like behind the high fence, but most because it was so different from everything outside the gate that I didn't know how to begin to describe it. I don't think they minded: they wanted the Wans to be a bit mysterious. (My mother would say "they're beyond our ken", and I'd see my fat cousin Ken gazing at the three Miss Wans with his mouth sagging open.) Mum was a bit nervous about my visiting them, coaching me about 'manners', and in one of her grabs at being a lady she tried to get me to call them 'the Misses Wan' instead of just 'the Miss Wans', saying it showed more respect. At first she was shocked by the names I'd given them, but she fetched up using them herself, because how else to tell them apart?

After a while the boss Miss Wan started asking me into the kitchen – very clean, very bare, nothing

like the kitchen at home. Then she'd take me by the shoulders with her cool pale hands and stand me at the entrance to the big gloomy dining room, so I could admire it, with its long mahogany table and the big chairs standing around, everything shining with polish and not a sign of food or eating anywhere. Once she led me over to the sideboard and slid out some of the drawers, so I could see the glossy white tablecloths – best damask, she said – and the giant napkins with their sharp creases, all beautifully folded away. We only had the knife drawer at home, with everything just tossed in, but in her cutlery drawers each kind of thing – four sorts of knives and four sorts of forks and spoons, ladles, carving forks, a huge carving knife, and every single thing made of heavy silver – was set out in satin-lined boxes like little padded coffins, filling the whole length. The lamps along the sideboard were like rubies hung with ice-crystal stars. I got to like her then, because she touched all those beautiful things so tenderly.

Best of all were the photographs: old, brownish ones in heavy frames covering every wall. It was always dim in there, like being underwater, with the blinds pulled half-down, even in winter, and fine net curtains on top of them, and dark green velvet drapes at the sides, but after a while your eyes got used to it. There was one picture I especially liked, of a handsome young man, in profile, with a stiff collar up to his chin and rippling dark hair. It hung exactly above the centre of the sideboard. When Miss Wan saw me looking at it, she nodded to the picture, and said something strange. She said: "He is our only brother. He fell in Flanders Field." She didn't explain. And she should have said *was* our brother.

Over the mantelpiece, behind the chair at the head of the table, was the biggest picture of the lot, in a heavy oval frame. It was a 'studio portrait' of the father, Mr Wan. He looked old and ferocious, like men did in the old days, with a thin tight mouth in a great bush of whiskers, and narrow angry eyes glaring down on the whole room and everyone in it. I thought he might have been a missionary, because there was a photograph of him scowling in front of some little Chinese boys, very neat and clean, their blank little faces looking straight at the camera.

Opposite Mr Wan, in her own smaller frame, just above what must have been her chair when she was alive, was a hand-colored picture of the mother. She had darkish hair, perhaps red, like the stuff that sprouted from under the middle Miss Wan's hat, and she had the round cheeks and the vague, dim prettiness of the baby Miss Wan. The boss Miss Wan looked more like her father – thin mouth, narrow pale eyes – but sadder, and nothing like as angry.

I'm not sure if Mr Wan really was a missionary – I might have come to think that just because of the face, and the photograph, and that funny name, 'Wan'. And because of what happened next, because the Miss Wans, or probably the boss Miss Wan, decided to do something about my religious training.

It's true I hadn't had any, except for learning a bit about missionaries from R.I. at school. My mother thought religion was good for children, but she didn't get around to doing anything about it. I don't know how Miss Wan arranged it. Did she give me a note for my mother? I can't imagine her coming out of her gate, walking up the hill, turning in at our gate, walking up our path, climbing our dusty old steps, knocking on our door. It must have been a note. I do know that one Sunday my mother scrubbed and dressed me, tonged my straight hair into bends, gave me a shilling for 'the collection' and told me to go down to the Misses Wan and to do everything they told me.

THEY TOOK ME to the big stone church in Noble Street. I expected to enjoy myself, and I did. I loved the singing, and the way the boys' voices floated around the vaulted ceiling, the tall flowers in their tall brass urns, the strange candle smell, the great glowing windows, and best of all the processions of men in beautiful robes, with embroidered stoles over their shoulders. I'd had no idea that such things went on inside those heavy grey buildings. I imitated everything the Wans did, though when I went to follow the boss Miss Wan up to the front where people were kneeling in a row, the baby Miss Wan gently pulled me back, so I waited in the pew until all three had gone up and taken little bird sips from the silver jug and opened their mouths wide for the priest.

This going to church happened quite often for a while. Perhaps they took me as often as they went

themselves. I think they liked going because it was so rich and vivid, compared to their quiet underwater lives, while I liked it because the church was so peaceful and ordered. At home it was always noisy and a bit hectic, with the six of us piled into one small house. When my father came home at night and we'd all be in the kitchen, with the radio on and homework spread out and the dinner cooking, he'd say "it's the Human Zoo and HERE COMES THE KEEPER", though really we managed pretty well, threading round each other on our own little tracks. Still, I liked to see things quiet and orderly, if only for a change.

The Wans never talked about what happened in the church. I suppose they hoped some of it would just rub off, though it never did. The funny thing is that in spite of all that religion I committed my first and only deliberate sin at the Wans. My mother had always taught us that stealing was the worst thing you could do – she'd have thought the Muslims had the right idea, chopping people's hands off if they stole the smallest thing. But there was a little bush with dull green sticky leaves growing halfway down the Wans' side path, and it was covered with the most beautiful flowers I'd ever seen. They were very small, and they were like fairy bouquets, with different colored flowerets – pink, pale yellow, lavender – arranged in rings. (It was lantana, I discovered later. It grew like a weed further north.) I was too shy to stop and look at them properly, and I desperately wanted one.

So I decided to steal one. If I wore my apron with the big pocket, I could snatch one little flower head on the way past, hide it in the pocket, and then when I got home I could crawl under the house and duck waddle through the dry powdery dust to the furthest corner, which was about the only place where I could be really private (being the smallest, no-one else could get in there) and look at it as long as I wanted.

I wasn't worried about the Miss Wans. I knew they wouldn't mind, not even the boss Miss Wan. It was God I worried about. The first time I tried, with my heart thumping and my stomach shaking and His great mad eye glaring full at me like Mr Wan's, I couldn't do it. But the next time I did it almost without thinking – my hand just floated out, nipped off a flower, and I was out of the gate and home free. In the dusky golden light under the house the bouquet-flower was just as magical as I'd thought it would be. And nothing happened. My hand didn't wither, nobody found out, nothing bad happened at all. That's when I found out what I'd always suspected, that God was a fraud. So that was the end of Him, and of sin.

I longed to see more of the house; the bedrooms, and especially the bathroom, because bathrooms are always the most interesting. Once I'd got into Mrs Mack's, the uphill neighbor, by saying I needed to use the lavatory. (It was all pink and smelling of powder, with her pink shower cap hanging on a little hook and a pink cosy on the lavatory seat – no trace of Mr Mack anywhere.) I wouldn't have dared try that with the boss Miss Wan, but one day when I was in the chook yard with the middle Miss Wan I whispered that I needed to go. She looked flustered for a moment, so I was sorry I'd asked, but then she led me to a broken-down old outside lavatory beside the little tool shed, waved me in, and showed me how she'd stand guard at the door, banging her old rake down between her feet and standing to attention like a soldier. She was always making me laugh with jokes like that.

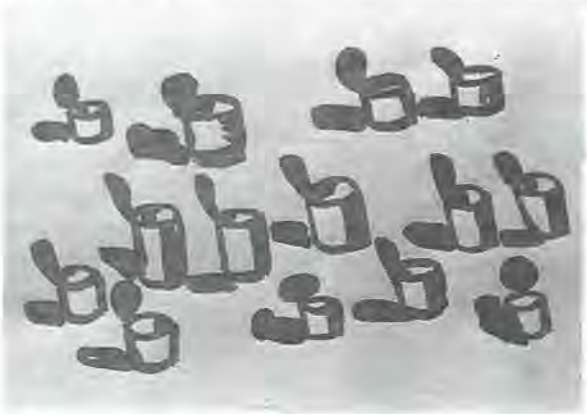
That must have been the lavatory she and her sister always used, at least during the daytime. While they did a lot of their work outside, in what I suppose was the country way – peeling and slicing the fruit they were putting up for the winter in the garden shed; stacking the jars along the shelves; burying lemons in boxes of sawdust; rubbing eggs with isinglass and storing them away – they must have had a room somewhere inside the house for cooking and eating and talking, and for when the weather was bad. The war with Germany and Japan was happening then, but they didn't have a radio, so it wasn't happening at the Wan house. I liked to think of them snug together in the night, doing the kinds of things I did at night, like drawing maps and doing sums and learning poetry.

I never saw that inside room, or anything past the dining room. No-one else saw inside the house at all. If a delivery man came to the front door, the boss Miss Wan would unlock the door and open it just a crack, and tell them to go round the back. (No-one else locked their doors – we didn't even have a key to our house.) It's only now I realise they must have been poor, that in spite of all that rich household stuff they didn't have much actual money. The musty biscuits, the raggy clothes and sacking aprons of the two younger ones, the lack of food smells in the kitchen, the cold inside even in mid-winter, should have told me that, but to me they were just marks of their separateness, of their aristocratic ways. They might have found going to church – for all three to dress properly, even scraping together the collection money – too much of a struggle.

THEN THINGS BEGAN TO GO WRONG at the Wans'. The boss Miss Wan suddenly seemed to

get much older. When I'd call for the eggs she'd be slow coming to the door, with none of her old gliding speed, and she'd peer at me a bit uncertainly, as if she didn't know quite who I was. Her dress would sometimes be buttoned wrongly, or have some food dribbled down it, or its white collar crooked – just little things, but shocking in her. And the baby Miss Wan began to come into the house with me, leaving whatever she was doing in the garden, though it was still the boss Miss Wan who gave me the eggs and took the money.

Then one hot afternoon little Miss Wan must have been busy, and didn't hear me arrive. I tapped on the door, and at last the boss Miss Wan came wavering from somewhere deep inside, and slowly



led me into the kitchen. A blowfly was buzzing and blundering against the corner of the kitchen window. Miss Wan looked at it, then shot out her hand, grabbed it in her fingertips, and squeezed it – I can still hear the buzzing suddenly change pitch – until the yellow insides squirted out over the pale skin. Then she dropped the emptied body, looked down at her fingers, bent her head, and licked them clean. The baby Miss Wan had just come in. We looked at each other, I picked up the eggs, thanked her, and managed to get out of the house before I started to heave.

I think I saw the Wan sisters, at least to talk to, only once after that. Again it was hot, again the eldest Miss Wan came slowly out of the darkness, and peered at me out of her strained old eyes. Big tears began to leak out of them, making little rivulets along the fine wrinkles until they collected in the corners of her mouth, and her pale tongue mumbled them as she looked at me, so sad, so lost. I put my hand out to her, and she took hold of my bare arm, and began to stroke the skin, murmuring, "such a lovely, lovely blouse – like silk, like silk", with the big tears falling. I could smell her smell, of old urine under the lavender water. Then her sister put her arm around her waist, and led her away. I let myself out. The middle Miss Wan, standing in the yard, gave me a little wave as I turned down the side path. I knew I wouldn't be visiting them again. They'd have go close ranks now. No more strangers.

I went under the house for a while, to be sure of being on my own, and then went inside, gave my mother the eggs, and told her the Wans didn't want to sell eggs any more, that they were getting rid of the chooks. She asked me if I was all right (she must have seen I'd been crying) but when I said I was fine, she didn't ask any questions, she just nodded.

I've never told anyone about those last visits. But the neighborhood seemed to know what was happening. Anyway, it was public soon enough, because the boss Miss Wan began to escape. We'd see her, skinny legs pumping, black skirts flapping, racing up the hill, full of a terrible energy. The strength had left her mind, but her will and her body were still terribly tough. After her would come the baby Miss Wan, apple cheeks flaming, to catch her arm and coax and coax until she'd turn for home. But then she wouldn't turn, and little Miss Wan couldn't hold her, so the middle Miss Wan had to help, rushing stiff-legged, awkward, boots clumping, her wild hair flying under her hat.

(Watching behind the curtain, I had a sudden painful memory of her hens rushing at her, stiff-legged, frantic.) Then they'd catch her, and pull her wailing down the street, in through the white iron gate, and down the dark side path.

At first my mother would send me down to the silent house with an apple pie or some of her potted steak, and I'd add them to the offerings lined up on the doorstep in front of the closed back door. Ants were swarming all over them. The door wouldn't be opened again, not to us.

Not to anyone else, either. Different people – men from the Council, the district nurse, once two young policemen – came and beat on the front door, but no one answered. They'd go down the side, then after a while they'd come out again and ask along the street for information, but no one ever knew anything. They came to our house a couple of times. My mother, usually so timid with strangers, and always so stern about lying, would look them in the eye and say no, she hadn't seen anything of the old ladies, no, she scarcely knew them, no, she hadn't noticed anything, no, she couldn't be any help at all. I'd never heard her so steely.

Do you think it was heartless, not to interfere, to leave them alone in their trouble? No. That was what they wanted, and they'd earned their right to privacy, and to dignity on their own terms. When the bad time began a few people tried to start stories

about cruelties in the sealed house, about starvation and beatings and cords cutting into old flesh, but they were frozen into silence. It's as if the street, usually fat with gossip, knew to turn its face away; knew that the sisters had chosen to be socially dead; that whatever happened to them physically didn't matter; that they had to be ignored.

I'd wanted this to be the story of the Wan sisters, but it can't be that, because in a way nothing happened to them, nothing at all. All around them things, and people, changed. They didn't. Instead, they lived as their father had told them to live all those years ago, sustaining the ghostly pattern of their girlhood in that bleak house. I don't remember just when they died, or anything about hearses and funerals or the busywork of death. Did a distant nephew come? I don't remember.

The house is still there. I don't like the way houses outlast people. There's a young family living in it, but it looks much the same, though the lantana bush is big now, and the grass grows long and straggly. It's still called 'the Wan house', even by people who came well after the sisters were gone. I pass it often, and think of them.

It was an honor to have known them, the Misses Wan.

TWO POEMS BY TIM THORNE

SPEAKING FOR MYSELF

i.m. Brett Whiteley

You gave me the American Dream
I had already been dreaming,
portraits of shared heroes,
dared lines, sweet games.

You drowned me through the ultramarine
of my harbor, exploded me
– palm tree or lion – terrible
as brain, river, sex, flight, self.

You took my addictions,
curved them into your blood,
swirled mushroom waves, the beaks
and hills, the alchemy of need.

Now I have to see round corners
for myself. What I see
is the full warm promise
of an empty motel room,

the air and debris fidgeting
with infinity, the trick perfumed
and sacred, waiting. I hang between
redemption's con and courage.

STAGE DIVE

Not always living by proxy, nor re-living
the clip of edited glamor thrash,
the fantasy death gig safe as the States,
no, sometimes, having so heavy a need to fly
on a lead break of my own, to assert
more than dreary frenzy can: noise pure
    beyond sound,
a tattoo sharper than art or pain,
I make and am still and private.

Anyone can jump from the top of an amp
into a crowd. Faith in the music, in the stance,
is a bungy rope. You might as well
sit in the mall or round a bong.
You might as well mutter, "The world's fucked"
to your mates who know that's not news.

"Despair" is no more to the point
than "the devil". When the metal
gets to be more than metaphor
it's style driven all the way
till it fuses with reality.

Like when Jason's head banged back
that night we were just having a few beers
no smart-arse video director
put the clotted pink crap
on my Anthrax T-shirt.

Now I mime to the tape of his suicide
but with feeling; the memory of his sudden weight
in my arms is the bass line to a track
I'll cut one day. When I dive
it will be through all this shit and on forever.

MEMO

Opening a primer
of modern literary theory
bought years ago
and symbolically uncut,
I find your arrowed note
pointing me to the perfect salad
and choicest fillet.
('Remember, only Germans
really appreciate meat.')
Amid the apophthegms the
diagram is crude but navigable,
notes the jeweller
past the tailor annotated
for the future.
Nothing is left to chance
in this panopticon of vendors.
Hardware, locksmith,
paint and charcutier,
all lead to harmonies
of mignonette and cress
dressed in your own garlicky oils
specified in a postscript.
About to discard it
I hoard it again,
certain that in fifty years' time
generations of scavengers,
the prickly daughters
of numerate widows,
will uncover a hundred such notes –
enlightening the nescient
in your high red bountiful hand.

PETER ROSE

DRY COUNTRY

A man of the dry country
wise with the ways of science,
he spoke of his own geography with sureness,
was fluent in the language of fringe land ecology.
I was tongue tied, lacked the grace
to enter the intimacy
of the desert,
where earth and sky meet
in perpetual shimmer.

This arid place claimed him.
The landscape without horizon, blood
rock and thorn stem scrub encourage
    subtle words.
He measures, samples, monitors and
    documents his world.
His thumb traces the texture and rhythm
from sea memory, poetry
of another time
trapped in the sediment
the wind now erodes.

I am a stranger to the color
and rolling boil of light washing
his habitat and hesitate to join his singing,
aware my thin voice will not coax ripple echoes
from the walls of wafer stacked rock.
The country answers him,
his call resonates
constructing a bridge
to a time unmapped.

IAN TEMPLEMAN

PARALLELS

1846 Lincoln comes to Congress
President-elect in 1860

1946 Kennedy walks into Congress
finally President-elect in 1960

They're succeeded by Andrew Johnson
born 1808 and Lyndon Johnson 1908

1839 Lincoln's killer is born
1939 Kennedy's

Both Southerners
shot before their trials

Booth fires in a theatre
escaping via a warehouse

Oswald fires from a warehouse
and runs into a theatre

History never repeats itself
exactly

R. A. SIMPSON

ACADEMIC

These days
she squeezes
out the words
like blood.

She stands
in clever land,
knee-deep
in all but wisdom.

She chews
a rancid cud
of student theses,
proffers hope.

At night
corridor politics
traduce her sleep.
She has forgotten
how to weep.

GRAEME KINROSS-SMITH

SEVEN SECRETS

This is my niche filled with some
worshipful matter, but what it is
I won't say. I'm not
at liberty to.

And this is my thorn in the side
of something, but in
the side of what is strictly
confidential. Of it I'll never speak.

And this is the persuasion of the jockey
who rides me, but to do or
not do what is not your business. And I
shall never make it so.

And these are the swimmers that I've kept
under glass, but their destination
is classified information. So please
don't ask.

And this is my lamb in bed
with my wolf, but what therein they do
& how you'll never from me hear, not
a single word.

And this is the fruit of my thirty-first
communion, but it too, its
taste & shape & color is my secret,
forever kept.

And this is my good death
dying, but to what & in
what manner is also information that
will go with me to my grave.

PHILIP HAMMIAL

GETTING SOBER – FIVE MONTHS OF DAYS

I must change or die.
It's like saying goodbye
to someone

to someone I am fond of
despite her faults
it's like saying goodbye.
Goodbye my wicked friend
who kept me warm
through thick and thin.

I am to be peeled
pared down.

It's like saying goodbye
to someone I am fond of
despite her dreadful faults,
doggedly rational
irrationally emotional
extremist cased in manners.

"Let me out!"
cried the witch in the tree.
"A jealous magician
imprisoned me here."

"Let me out!"
cried the angel in the tree.
"A demon pinned my wings
with wood."

GLEN TOMASETTI

BUILD UP

The sky is so blue it hurts.
Not deep leagues of 'blue for truth'
such as at dawn or evening,
but hard blue – a ply-backed board
finished in matt – bolted in at
the four compass corners.

The sun chalks the surface
with down the line strokes
of straight sets success. Pow. Pow.
You too could teach the tie-break cobalt,
smash and pass through to unknown upsets,
if you were just tough enough
could just jump high enough.

By this court, however, leaves trickle down
then the breeze hoves to
and schools swim past, gathering:
a gradual descent
of Colonies out of Empire.
And today, of all places,
there may never be another one
so close to – the one oncoming.

JAMES BROWN

EUROPA

We used our father's
spent pink fivepenny tram tickets
as play money, converting pence
to pounds for the exercise.
The five dollar note
is much the same in size, complexion,
buys equivalent travel.
Trust Ozenfant to be a corporate treasurer.

One judges a company by the person that it
keeps.
Ozone is an international trade mark
and he is a registered user.
Stuck in Venlo for the weekend
at a multinational conference,
forbearing Meertens, Controlling, offers Maastricht
and Dutch culture. Ozenfant's already accepted
ebullient Doevenspeck, Cash Management,
and spends the weekend checking local
directories
for past Dutch connections and in a Venlo bar
watching German bulls invade the shops
to make a margin on their marks.

Ozenfant, at home, escorts the world president
to the bank to turn director's fees to cash.
Ocean is an international trade mark
and he is a registered user.
The teller counts the currency.
We want Australian, not that foreign stuff,
Ozenfant protests. Meer hundreds, the teller notes
and demonstrates: foreign stuff.
Closer union we entreat
and count the cash.
Brussels to Maastricht is a step
in the right direction, just short:
the community of corporation men always knew
the big O, origin, centre of the Netherlands,
Europe, the world, the multiverse
was in a Venlo bar.

LEON SLADE

POSSESSION

He praised the god in the throat of the bird
And in the eye of the flower, centre-point
Of shadows, glisten of sap, bareness of twig,
Hidden softness of yellow fruit, silent
Worm-hearted soil, green feather of fern frond,
Palm overflowing with sunlight, deadness
Of fallen leaf, catapulting springiness
Of grass, of the wind, of twisting tree...

Until, like a wisp of steam, an ascending
Insect, self became a vapor near the centre
Of his praise, this need to find in hidden
Intensities, calm surfaces, the abundant
Otherness of the god he would carve
Like a sculptor from the unsmiling face
Of rock, of life.

SHANE McCAULEY

KEVIN HART

After Poetry 17, A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry

THE UNKNOWN

I WISH TO LET MYSELF be guided for a while by two lines of René Char. The first comes from *Partage formel* (1943): "The poem is the realised love of desire that has remained desire". And the second is from the argument of *Le Poème pulvérise* (1947): "How can we live without the unknown before us?" Each line suggests a great deal about poetry and about Char's poetry in particular. Taken together, they set up strange and powerful patterns that would sustain a long meditation. I do not know if Georges Bataille had these lines in mind when, in *L'Impossible* (1962), he ventured the following observation: "Poetry reveals a power of the unknown. But the unknown is only an insignificant void if it is not the object of a desire. Poetry is a middle term, it conceals the known within the unknown: it is the unknown painted in blinding colours, in the image of a sun." Perhaps Bataille was responding to a summons of his friend René Char, maybe even without consciously knowing it. If he was, and if he knew he was, he would not have regarded his words as a synthesis of Char's two thoughts. Poetry reacts badly when treated in that way, and Bataille valued poetry too highly to belittle it. No matter: let his words stand as one of the many patterns engendered by Char's lines.

Certainly Bataille cautions us against making a crude mistake in reading René Char. The unknown, here, is not the future. It may be that we cannot live without projecting ourselves into a future, which is surely unknown except for the fact that each of us must die. But that is not the point at issue. And for support I can claim no less an authority than Maurice Blanchot who, brooding on Char (and perhaps also on Bataille) in *L'Entretien infini* (1969), says that "The unknown to which poetry alerts us is much more unforeseeable than the future can be". Then he goes further: "To speak of the unknown, to receive it through speech while leaving it unknown, is precisely not to take hold of it, not to comprehend it". And then he goes further still: "To live with the unknown before one...is to enter into the responsibility of a speech that speaks without exercising any form of power".

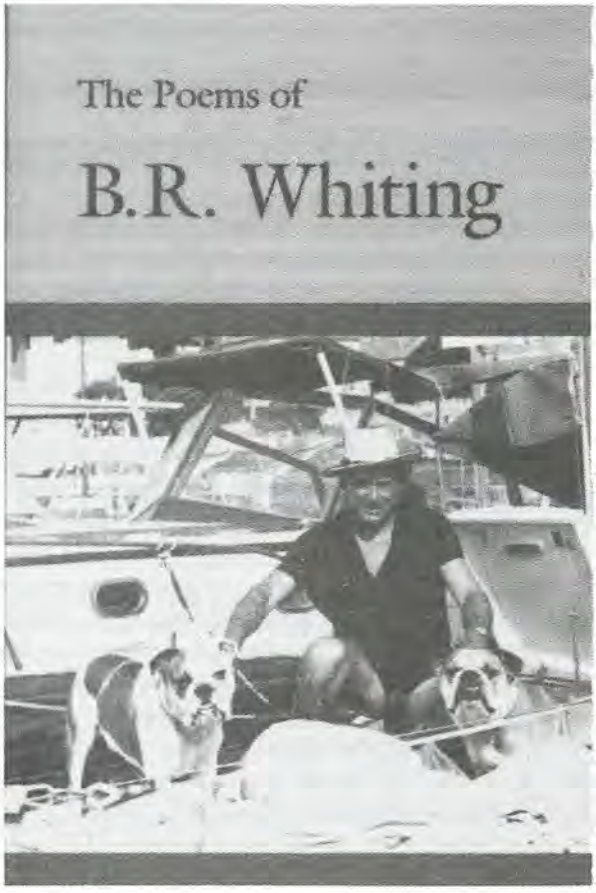
We can say rightly that the unknown is here and now, all about us, but that is quite different from asserting that it is present to consciousness. If presence were able to impinge on us, every open space, every hesitation and deviation, every ambiguity and irony, would be eliminated. The thought of presence is precisely what blocks our sense of the unknown and what diminishes poetry. In a world of presence all poetry would be prose, and all prose would be lifeless; indeed, the best idea we have of full presence is death, the state that brooks no difference, no division and no deferral. Art and presence are profound enemies; the one solicits the unknown, the other forbids it. We witness the unknown passing through art, and the effect is such that we are tempted to define art as that which invites and allows the unknown to gather there. Understood this way, art is the event of the unknown. It is more tempting to say that only great poetry remains open to the other and the unknown, that a sign of great poetry is precisely its willingness not to domesticate its subjects to the present moment but to let them approach and withdraw in their own times and in their own rhythms. We may succumb to this temptation only if we distinguish the word 'great' from its more stolid competitors – 'major', 'canonical' and the like. For there are writers who make no pretence of being poets, even minor poets, yet who by the esteem in which they hold poetry can reveal the unknown more surely than those who keep a steady eye on their literary careers.

Few readers of Australian verse will have heard of B. R. Whiting; but people who encounter 'The White Stoat', 'Vermin Hunt' or 'And the Dark

Falling' will find his voice lingering in their minds for long after. Here is 'Gandhi, 1946', the book's opening poem:

Did you like him? No. What was it, then?
He had a memorable laugh.
Did you like his disciples? No, not at all,
They had the vestry air.
Yet you remember him? Oh yes, unforgotten
The bright eye and the paper light
Hand on my arm when I walked with him
Only that? No, time has worn away
The resentment at a power
That presumed on my arm for its strength.
And now I like to think
How, after I had escorted him to the car,
The Khitmugar came up
To ask permission, if he might touch that arm.

That we know neither the overt questioner nor the answerer is not a matter of prime concern. (Although it's worth noting that Whiting handles the speaking voice and the more ghostly other voices – including the Khitmugar's – with considerable tact.) The unknown leaves its trail in the closing four lines; it is felt though not detained. The speaker likes to think *how* the Khitmugar came up to him, not *that* he was approached, and in the difference between those two words a space is opened for something to pass by without being caught and interrogated. All that we hear is a request – "if he might touch that arm" – which lightly evokes the Khitmugar's customary politeness while also insisting that the speaker's arm is no longer simply in the realm of the customary. It has entered the world of the sacred, become "that arm" for the Khitmugar and, for as long as the memory lasts, for the speaker himself.



'Gandhi, 1946' makes it clear that the unknown is not necessarily novel and that it has no special investment in the breaking of form. The unknown might be the most familiar thing in the world. To become aware of it requires more than a shift of attitude; it demands a conversion, a complete change of heart, which means a perpetual turning around to see what must, by definition, remain at least partly concealed. For the poet as for the religious person, conversion is not a single or a simple change of state. We turn toward what gives life, but knowing its power and the demands it makes of us, we also half-turn away. To keep facing, as directly as possible, whatever gives poetry to a poet (and it is seldom the same for any two writers) requires discipline and strength. To love poetry and to love writing poems is well and good; but, where art is concerned, it is not enough. It takes discipline to realise desire, and something else – call it art or spirit, at this level of generality it hardly matters – to let desire remain itself, even once it has been embodied; and it takes discipline not to guide art, however covertly, towards the worlds of personal ambition and power.

Alex Skovron knows this better than most, and *Sleeve Notes* could be read as an extended meditation on desire and the unknown. As good a place as any to witness this is 'A Life', three variations on the villanelle, the most direct and formally traditional of which is 'The Moth'. The poem moves like a dance, and so really moves nowhere. None the less there is a drama, a passage from asserting in the first line that "There is a knowledge indistinctly heard / Behind all that I know and all I am" to the high claim of the last two lines, "There *is* a knowledge, indistinctly heard, / Behind the turning socket of the world". What motivates that *is*? The question, and our inability to answer it decisively, is part of what gives the lyric an emotive force above and beyond its technical virtuosity. As the poem develops it moves through various modes of affirmation. After the initial response: "I understand / There is a knowl-

edge". Is this a declaration of comprehension or an admittance of hearsay? It is impossible to tell. Very quickly we pass from the subjective to the objective (and certainly more assertive) statement that "mind and circumstance, and entropy, demand / There is a knowledge, indistinctly heard / But true". No sooner there than we are returned to a subjectivity that is now sure of itself: "And I'm committed..." before we end with an allusion to the act of writing the poem, where subjective and objective dimensions necessarily interact.

Living with the unknown, realising a desire that none the less remains a desire: these are Char's distinctive themes, to be sure, but amongst others they are also Skovron's. The Australian generally prefers to engage them indirectly, through images of music. Sometimes indirectness is the only way, let alone the best way, of being direct. 'Elgar Revisits Worcestershire, 1984' takes its cue from a story of the composer revisiting his cottage long after his death, and the poem is spoken by the composer's ghost:

> How painful they can never truly know
> Me in this world. Music deceives,
> Can cover up the music it contains – go
> To Vienna, study Mozart's last immortal scores,
> Beethoven's late inscriptions. How it grieves
> Me to be standing by the side
> Of this sententious expert on the Variations,
> Who's never stepped *into* the notes they hide.
> Never peeled back his sticky annotations
> To *listen* to my ink...

The hapless expert fails to let Elgar's Variations remain desire even in their moments of realisation. For him, they exist to be classified and interpreted, not lived, and whatever of the unknown might pass before him is unseen, unacknowledged, or quickly reduced to what is already known.

Like any other image, music can be made to work hard in a poem or just left to idle there. Skovron likes to work it hard, sometimes requiring it to suggest many things at once: freedom, love, transcendence, and the unsayable. These words, especially when linked with 'unknown', nudge a shy question onto centre stage: What relations are there between the unknown and religion? If we are to respect that plural no quick or simple answer can be given, and if we are to let 'unknown' and 'religion' speak in their many voices (not to mention their many tones) the answer might take several lifetimes to make itself heard. Certainly 'religion' denotes more than 'organised religion', and it cannot be neatly confined to belief in a supreme being or that frosty God of the philosophers, Being. In 'Threshold' René Char writes of "the foresaking of the divine", a line that rises in the wake of Martin Heidegger's conviction that today we live in the age of God's default. It is not just that today no God, or even a god, gives meaning and direction to human life. The situation is far worse than that, since we no longer even register the absence of God as an absence. Only the poet, so Heidegger and Char tell us, lives more or less outside the age of God's default. Only the poet recognises and feels the advent or withdrawal of the divine. 'Poet', here, has a wider extension than is usually the case in English, and 'artist' might be a more accurate word. Even so, Char will write with confidence that "The gods are in metaphor".

That last quoted sentence is a fundamental tenet of Orphic theology. And, like many another poet, Char is an Orphic: that is, he believes that nature can be transformed into song. He may not be able to find God in the heavens, yet he discerns the gods in metaphor. Reading and writing poetry cannot save us but perhaps they can at least bring us into contact with the holy. Perhaps. I hesitate because Heidegger's words can so easily be twisted into a slogan, and because words like 'holy' and 'salvation' should be used with the greatest circumspection, especially when linked with art. Char knows this, and he manages to combine a proper circumspection with an elation. One line says it all for him: "Snatched up in the sudden swerve, poetry gains a beyond without guardian". Char's poetry lives and moves in that sudden swerve; but in English it often seems weighed down, even when the translation is more or less faithful, as in 'The Swift':

> Swift with wings too wide, wheeling and
> shrieking his joy as he circles the house.
> Such is the heart.
>
> He dries up thunder. He sows in the serene
> sky. If he touches ground, he tears himself
> apart.
>
> His response is the swallow, the familiar,
> whom he detests. What value has lace
> from the tower?
>
> His pause is the most sombre hollow. No one
> lives in space more narrow than he.
>
> Through the summer of long brightness,
> he will streak his way in shadows,
> by the blinds of midnight.
>
> No eyes can hold him. He shrieks for his
> only presence. A slight gun is about to
> fell him. Such is the heart.

The translation captures the lyric's main drama, the heart being equally like the swift and the gun that will kill it, but the poem's lightness and speed are lost. For example, the sharpness of "Il crie, c'est toute sa présence" is blunted by "He shrieks for his only presence"; the phrasing "for his only" is a prose answer to a poetic question. Some great poets can be translated into English, even with heavy losses – Cavafy and Lorca might be examples; while, for all sorts of reasons, others resist it at every opportunity: along the Goethe and Holderlin, Char seems to be one of these.

IN HIS WAR JOURNAL, *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (1943–44), Char writes, "The poem's line of flight. Everyone should be able to *feel* it". This does not mean that one should be able to anticipate the poem's drama, should be able to deduce the last line from the first. It means, rather, that when reading a fine poem one senses its intuitions and its deep confidence in them. There is no guesswork in strong poetry, but an openness to chance is essential. This openness has the same value and the same importance in formal verse and prose poetry alike. Anthony Hecht and Saint-Jean Perse are as different as different can be, and yet each draws from and delights in what chance offers in the moment of composition and in the hour of self-criticism (which need not be distinct). For the one it might be a rhyme that entails a crucial movement in the narrative, while for the other it might be the cadence of a phrase that opens up a whole new range of feelings and thoughts about rain, sea or snow.

"A poet's reputation should depend wholly on fully achieved poems, and on the desire that still aches in them..."

In any literature there will be only a few poets who meet Char's strictures. Few people write with an assurance that communicates itself immediately and convincingly. All too often one feels just beneath the surface of the text a sense of strain. It is as though rhetoric rather than confidence were being communicated, or – it may amount to the same thing – as though the poet had an eye on literary reputation rather than on the life of the poem. In Australia Les Murray writes with more bravado than anyone. True, he is given to rhetoric, but now and then he can recognise and redeem his faults: his revision of 'Their Cities, their Universities' is a case in point. The question of confidence can be divided into two separate questions: Is it a matter of a deep faith in the poem, as Char's observation suggests? Or is it an issue of faith in oneself as a poet? In the abstract the answer is simple: yes and no, in that order. A poet's reputation should depend wholly on fully achieved poems, and on the desire that still aches in them, and not on proclamations that he or she is a true poet, lives as a poet should, fulfils a social role or whatever ruse happens to be in fashion at the time. In the concrete, though, the two questions are often muddled: because poetry can never in fact be isolated from the culture – dominant or oppositional – that sustains it, and because pride and vanity are not always distinguishable when viewed from the inside looking out. Some poets, and Les Murray is a good example of one, are so linguistically adept that they can bring off poems as feats of vatic self-confidence. And when a poet is caught up in large cultural movements, or is a focus of national desire, it becomes increasingly hard to separate texts that long to be poems from texts that realise and maintain that – and other – longing.

These difficulties occur when reading a whole range of contemporary poets, including one increasingly distinguishable group: Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Les Murray and Derek Walcott. What links these four can be summarised by a paradox that was once held to have a sharp political edge, "The margins are at the centre." Each of them has written fine poems in the past and continues to write striking poems from time to time. But by and large each now tends to compose out of a faith that, because he is a poet, whatever he writes will be poetry. It works better for some than for others. The tendency to bardic self-confidence has always been in Murray's poetry; it is one reason why his *œvre* is uneven and why his heights are distinctive. In recent years, though this self-approbation has become more and more prominent, and increasingly the reader is asked to take on faith that what Murray writes is poetry. Not because it does not *look* like poetry, but because it always does. So that it comes as a surprise, after putting a new book of Murray's down, to realise that what has carried you along for its sixty or so pages has left the heart and mind untouched in the places that matter most.

Some of Murray's most impressive writing has used or mentioned the genre of the verse essay. His new book *Translations from the Natural World*, begins with one such poem. 'Kimberley Brief" is a journalistic piece about the Broome area:

Land of pearl and plain, where just one man
now goes for baroque
and is mostly liked for it; of seeping pink
gorges and smoke,
where whites run black shops since, as
my aunt found at Bunyah,
deny credit to your own poor and your world
will shun you,
where great films await making, perhaps
not for Southern television
(most Oz comedy dismays us, we agreed,
with its terrible derision),
where bush balladry has set rock hard,
with decrepitations,
as a means to silence poetry, and a finger
stuck up at denigrations,
since most modern writing sounds like
a war against love...

It is characteristic Murray, and nearly as good as it gets: the word play ("goes for baroque") the willingness to let the rhyme call the rhythm, the small-town homely advice ("as my aunt found at Bunyah..."), the breezy cultural commentary ("most Oz comedy dismays us..."), and the anxious polemic ("most modern writing sounds like a war against love").

In its own terms of verse journalism this is fair enough; even so, I cannot help feeling that the terms are limiting, both here and beyond, and that the linguistic skills cover up a certain coldness at the core of the work. I doubt that "most modern writing sounds like a war against love" (Akhmatova? Bonnefoy? Hope? Lorca? Merrill? Neruda? Quasimodo? Wright?... – It seems unlikely amongst the poets.) And it is an odd line for Murray to run since love hardly features in his own verse. His attention is more surely caught by manners than morals, by violence than by compassion. One can show love in all manner of ways, not just by composing 'love poems' or 'religious verse'. Demonstrating care for the natural world is as good a way as any, and one that Murray illuminated beautifully years ago in his imitation of the ancient Aboriginal chants, 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle'. In this new book the sequence titled 'Presence' would seem to offer an ideal opportunity for him to do this, to evoke what Char calls "this simple life flush with the earth", which is more or less what 'presence' means here. Thus 'Pigs': "Us all on sore cement was we. / Not warmed then with glares. Not glutting mush / under that pole the lightning's tied to". This is clever – and it knows it. Verbal ingenuity in this case tends to block the unknown from the poem. Rather than witness the pigs revealing themselves in their own way we are invited to admire a glittering display of language.

Lyrics about animals and insects are not uncommon in Australian poetry. Where Murray tries to speak from within them, and shows the strain of doing so, Diane Fahey prefers to observe them with a wry detachment. Why do people write so much about nature? Because deep down most modern poets are Wordsworthians, and not very good readers of him. For what is truly modern about Wordsworth is not that he wrote about nature, and not that he used the language of ordinary men and women, but that he was preoccupied with the self. The bard of the Lake District was not very interested in nature; but he was animated by the imagination or, more exactly, by the egotistical sublime. A poet like Mark Strand, who can scarcely look outside himself, is a more faithful and more rigorous Wordsworthian than Mark O'Connor, who values nature as a subject for poetry. Diane Fahey writes a kind of lyric that has become dominant in the last century. In historical terms, it is a result of long and sometimes crude negotiations with Wordsworth. And in formal terms, it is an intertwining of close empirical observation and transcendental subjectivity. Thus the opening stanzas of 'Moth':

Soft, almost unseeing sentinels,
they wait without purpose on walls,
in cupboards, ready to be dismembered,
like candle flames, by a finger-pinch.

As cupped hands open to outer air,
they fidget, cling – do they know
how to be saved? Some prefer
to grow brittle on curtains, silk fringes.

Modern poetry could be understood as a project of blurring the borders between observation and consciousness or, if you like, of showing that the borders were never in place at any time. Either way, Robert Gray and John Ashbery can be seen as marking two contemporary limits (for the one the 'I' is an effect of the eye, for the other the 'I' is a condition of possibility for any experience whatsoever). Fahey falls somewhere in the middle. Often enough what seems to be a statement of natural fact ("they wait without purpose on walls") relies on a subjectivity half-reflecting, or half-open to reflection, on its own whys and wherefores (can I really tell their purposes? am I without purpose? should I be?).

John Foulcher's *New and Selected Poems* edges as close as it can to the first limit. Like Gray, to whose work he is indebted, Foulcher writes a poetry that tends to a radical empiricism, although his

Christianity restrains him (in a way that Gray's Buddhism does not) from making claims that the subject is a relatively coherent but temporally limited assemblage of sense impressions. "The sky", he writes in the opening lyric, "is pegged between branches, a faded blue cloth / still damp." Then from this apparent statement of fact he moves toward a world imbued with value:

> Downstairs, the children cast
> sounds, trailing like fishing line through the
> rooms,
> reeling us in, as if life were teeming
>
> always in their wake. It's this confidence
> that I lack...I hear you speak to them, quietly,
> and cups and plates on the kitchen table.

"No post-modernist would miss a golden opportunity for self-reflexivity like that, which is one reason why so much overt post-modern verse has become routine."

What is impressive here, as with Robert Gray, is the exquisite tact with which the second sentence is framed. The speaker denies the very confidence that the poem, which allows him to talk, calmly claims for itself.

No post-modernist would miss a golden opportunity for self-reflexivity like that, which is one reason why so much overt post-modern verse has become routine. Formal tricks, like the *mise en abîme*, become tedious very quickly, but so can a lively habit of perception when it becomes no more than a habit. The lesson is relevant for everyone, banally so, but I mention it here not because Foulcher is ever dull but because he relies more clearly than most on another's way of seeing things. (Reading him I keep recalling Pasternak's words to a younger writer who had shown him a manuscript: "These poems are so good that I would be happy to include them in my next volume.") In a world where we read verse simply on its own terms, one poem at a time without reference to any other, it would be a simple pleasure to praise Foulcher's talents: his gift for visual imagery, his sense of line, the ease with which he moves from the empirical to the subjective and back again, and the compassion evident in the verse. These should not be dismissed. Yet we live in another world, where poems whisper their debts to other poems, even when their authors try to silence them, a world where art competes with art and – especially now – a world where originality is prized, if only because it has become very rare.

"THE IDEA OF SURREALISM tends simply to the total recuperation of our psychic forces by a means which is no other than a vertiginous descent within ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of all other places, the perpetual rambling in the depth of the forbidden zone." So wrote André Breton in his manifesto of 1929. In his early poems René Char was oriented towards surrealism, and it is easy to see the attraction: it places the known within the wider framework of the unknown. In time, though, Char began to see surrealism as a limited enterprise. Poetry, he felt, was a larger movement than even the surrealist quest for that "point in the mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, what is communicable and what is incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictory." Or perhaps Char's reservation was a little different, circling around a suspicion that, taken purely by itself, surrealism was incapable of determining that ultimate point.

Blanchot points out that surrealism was always engaged with a communication with the unknown. "From the unknown – what is neither the pure unknowable nor the not yet known – comes a relation that is indirect, a network of relations that never allows itself to be expressed unitarily", and he goes on to speak of "a non-simultaneous set of forces" in the surrealist work; it is "a *magnetic field* always free of the itinerary it calls forth, embodies, and nonetheless holds in reserve". These thoughts help us to make sense of James Gleeson's *Selected Poems*, a book of texts transcribed from the artist's 'poem-drawings' over the period 1938–1942. Like all surrealists, Gleeson celebrated the plural. His 'poems', if we can call them that without being reductive, are part and parcel of his visual compositions; and in seeing them in this format, we inevitably lose a dimension of their plurality. Two reproductions give us a faint idea of the original images, and it comes as a shock to see the text of 'On the Destruction of the Face as an Authentic Phenomenon' (spread over and under three strange 'figures' in the 1939 original) neatly presented here as five quatrains. We need a rich reproduction of all Gleeson's work. In the meantime, though, it is good to have this selection, including the quatrains I just mentioned:

I am hearing the killing inside myself
like the thin snap kernel of the sounds of
butchering
and, cargo of my death jewellery, I have heard
the plenty of stark darknesses.

The explosion among the naked hearts
is an animal wakened to a lethal ability
of muscles: it is strong to be flesh!
This bullet, this body and the awful coinci-
dence.

"From the unknown...comes a relation that is indirect", says Blanchot. And he is right to stress that it *is* a relation, that surrealism does not offer us the purely unknowable. Gleeson's poem does not provide a narrative thread for us to follow from beginning to end. Like much surrealist verse, it prizes lyric over narrative, though not to the complete exclusion of sense.

The surrealist quest for a point beyond all oppositions often goes by way of posing arbitrary conjunctions. They cannot be resolved dialectically or recuperated by a higher narrative. Their ultimate aim is spiritual: to jolt us into a higher consciousness. So 'catalogue' queers the dualisms of inside and outside, cause and effect, the subjective and the objective:

the elements must be sometimes very lonely,
and in slow hours
find in people's eyes
only the name of their shadow
and none of themselves.
each cause, a result; result, a cause:
there must be a name in this!
and the frame of its sound
is the name of nothing,
and its shape is the shape of nothing,
and its endless life
is the life of endlessness totalling the prophecy
of a shadow.

One fascinating moment here is the exclamation, "there must be a name in this!" The verbal improprieties of surrealism turn slowly and inevitably around an unknown point that is hailed as the truly proper and that quietly functions as full presence. As Breton said, "Vainly would one assign to surrealist activity another ambition than the hope of determining this point." Surrealism tries to grasp the unknown, and in doing so transforms it into the bizarre. Its greatest successes are those works that begin from its doctrines and then turn partly against them.

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Georges Bataille: *The Impossible*, trans. Richard Hurley. City Lights Books $19.95.
Maurice Blanchot: *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and foreword by Susan Hanson. University of Minnesota Press, $59.95.
René Char: *Selected Poems*, ed. Mary Ann Caws and Tina Jolas. New Directions, US$10.95.
Diane Fahey: *Mayflies in Amber*. Angus & Robertson, $14.95.
John Foulcher: *New and Selected Poems*. Angus & Robertson, $14.95.
James Gleeson: *Selected Poems*. Angus & Robertson, $14.95.
Les Murray: *Translations from the Natural World*. Isabella Press, $14.95.
Alex Skovron: *Sleeve Notes*. Hale & Iremonger/Golvan Arts, $12.95.
B. R. Whiting: *The Poems of B. R. Whiting*. The Sheep Meadow Press (PO Box 1345, Riversdale-on-Hudson, New York, 10471, US$22).

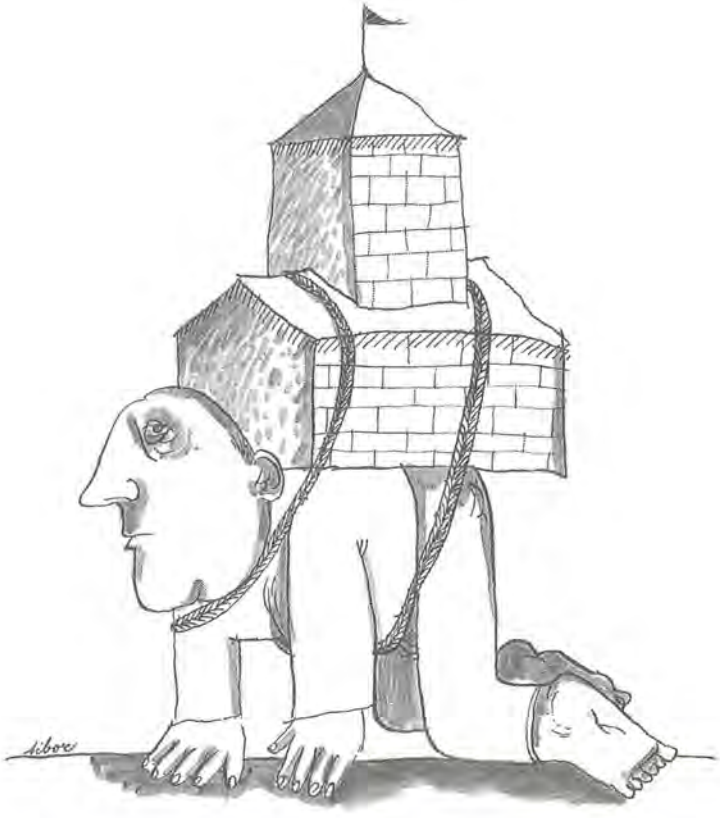
Kevin Hart has just completed editing The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Poetry.

ROB FINLAYSON

Shut Up! Be Silent!

SHUT UP! The story has to be told and all you can do is jabber on and on. That's your problem, what a problem, always yabbering when there's important people wanting to tell you something, something that's not about you maybe, but how do you know unless you shut up? Shut up! You're still going on, though it's hard to believe. What do I have to do to make you listen? Pull my pants down? Lift my skirt? Will either of those acts render you silent? What I'd really like is to render you behind a wall, nicely smoothed over, nothing showing, just a delightful surface without a bulge betraying the truth. Just stucco. Wouldn't that be nice? Though I admit it's a little hackneyed, there's something to be said for the careful application of tradition. Don't you agree? Saying nothing is the answer I require. And at last your silence is offering the sort of respect I require to allow me to give you what you need: this story. Forgive me for calling it a story. It isn't a story, it's just an anecdote, a trifle, a mere blemish on the face of literature. I can't even bring myself to tell it to you, to place it before you, it's so embarrassing. I want to go away and not face you, not put myself in this horrible position. It is! It's full of horror! How can I begin? I'll have to start or I'll never be able to leave. I know you'll never release me. I'll start like this: she was a nice, middle-class mother. Was she? Well, not really any of those except the last, for she most definitely had given birth to a child. Coincidentally, she was also a wife. Then what happened? (If I ask myself questions I can answer them for you.) They had no money, and hadn't for some time. See, that's why it's so difficult, for all appearances she was middle-class and yet she had no money. To be truthful, she had very little money. They were some of the working poor, but through choice, if it's possible to say that. They had, how can I say it without offending you, without giving you the wrong impression? They had difficulties with conventional employment. They couldn't hold down a job. They didn't like to be bossed around. They wanted to do their own work, not someone else's. That's what they were like. By they I mean her husband as well as her. As for the child, it just sucked, it was of that age. Now then, imagine them, sitting there one cold winter's night, the wind bashing against the panes, the rain lashing the panes, the panes bulging under the strain, and they, the two of them, coming together to a conclusion: they ate only vegetables, they lived cheaply and they had no money at all. And then they reached another one: they had no money at all and no prospects of money. They couldn't make ends meet. And then one more: this situation had been going on for too long, they'd had enough, what could they do to alleviate their distress? They went to bed. Sleep and its ministering angels stuffed up their eyes and ears, crammed fur into their mouths, left the real world out of it for awhile. In the morning, which inevitably must arrive for mortals, gloom and its accompanying devils had settled in. They went about their business for the day. That evening, picking up small, torn up pieces of paper and dropping them back onto the tabletop, she said: I've had an idea but I don't know whether you'll approve. He looked at her. Tell me, he said. I thought I'd whip people, she said, scratching an eyebrow. Whip people? he replied, With what? Whips, she said, and whatever else they wanted. In a parlor? he asked. I suppose so, she said, but I wouldn't have sex with them. You wouldn't? he enquired. No, not at all, I don't think I could, she said. How is it that this idea came to you? he asked. I saw an article in the paper about a woman in (here she mentions the name of a wicked city) who ran her own place specialising in this (she pauses) service. She couldn't keep up with the demand. What d'yu think? she said, assuming a face of anxiety whilst staring at the wall, casually. Sounds like a great idea, he said. It does? she asked. I'd reckon, said he by way of reply. I didn't think you'd approve, she pursued. I'm proud of you, he said. Proud of me? Why are you proud of me? she asked.

Because you're not being a hypocrite, he replied, and because you're finally deciding to make some money. I'm tired of doing all the dirty work. And this could be quite therapeutic for you. On the other hand it may not. There's only one way to tell, so they say, he said. It makes perfect sense to me, she said, I can go and whip those stupid bastards and be paid for it. I'd love it. Why work for ten dollars an hour cleaning some richie's house when you can work for one hundred and ten dollars an hour whipping them? Indeed, he said. She went on: God, it'd give me great pleasure to let'm have it. The only thing is, who runs it? Where can I get the work? I don't want to work by myself, it'd be too dangerous. It is too dangerous, isn't it? He replied, Yep, it'd be safer in a parlor. All right, she said, tomorrow I'll ring up and see what's what. So they went to bed, having some unexpectedly exciting sex on the way, and then sleep did its stuff and in the morn they arose to their usual round of endeavor and sloth. In the afternoon, when they met again, she seemed a little exhausted, somewhat worn out, a trifle downcast. What's up? he said. Not the job, she said. No luck? he asked. 'Fraid not, she said. Tell me the story, he said. Well, she said, I rang up the first place I saw in the phone book and spoke to the boss. The Madam? he asked. I suppose so, she replied. The boss said, Love, you want to whip'm and not have sex? Yes, I said, and I'd like to wear something modest and stylish. And I wouldn't want to say anything, either. I think I could be the strong, silent type. And then, he asked, sitting up, looking interested, what did she say? There was a bit of a pause, and that sort of startled sound that people manage to put across the phone, you know, funny how that happens isn't it? Yep, hilarious, so what did she say? Well, it took her a while, but finally she said to me: Sweetheart, said the boss, let me know when you find clients like that and I'll come and work for you. That's the best speech I've ever heard. And then she laughed and hung up.



Jiri Tibor

JULIAN WOODS

Too Late, the Republic

IT DOES NOT TAKE much flexibility in republicans to side with the House of Windsor in its present crisis. Gossip, exceeding the level of villager or congregational malice from the provincial past has triumphed, thrilling millions. Spies, informers, phone tappers, busy-bodies and wowsers flourish, all these social pests are encouraged and some are paid. And it's all 'in the public interest'. Amazingly, many of them claim to be monarchists.

But do as we loyal subjects say, not as we do. We can divorce, philander, 'come out' with an openness that is applauded, but you dear royals must be different. You must remain smiling and waving in your Victorian citadels. Your endless soap opera must contain no scandal, no impropriety.

The house of Hanover and Windsor has been its own worst enemy, relinquishing power to a kind of 'royal bureaucracy' in which it is only living furniture. The petit bourgeois Victoria, so grateful to be Queen and so worshipful of Albert, the petty concerns of George V like a character out of Arnold Bennett, the frivolity of Edward VIII, the decency and ordinariness of George VI, loved because we could feel both sorry for him and superior and the long twilight of Elizabeth II's reign has ended in a nullity. Edward VII was old and, besides, his energies lay elsewhere. Are such as these *monarchs*? The family has become the littlest of the little people, ordinary, nice, of family storms only, conservative, seen not to think, the eternal maiden aunts to the great Commonwealth clan.

In the case of Australians, as with the Scots and Welsh, republicanism serves national pride rather than something more just or equal or efficient. After more than a century of fervently placing millions of pieces of paper in ballot boxes (and it is the Napoleon the Thirds and the Stalins who knew the true cynicism of this custom) the superiority of elected rulers is doubtful. Just and efficient kings are more likely to emerge by random breeding than from the winnowing process that selects prime ministers, presidents and cabinets. And those who break through all systems like Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin are the great devourers. With modern party systems the way of mediocrity, deviousness and self-interest has been perfected. Unfortunately, the Windsors in their mediocrity seem to be managing the genetically impossible; and this remains their greatest claim to originality.

To maintain regality, Elizabeth R. & Co. should start acting imperiously, shouting and ordering people about (showing everyone who the subjects really are) – in short, acting as the royal are supposed to act. Andrew and Edward should smash cameras, threaten editors with pistols, buzz crowds with helicopters, order bodyguards to kick a few heads and drag off spies and informers to the Tower and lock them up for a week with sliced bread and chlorinated water. Charles is, of course, suitably qualified to perform that style of Hanoverian insanity which has made past English monarchs so great and so amusing.

They should cease appearing in public as they do, inspecting power stations, opening toy factories, being photographed in white safety helmets, leaning forward, hands behind their backs as though enthralled by some functionary's description of a sludge system, cutting ribbons, praising everybody in sight, essentially being ordered about in the dreariest of lives. They should rip up Royal timetables and please themselves. Then if a republic follows they can at least say they haven't gone down abjectly. If Charles I had snivelled his way to the block Parliament's glory would not have been as great.

The republican movement in Australia, in spite of its growth, is reaching its ideological nadir. Australian loyalties, like the Scots, Irish and Welsh, have always been tainted with insincerity in relation to England. On the one hand we loudly assert how different we are, how we possess virtues beyond the poor English, but we forever seek recognition there, royal employment as mercenaries and careerists and

honors bestowed with the final bliss of the kow-tow. Bewildering, too, when the substance of allegiance was transferred over the Pacific exactly fifty years ago after the fall of Singapore.

Eager to get on with it, republicans are now saying, scarcely hiding their pleasure, "If the Royal family can't stop the adverse publicity, the scandal of divorce, sexual intrigue and boorish behavior then the change to a republic is close." One wonders what Brutus or Voltaire would have made of this. What was once desired as a great liberation will be obtained without will or passion and with few changes except of names.

My view is that it is too late for a republic. In Australia it would have meant a lot in 1901, 1919 or 1945 or even in 1972. Political power has drifted elsewhere. As Spike Milligan said, we will get an actor doing Presidential impressions instead of Royal ones.

As peripheral kingdoms in the past were allowed by wise emperors in Rome, Persepolis and Peking certain autonomies, illusions of independence in return for allegiance, some guarantees, tribute and other losses, such is our condition. Full liberty can be pretended, independence cried in words, flags run up over institutions which in fact have been nullified. The ultimate kudos the nation waits for now is the rise of a notch in the World Bank's credit ratings – such is modern servility.

Hugh Dalton, preparing Britain's first post-war budget was one of the first to confront the new regime. Desired reforms as voted on by the nation were as nothing in the face of the ideologies of the lenders and the conditions they imposed. Real political power had already passed over the Atlantic. The full implications are the well-kept secret of the western world. The term 'partnership' is the cover. In the Pacific, for instance, the USA never allows a general meeting of interested states but manages each nation unilaterally. The bewildered publics of the client states find themselves with strange allies and unsought foes. Australia trains the Indonesian army so it can coerce its empire of reluctant outlying peoples while we help the USA blast another nation, Iraq, for the same behavior.

The rule of capital in the developed world, more

Rare photograph of the Royals using their loaf. With apologies to a well known bread manufacturer.

obvious in the Third World, is so diffused, so subtle as to be invisible to most. It can't be pinpointed to a country let alone a city or a street full of financiers as in the past. It is all-pervasive, works by monetary controls at great distance and speed through multiple channels, by electronics, lobbying, bribes, secret meetings and deals, take-overs through obscure intermediaries. It bribes governments, undermines the reluctant or recalcitrant by financial and trade boycotts and encourages insurgency. Yet it is monolithic only in the relentless rules of its game. Even the USA finds this fluidity and centrelessness hard to manage; it keeps slipping away to Tokyo and elsewhere. The colored maps and solid boundaries, nations each with its capital city are now merely part of the mirage that manipulates the inhabitants of the New World Order. Such is still the power of 19th century relics. In comparison monarchies are hardly more outdated.

The simplest commodities in our kitchens are in this thrall. In the developed world you contribute and you consume regardless of your ideas. There is no opting out – self-sufficiency and subsistence is the privilege of millionaires only. "The vague and dirty root" as Auden said, has captured us all. Currently, the USA and western Europe are its police force.

The colonialism of finance is the subtlest tyranny yet devised, least able to be got at, understood or overthrown. It reaches us in the small print of contracts and the terms of loans. In the Third World it is different. Sharp lessons are delivered by bombs and shells if nationalism dares to rear its head and if the retribution is ghastly and seems severe it is because, as with Iraq, the lesson must be understood by all nations.

The New Order was forecast in the first years of this century in the beautiful ironies of Anatole France in his Penguin Island and in his talks to the working men's clubs of Paris. With the demise of the USSR it has reached full flowering. Money and only money counts in all things great and small. Even sportsmen are commodities. Money is a self-sufficient principle and the only principle. You will quote Adam Smith that the market rests on the fair dealing of men of goodwill and honesty in vain. Drug cartels, arms manufacturers and dealers, land sharks and corporate thieves *cannot* be curbed because they, too, adhere to the great and sole principle and must be respected. Money, as such, is a sacred thing.

It is the cost of the monarchy that troubles us most. It, too, if not cost effective, will have to go.

King or President doesn't worry me much any more. I suppose we already have a President in Washington and a Vice-President in Tokyo. We have a Queen who doesn't act like a monarch but more like a downtrodden typist trying to maintain dignity in a firm of chauvinistic car salesmen – "Come on love, give us a smile, and we want you to look smart and bright when the customers come in." It makes me yearn for Henry VIII and his daughters.

In the past the monarchy was a screen and a diversion from the real issues of power. Now, the republican debate is also part of the screen.

Julian Woods' collected poems, Snakes and Ladders, *was published in 1975. He lives in Tarago, NSW.*

errata

John Arnold would like to correct a couple of minor errors in his review of the *ALS Guide to Australian Writers* in the last issue of *Overland*: Brenda Niall's biography of Martin Boyd *is* listed in the *Guide* (apologies, Laurie); and the AUSLIT database is available on its own CD-ROM, not as part of AUSTROM.

Also, John Philip's review of *The Mind of God* in no. 130 suffered at the hands of a proof-reader. Gödel's 'incompleteness proof' was altered to 'incomplete proof', thereby negating a major point: the finality and completeness of the incompleteness proof.

MAX TEICHMANN

Redefining Australia

Hugh MacKay: Re-inventing Australia; the Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s *(Angus and Robertson, $16.95).*

HUGH MACKAY HAS WRITTEN a quite important book which was partly serialised in the *Australian*, and widely reviewed. There was one theme, work and its importance (or otherwise) in our lives, which received especial attention, and another, the rise of fundamentalism, especially secular versions thereof, which did not. There *were* other areas of Australian life – the man/woman relation and its effects upon family, and the young; multiculturalism and mass immigration; the plastic money, debt-driven frenzies of the 1980s and *their* aftermath; the contempt with which many Australians now regard their politicians, even their institutions – about which MacKay says some interesting things. But these can keep. Two themes are sufficient unto this day.

MacKay, who is an experienced counsellor and social psychologist, sees the present as an Age of Angst, and Australians as faced with a major task of Redefinition. Their roles, their lives, their country and our world, have to be restated. A major task, but, he feels, we have no alternative, for the changes are occurring anyway.

The collapse of employment for so many, the almost horrendous prospects facing the young, the decline in real wages, the appearance of a subculture of working poor; the fact that many if not most new jobs appear to be part time or casual, has become apparent, at long last. At least a decade has been wasted by the media and the politically involved, obsessed with the ephemera of party politics and the contrived clashes of 'personalities', while our social and economic life has been unravelling. Alternatively, there have been the incessant beat-ups about the vicissitudes of the cargo cult, and the increasingly disingenuous stories about progress, coming growth, lights at ends of tunnels and prosperity just around corners. These official mendacities will continue, but we are now being forced to address reality. As a consequence, there is a deepening sense of depression and disorientation, and some panic, among the citizens. The kind of thing which happens when the Reality principle tries to take over from the Pleasure principle.

What has been happening while the era of the Tall Ships and casino politics was flourishing seems to be as follows...

> From 1970-92 one quarter of Australia's full time jobs have been eliminated. Of full time, non-managerial job opportunities opening up during that time 70 per cent were taken by women. The male wage earner, the traditional breadwinner of the traditional family unit, is an endangered species. So is the traditional family unit.
>
> Increasingly most of the new jobs being 'created' by Prime Ministerial fiat do appear, like the millions created in America in the 1970s and 1980s, to be low paid and part time or casual.
>
> But this is only the beginning. Three traditional foundations of the labour market and our class system are crumbling. There is the rural community, so important to our history and our national self-image. More and more farmers are being told that it would be better if they left the land and saved us all embarrassment. They might then prefer to live in caravan parks by the river, as farmers driven off the land do in Mildura. Then there are those dependent, directly and indirectly, upon our once extensive manufacturing industries, viz. the traditional blue collar working class, along with transport, building and construction. These industries are also ailing, and shedding labour.
>
> Then there is the conventional middle class – the middle 60 per cent of the wage distribution. The number of their jobs has declined by 25 per cent over the past 15 years, relative to popula-

tion. Whereas the bottom 20 per cent has grown by 20 per cent. Males are being sacked, perhaps 300,000 since 1989, and 100,000 part time male jobs created.

Marx's prediction of the middle class folding, and tumbling into the proletarian basement, is at last coming true. And they are tumbling on top of working class unemployed, and unemployed youth. Another Marxist prediction, that machines would replace men (and women), and that a large and growing reserve army of unemployed would emerge, *under capitalism*, is also coming true. But *under communism*, as practised, making sure everyone had a job of some kind was only achieved at the expense of everything else – so it collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. The people pretended to work and the government pretended to pay them.

What was to happen in the model post-revolutionary society? Machines *would* do it all and men would be relieved of labour. They could then fish, write poetry and, who knows attend cottage lectures in the evening. What we might call permanent leisure, or technicolor Nirvana. It sounded implausible then, and just as implausible now that capitalist spokesmen are pushing a disguised version. In good faith, and from compassion, I should add...otherwise it might look like saving capitalism's face.

"...people must develop their own inner resources, social skills, and remember that man does not live by bread or work alone."

MacKay, following Phil Ruthven, accepts the appearance of an underclass, a class of servants to the affluent, as in Victorian and Edwardian England (and large parts of Europe until the War). Only he thinks they should be called the 'service' industry. Like the hospitality industry. Masses of others will have to accept part time, low paid occupations, and there will, must, be unemployed. So people must develop their own inner resources, social skills, and remember that man does not live by bread or work alone. How this psycho-moral metamorphosis is to transpire, and whether it is to be *imposed*, is not clear.

To return to MacKay's shrinking middle class. Were it not for the rise of public sector employment, especially the New Bureaucratic class, Australia's middle class would be in far worse shape. Is this the way we should go – raising the proportion of public spending on employment more and more as other jobs disappear, and letting the budget go to the devil? Like the Italians, the Peronistas or The East Europeans? The answer is not an easy one.

But as MacKay says, "for those who still sit comfortably in the shrinking middle class – there is no real awareness, yet, of the burgeoning lower class beneath them." Again, "Whether this will lead to a more compassionate sense of the needs of the total community, or a more defensive, protective sense of superiority among the affluent will be one of the more compelling social questions of the Nineties."

A great many of these malign changes are Western wide; but not all. Ideally, this *would* be a time to borrow overseas, run budget deficits, and stimulate private employment, if possible, but certainly to increase public spending and put more on the public payroll. Unfortunately, the Hawke–Keating era saw a sevenfold increase in overseas borrowing, and debt, for no defensible purposes; the continuing expansion of public spending and the taking on of masses of new people who constitute the New Class – hence hard core Labor supporters with much to lose from either cuts in public spending or a change of government. Much of this public employment started from Whitlam's time. Consequently, our governments now have limited options, and must pump prime without breaking the handle. This wild excess concealed the decline in private employment and real wages. This public sector growth and Press economic disinformation misled the public as to what was going on. People were deceived into thinking the country was becoming more prosperous, and things would get better and better. Governments are now between a rock and a hard surface.

Was this all necessary, and is the future which MacKay paints inevitable, for if it is, he forecasts a rising tide of crime and violence, of neuroses and psychosomatic illness, the fraying of the social bond. This despite his Panglossian optimism, expressed in some places, about Australia finishing up OK. The fact is, a lot of these follies – economic rationalism, internationalisation, zero tariffs and the junking of traditional Labor policies and leadership styles – need *not* have occurred. The question is, can these policies be reversed – for our Conservatives appear to have little helpful to say, in the long run. Their short term efforts to bail out the boat are praiseworthy, in my opinion, but cannot tackle the basic matters raised above. So the jury is still out – or unemployed. Then MacKay turns to contemporary Australian (and Western) fundamentalism.

FUNDAMENTALISTS, by MacKay's account, have a low tolerance of ambiguity, dislike a condition of suspended belief, embrace what most of us see as dogmatic attitudes and points of view, which views however *they* regard as principled adherences to the basic truth of the matter – whatever the matter may be. They have been coming in many shapes and sizes in Australia. There are the religious ones – e.g.,

Muslim, Jewish, Christian and, no doubt, a few Indian and Sikh versions; political – mainly Left plus a few Right. *But*, more numerously, there are Greenie fundamentalists, immigration and multicultural ones; feminist fundamentalists, economic fundamentalists – totally dry or totally wet; anti-smoking fundamentalists. Even some atheists and humanists have that smugness and élitism of so many fundamentalist character types – who resemble in some ways our old friend the authoritarian personality. Then there are educational fundamentalists, egalitarian fundamentalists, pro- and anti-abortion fundamentalists, and so on.

These people, as MacKay says, are perfectly capable of discrediting quite worthy causes and of compromising the large body of adherents who are moderates and sensible. Thus, as he says, feminist fundamentalists who insist that other women adopt their politically correct line, miss the whole point of creating a diverse, complex plurality of choices for contemporary women.

But, as he says, after 20 years of turbulence and insecurity, the sense of relief at arriving at a simplistic, monistic account of things is indeed very comforting. You have a powerful sense of purpose, and such people sleep well at night – apparently. They are equally capable of changing the world or of resisting change. There can be a strong flavor of religious fervor involved, or acquired. Conservationism and environmentalism might be seen as contemporary pantheism. Certainty *is* the name of the game – not the mysteries of traditional religion.

Fundamentalists assume the high moral ground, which can be a position of either influence or power. Those with power in their mind seek to proselytise others, control others, make others 'good' by various kinds of indirect force, including moral blackmail. Reasoning is, after a time, difficult to discover. After all, right does not negotiate with wrong, nor good cohabit with evil. Fundamentalism which seeks to change and control others leads easily to puritanism, which is a happy hunting ground for sado-masochists. Verily we have some problem citizens on our hands, together with their nostrums, quick fixes, simplifications and persecutory scenarios aimed at the rest of us. Thus, our anti-Fascists are at present tearing around trying to find Fascists. Here, necessity may be the mother of invention.

MacKay thinks that this comes from social confusion and instability, and is only an interregnum, while society reorders itself. After which time the problem, as a major problem and not that of myriad individual problems, will go away. I doubt it.

For one thing, there are ersatz fundamentalists, or fundamentalist *manqué*, who are very numerous. *They* create Paulianity out of Christianity, churches, sects and, in time, patronage systems arise from the simple pristine clay of superior moral insights. So we get fundamentalist gravy trains, with their Colleges of Propaganda, Syllabi of Errors and Politically Incorrect Attitudes, and Committees of Inquisitors and Censors. These lay fundamentalists are blotting out the sun like locusts. MacKay seems to think they will go away. Only, I imagine, when they have eaten and spoiled everything. Like the Weasels who occupied Toad Hall, and stayed on. Badger was silenced by the Racial Vilification Act. Toad went back to goal for ideological turpitude. Mole and Rat finished listening to the BBC World Service, as an escape from the Weasel words and the Weasel deeds around them.

When fundamentalists, authentic or otherwise, take positions of power or influence, their conduct

is quite predictable. They persecute or censor or marginalise critics, non-believers, agnostics, as a matter of course. They lay down what is politically correct, religiously correct, culturally correct, philosophically correct – depending upon which racket they are running. All in the service of a principled position, naturally. Australia is in danger of suffocating under the weight of such networks, especially those in the media, publishing, education, the caring industries.

"When fundamentalists, authentic or otherwise, take positions of power or influence, their conduct is quite predictable. They persecute or censor or marginalise critics, non-believers, agnostics, as a matter of course."

MacKay, as I said, sees this as a response to social instability and cultural meltdown, likely to disappear when the boat rolls back to an even keel. (We should be so lucky!) Certainly the various fundamentalist movements rising in foreign parts owe much to cultural despair, revolts against modernity, collapses in authority and legitimacy – even government itself.

But in Australia things may be different in some respects. The disenchantment with the hitherto authoritative conservatives and the abandonment by Labor of its traditional positions and beliefs in its grab for power, created a market for alternative formulae. Labor had to replace one ideology, one variety of moral fundamentalism, with something else. The single issue nostrum vendors, with their militant moral edge, were the answer. They were incorporated, ennobled, empowered and rewarded, becoming part of the new system of élites. Naturally they have worked to widen their power base and clientele, while suppressing all alternatives.

Secular fundamentalists enjoy certain advantages over their religious brethren – they only have to wear their ideological vestments on special occasions; otherwise they can pretend to be just one of the boys, or girls, in the political congregation. Religious fundamentalists have to act up all the time.

Meantime, the proportion of Australians believing in astrology increased from 16 per cent in 1987 to 29 per cent in 1991. They may be the swinging vote. Alternatively, our polling organisations and economic journalists. Incidentally, the French, among others, are also into this with middle-class French Greens leading the charge.

Finally, there are some surprising omissions in an otherwise wide ranging evaluation of Australian society by MacKay. Although he talks of youth and all its problems, he nowhere mentions the great changes in the school environment and what has been taught and not taught. Too controversial? Nor does he mention the media, especially television, when he talks of changes in the family or the young (the death of childhood, Neal Postman labelled it). And when describing the rise and rise of greed and the ME generation, and the statistic that violence against the person has increased five-fold in twenty years, the influence of the media goes unreported. Of course this book *was* sponsored, in the last analysis, by News Limited.

Nor is there a chapter or a paragraph on corruption, whose increase has utterly changed people's perceptions of their governors, their businessmen, their lawyers, accountants, tax gatherers and senior medicos. Will we have to become like Italy, or the Philippines, before we get a chapter on corruption in a future edition?

MacKay, in his mien as sociological observer, seeks to eschew value judgements as to what has been happening over the past twenty years, but comes nearest to showing his own hand by drawing attention to the moral terms and notions which are in danger of disappearing from common usage. These terms, once the stuff of our moral and political discourse, *not* so very long ago, are now rarities in the vital fields of politics, the media, education, and as a consequence, fading out of family and interpersonal life.

He enumerates objectivity, fairness, tolerance, gratitude, modesty, stoicism, loyalty, genuine sympathy, compassion. Then there are key notions like dignity, self-respect, personal integrity, truthfulness and simplicity. Are such terms still used, even in churches? The author doesn't really go into why these basic terms are disappearing, but if he's interested, he might start with the people who run News Limited.

These caveats aside, MacKay, whose approach resembles parts of Barry Jones' and Daniel Bell's earlier work, has given us a good book.

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

JULIE LEWIS

The Modernist Impulse

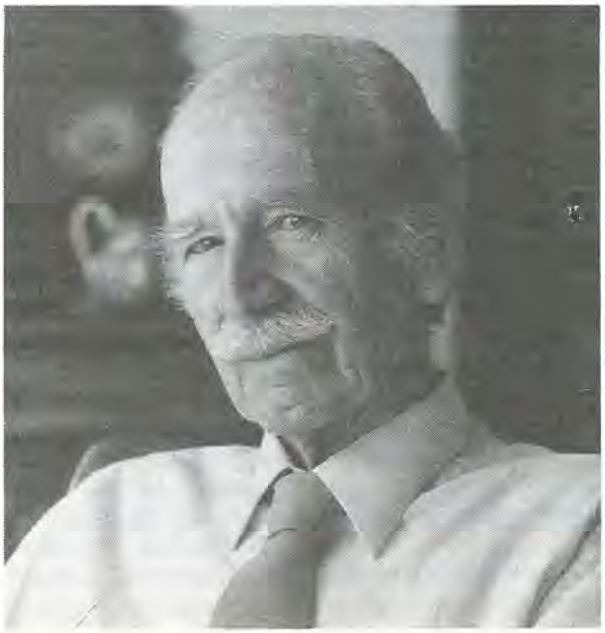
Peter Cowan's Early Fiction

IN THE EARLY 1930S when Peter Cowan first felt the impulse to write there were few avenues in Perth where potential writers could seek guidance or exchange ideas. There were writers in Perth but Cowan did not meet them. They mostly worked in a social realist mode, something that did not excite him. Instead his role models were Hemingway and Dos Passos and their work was hard to come by in Western Australia. Censorship laws kept out novels that were considered subversive or offensive to public taste. In spite of this, Cowan persevered. He read widely, and, when he was ready, began to write, concerned more with the inner lives of his subjects than with their actions. The cultural climate of Perth in the 1930s and the social issues of that time helped form Cowan's thinking.

Peter Cowan's first collection of short fiction, *Drift*, was published in 1944. The stories drew upon background material from the early days of the Depression through the 1930s to the beginning of the Second World War. Its focus was very much on the difficulties in practical and emotional terms of living during those years. For the latter reason alone – the exploration of the inner lives of the characters, he was breaking new ground in this country, particularly in Western Australia where, apart from a few exceptions (which had been largely ignored or disparaged), most fiction was still locked into nineteenth century form and diction, the content drawing nostalgically on familiar bush myths or plundering the possibilities of romance and adventure in some of WA's more exotic settings. Revelation of an inner life through a subject's own thoughts and responses, rather than through an omniscient narrator, disturbed many readers; yet it was this very quality, part of the whole modernist approach to art, that interested Cowan.

John Harcourt's impression of Perth during the Depression can be found in his novel *Upsurge*, published in 1934 and banned soon after (ostensibly for the offensive sexual nature of the material, but more probably for what was felt to be the subversive political nature of the work):

> The city was a city...with crowded narrow footpaths and wide busy streets; with clanging electric trams, painted a dull grey green and decorated with advertisements...with a morning and an evening and four important weekly newspapers; with fine public buildings; with bronze and stone and marble memorials to the War and other of the great and noble deeds of men; with green parks and public gardens; with Chambers of Commerce and Industry; with wealth amounting to hundreds of millions of pounds sterling deposited in bills of deed and currency in a dozen banks; and the thousands of unemployed who huddled in the trees in the parks, their shabby clothes and drawn, worn out faces spoiling the pleasant prospects for the more fortunate.



Here, alongside the sharply realistic depiction of the city is an underlying irony which links enduring monuments commemorating 'great and noble deeds' with other memorials to that most destructive force – war. And implied worship of commerce, industry and wealth is juxtaposed with the other reality of unemployment, in a clear indication of the priorities at the time. It was powerful writing and the book was full of such ironies. It disturbed many people, especially those who resisted change or any challenge to established mores. Cowan, writing about *Upsurge* had this to say in a 1984 essay published in *Westerly*:

> It was serious and sober, more determined in its exposure of the harshness and brutality of those Depression years for those who did not have the insulation of jobs or capital. It was a novel of social classes and its vision and style had no parallel at all in WA.

The impact of the Depression affected people in different ways. Paul Hasluck, who was a reporter on the *West Australian* at the time, said later in his autobiography, *Mucking About*:

> I scarcely noticed the economic Depression until lines of unemployed straggled through the streets of Perth...the Depression brought no hardship to me personally.

This was the way it was. The way, in a sense, it still is: for those in employment times may be difficult but they are rarely desperate; for the unemployed it is a different story.

Peter Cowan could identify with many of those for whom life was a bitter struggle and this had a powerful effect upon his sensibilities. In his early collections of short stories, *Drift* and *The Unploughed Land*, he recreates something of his perceptions of the period with immediacy. Much later, and with considered hindsight, he again examines the period in his novel *The Hills of Apollo Bay*.

PETER COWAN'S FAMILY had early links with the Swan River Colony. His great grandparents on both sides, the Browns and the Cowans, arrived in the colony in the 1830s. His great uncle Maitland Brown was a Member of Parliament as was his famous grandmother Edith Cowan. His father, a lawyer, died from complications after an operation when Peter was ten years old and the family became relatively poor, though it was a genteel kind of poverty. His mother battled to support the family by giving music lessons and taking in boarders; and, through considerable sacrifice, saw that Peter had a private school education. He left school at fifteen and went to work in an insurance office. Cowan told me recently, in an interview, "I hated it with a passionate hatred...in my fiction there's always been some poor bugger trapped in an office". The experience also made him aware of certain injustices. As a junior clerk he was paid considerably less than the experienced men who had worked for the company for years and yet those men, many with growing families to support, were the ones who were put off as the Depression bit harder, while the lower paid young clerks, including Cowan, were kept on.

Cowan's job may not have been threatened but he felt his freedom was, and he did the only thing that made sense to him them: left the job and went to work in the bush as a farm laborer for ten shillings a week and keep. He was young and strong. "I was very fit. [I] used to go to the gymnasium three nights a week – skipping, ground work, mat stuff, punching bags...if you wanted to you could box with the amateurs. Boxing was very much a feature of Perth." He got on well with the men he met there and years later would include a boxer, Harry (possibly a composite of some of the men he had met at the gym) in *The Hills of Apollo Bay*. Through Harry, he reflects some of the darker aspects of those Depression years. The speedway was another fascination – the machines themselves and the drivers' ability to manoeuvre their vehicles around the circuit.

In spite of his enthusiasm for these physically demanding and adrenalin-charged pursuits Cowan was also strongly introspective and he had long regarded the bush as a place of particular significance – in some ways a sanctuary. After his father's death he had spent some time on an uncle's farm in the forest at Jardee, near Pemberton. "It offered to the child a self-contained and secure world, but even a child was aware, confronted by those walls of karri forests, it was a security and containment largely illusory", he said in a biographical statement in *Peter Cowan: New Critical Essays* (University of Western Australia Press, 1992). He defied stereotyping because of the divergent nature of his interests and preoccupations – boxing and literature, speedway racing and sheltered landscapes, the simplicity of rustic life and the complexity of philosophical thought. Now working in the forest as a labourer his fitness stood him in good stead, which was just as well considering the long hours and hard work involved. It was at this time that he first tried his hand at some short stories, having been particularly excited by one written by Ernest Hemingway and

published in *Nash's*, a magazine forwarded to him by his mother.

"Working in the country for me was one of the best things I ever did," Cowan says. "And haunted me for the rest of my life because I kept having this feeling I ought to go back. You can't go back, it's like trying to go back in time...[but] I did go back in all sorts of ways. *Drift* came out of all that."

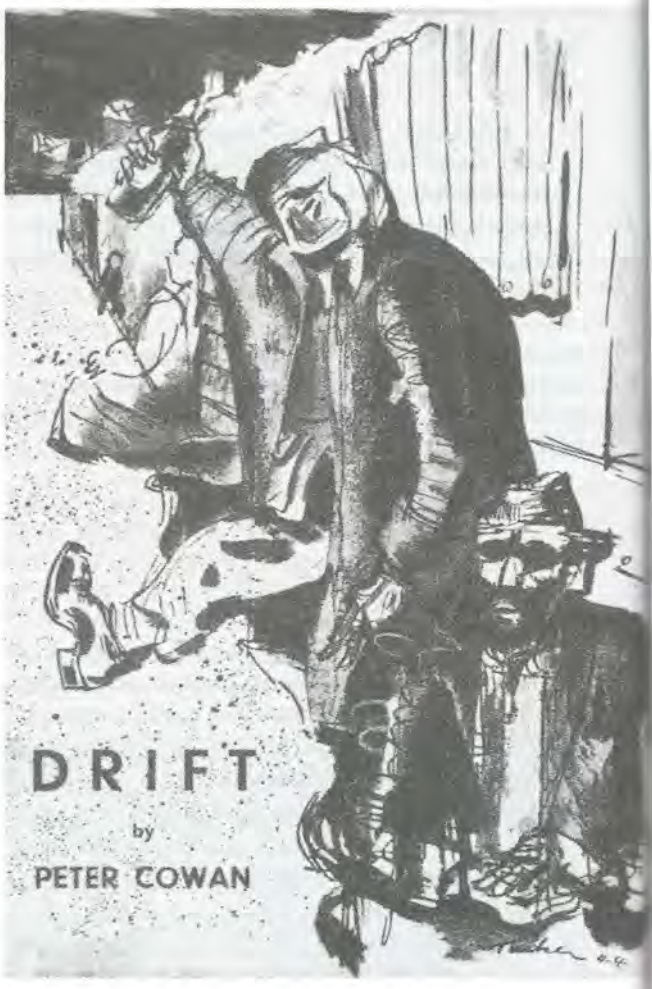
This is not to say that *Drift* is autobiographical in terms of the events of the stories; instead it reflected his burgeoning vision, one that had been shaped to some extent by circumstances, but also by his own nature – a bleak vision, often tragic, much like Thomas Hardy's, with possibilities of happiness that were almost inevitably thwarted or spoiled in some way. Cowan says, "I didn't see how you could see life in any other terms."

In spite of his enthusiasm for rural life, by 1935 it became obvious that he was never going to be able to make his way as a farmer. He returned to Perth, decided to continue his education and moved back into the family home. He undertook all sorts of jobs, including housepainting, to support himself while studying for matriculation at night school.

His first short story was published in a national magazine in 1935. In 'The Ties That Bind' he was already working through the same kinds of themes and preoccupations that would mark his later work – loneliness, isolation, conflicting attitudes with regard to priorities, understated sexuality and the powerful emotional tensions involved, separation, loss and blighted hopes. The setting, on the edge of a country town, suggests that he was still not ready to abandon accepted social norms entirely, though he was edging that way. The woman in the story, worldly, travelled, and with knowledge and experience the protagonist (an artist) longs to share, soon slides into domestic obsessiveness, which results in conflict that will never be resolved in a way that satisfies them both.

Although Cowan, by this time, had also written a couple of novels drawing upon his experiences in the bush and had sent them to an agent in England, he seemed to be more challenged by the short story form and was working on more stories, using Depression material. It was a difficult and lonely task. He knew no one with whom he could discuss his work and there were no classes where a fledgling writer could seek guidance. Cowan says, "I don't suppose anyone today would understand at all the kind of isolation that surrounded someone like myself."

ALTHOUGH ARTISTS IN PERTH in the 1930s were not a homogeneous group so far as art practice, politics and philosophy were concerned, this did not prevent them being friends and collaborators. This presupposes a social and artistic network that was above individual differences, yet in the city's literary world at the time there is no evidence to support any idea of a network and very few of the writers in Perth at the time knew each other. John K. Ewers had already been published when he met American critic Hartley Grattan in New York in 1936 and he arranged for a further meeting during



Grattan's proposed visit to Perth in 1938 when the critic could meet some local writers.

"In those days," wrote Ewers in 1972, "writers were not at all well known to each other and all I could muster up for the dinner at Billet's Café in Gledden Building were...eleven in all."

The fact that the meeting was to be held at Billett's is worth noting. Billet's, in a promotional advertisement, described itself as "The Modern Café" and went on to say "Environment is important – but not everything. The delightfully modern surroundings

of Billet's Café are backed up by efficient service and unrivalled cooking." Accompanying the advertisement was a kind of Cossington-Smith picture of the interior. The café was located in Gledden Buildings which had been built in the mid-1930s on the corner of Hay and William streets and which (surprisingly) still stands. It was one of several new *modern* buildings going up in Perth as the city aspired to modernise itself.

Peter Cowan was not among the writers who gathered to meet Hartley Grattan and he did not know any of the writers who had been invited. Indeed, of the eleven, among whom were Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Walter Murdoch, Bill Irwin, Gavin Casey, Mary Durack and Katharine Susannah Prichard not one had met all of the others. Yet, as a result of that meeting, with Grattan as the catalyst, the West Australian Branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers was formed.

Like Cowan, his student/writer protagonist in *The Hills of Apollo Bay* (set in the 1930s but written fifty years later), does not meet Hartley Grattan. But in the novel, when the critic's message appears in the afternoon newspaper, under the headline "Cultural Poverty" it excites the young man. There are quotes in the novel (possibly from an actual article) which deplore the lack of serious studies of men like Lang and Barton who had helped national development in Australia. In the novel Grattan is reported as saying that he considers Australian Literature a poor competitor with sport and gambling and is dismayed that there should be no indigenous culture. Cowan's student character is so affected by this that in a philosophy tutorial that evening at the university he becomes angrily outspoken, voicing impassioned support for Grattan's views with a predictable, but not unsympathetic, reaction from his professor. It may be worth noting here that at the time of Grattan's visit Cowan was a student of Alec King, a tutor in English at the University of Western Australia. Cowan remembers Alec King as a person who represented the "voice of modernism for at least a generation of students".

Wanting to write, but uncertain what to write about or how to go about it, Cowan felt totally isolated. Somehow, and often with great difficulty, he did find material that was challenging – Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, H. G. Wells' *History of the World*, works by J. B. Priestley and, above all, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. With hindsight he says, "I think the virtue of that sense of being perched on the edge of nothing forced you into yourself to think about what you could write about."

Unfortunately, public sensibilities reacted against the kind of frankness of attitude and sharpness of style that Cowan had in mind. Almost ten years earlier, in 1929, as well as several novels whose titles *sounded* provocative, four significant works of literature had been banned: Joyce's *Ulysses*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And in 1934, as I have already mentioned, John Harcourt's novel *Upsurge*, considered by Katharine Susannah Prichard to be the first truly proletarian novel, was also banned. The review in the *West Australian* shortly after its publication said:

> It would be hard to imagine a more thoroughly unpleasant set of people than are found in the pages of Mr Harcourt's immature narrative of 'petting parties', shopgirls' strikes, street rioting ...communist agitators, crude caricatures of magistrates and business magnates – the whole extraordinary conglomeration being liberally spiced with frankly erotic situations.

Harcourt left Perth and his book was withdrawn from sale.

This was the literary climate in which Peter Cowan found himself. He felt there was no one, except John Harcourt and one other writer, Philip Masel (*Past Present*), who touched on the dark side of Perth in the 1930s, writing about subjects and people not normally associated with literature.

In 1936 Katharine Susannah Prichard (already making her name as a writer) and Keith George called together writers, artists and actors to form the Workers' Art Guild, dedicated to furthering working class culture. Cowan recalls seeing their production of *Waiting for Lefty* and finding it a refreshing change from the usual plays produced by the Perth Repertory Theatre which were mostly trite commercial comedies, and described by some critics as decadent and bourgeois. These theatre groups each catered for a different kind of audience, tending to reflect opposing philosophical and political values. Surprisingly, among artists of all kinds, there seemed to be sufficient common interests, in spite of divergent ideological beliefs, for them to come to some kind of compromise. Paul Hasluck, considered to be a bi-partisan theatre critic, saw this as a form of mutual respect, though outspoken critics of conservatism might have felt differently.

By the mid-1930s Cowan recognised the form of writing which interested him and was fairly certain of the direction he wanted to go, but knew it was going to be difficult, that his work would not be popular. At the same time the source of his material and the impulse which would catapult him into

fiction (both factors arising from a combination of isolation and introspection) were coming together. The sources themselves included the bush with its paradoxical nature – a place of solace, while at the same time threatening; something that called up conflicting emotional states, entrapping yet spiritually restorative; the Depression and polarities of wealth, corruption and complacency on the one hand and deprivation, despair and violence on the other; and the lives of ordinary people and the tensions brought about by isolation, loneliness, sexual frustration and grief.

The bush became an idealised arcadia, a place of retreat; but Cowan understood it was also harsh, capriciously violent. Critics point out the sombre, threatening nature of the landscape in Cowan's work yet rarely talk about the healing and regenerative effect of that landscape when man is living in tune with it rather than working against it. For example, in a later story, 'The Lake', a hermit and his environment enjoy a symbiotic relationship which people from town destroy by their intrusiveness, mechanisation and conflict. In 'Isolation' from his first collection, *Drift*, Cowan's protagonist reflects much of the author's own attitude.

> For him the land was something vital, something into which he projected his own hopes and fears, and whose indifference or hostility had not only to be met by constant unremitting labour, but by a kind of inner resolution, a dedication of oneself wholly to the service of that more powerful element, the land.

At this time Cowan had not discovered *Triad*, a surprisingly progressive literary magazine, but he had come across *Angry Penguins*, which began in 1940, and was sponsored by the Adelaide University Arts Association. Its aim, according to its editor, Max Harris, was to "offer a serious and considered contribution to the immediate culture of the community". Here was a publication that did not look back, did not dwell on the past, but, instead, claimed to be "the only literary publication in Australia which is alive; contemporaneous in spirit and idiom." But for a writer (or a student) in Perth, it was not easy to come by. Cowan recalls, "One had to discover *Angry Penguins*...it was a matter of luck...even if one lived in Adelaide. For someone in Perth it was very unlikely indeed. Distance was a reality."

The journal, according to Harris, demanded "an openness of mind which our desire for final comprehension, for static understanding resents." This was something Cowan had been grappling with for a long time, the need for a dynamic rather than static approach to art (especially literature), and something he had already discovered in recent English poets and American fiction writers, but had despaired of finding in Australia. "It was a sudden revelation of possibilities one had not thought existed", he recalls.

He submitted a couple of stories, including one called 'Temporary Job', to a national competition, knowing very well that they didn't fit the pattern of nationalistic fervour so popular at the time. When they were returned in 1942 he was rather relieved because he had responded to an invitation in *Angry Penguins* for writers to submit short fiction. He had about eight stories, the ones which would eventually make up the 'Yesterday' and 'Between' sections of *Drift* and he sent them off. Max Harris wrote back, very interested, asking for more stories which would include wartime experiences. Cowan by this time was serving in the Air Force in Melbourne, where he wrote the 'Now' section of the collection on a typewriter loaned by Harris.

The Autumn 1944 edition of *Angry Penguins* contained the 'Ern Malley' poems and a story by Peter Cowan – 'The Fence'.

A month after publication the truth of Ern Malley's identity was revealed and the reputation of the journal and its editors jeopardised. Then, in September, Max Harris was prosecuted for immorality, indecency and obscenity. Peter Cowan's story was considered obscene.

'The Fence' is set on an isolated farming property in south west forest country of Western Australia. A labourer has been taken on to attend to the fencing. The owner of the farm is absent, but his son is there to give orders. There is a daughter, too, a strange girl, shy and guarded. The tension is implicit and palpable but quite mysterious at first. The hired hand gets on with his work. There are one or two strange and inconclusive encounters with the girl. Then her brother has to go to town and she and the farm hand are left alone. It gradually becomes clear, though it is never stated, that the brother has made his sister an unwilling incestuous partner. She is ashamed and feels that no one will ever look at her without contempt. The farm hand is sympathetic, but remains aloof. When the brother returns he senses a change in his sister and orders the labourer off the property:

> "Here's y'u cheque," he said. "You can finish up."
>
> "What's wrong?" Max said.
>
> "You can finish up and get the hell off my place."
>
> "Something wrong with the work?"

"Never mind the work."

"Look," Max said. "I'm not breaking m' neck to stay on your place. But you come at me like this you can tell a man what's wrong. What's the strong of it?"

"Y'u can finish up. Here's y' money."

"You can stick the money." He looked at the white face.

"If you think –" he said slowly.

"I'm not arguing with you. You can back up and get off the block –"

This was one of the offending passages. A policeman giving evidence in the case admitted he didn't know the meaning of the word 'incestuous' but thought it sounded indecent. Harris was found guilty of publishing 'indecent' literature and fined five pounds.

'The Fence' was included in Cowan's collection, *Drift*, but he felt the pressures of censorship laws of the period keenly and was virtually silenced for many years.

Published by Reed and Harris in 1944, *Drift* was dedicated to Alec King. Albert Tucker's powerful cover showed down-and-outs sitting in the gutter. The first three stories, in the section called 'Yesterday', reflect different states of mind including jealousy, grief and boredom. The first two stories are played out against a background of the bush, while the third, 'Weekend', is concerned with a brief respite from sustenance work. They are neither comfortable nor reassuring stories and that alone would have alienated the many readers for whom the short story was something that offered romance, adventure or escape and led to a conclusion that re-established order. It was Cowan's technical experimentation, however, that set his stories further apart from the conventional bush story of the period and made readers feel uncomfortable.

In the opening sequence of 'Isolation', a story of two men who have cleared land and are working a property together, the land they have cleared is viewed from an eagle's perspective, with detached awareness of its significance:

> To the eagle swinging well up the two clearings were as one and only a dot of lighter colour in the spread of undulating forest. But in the great bird holding the air there was a new thing in its timber covered domain, and something not in the natural unchanged order of things which it knew. More sharply, the dot held significance because occasionally it yielded food. Also it held danger.

We are immediately given the other point of view – that of those men on the ground for whom "the clearings meant life" and who do not think of them in terms of a "minute chink which might have closed in on them at the will of that forest". They are unaware of the eagle. The movement of images becomes cinematographic:

> The wedge-tail planed lower. The clearings took on distinctiveness, individuality; the small buildings showed as dark blots, the iron rooves gleamed with the brightness of a surface not yet dulled as sun and rain would later dull it...

These rapid switches of viewpoint are an indication that this piece of fiction will not follow a familiar and predictable path. As the story of the two men and the woman who later joins them develops, isolation, and its effect on each of them, is explored and each of their lives is destroyed. Ironically, order of a kind is finally restored (in structural terms anyway) with reference to the shadowy presence of the eagle. But it is a diminished presence – "now in the timber country they were seldom seen" – further indication of what Cowan sees as the blight that is inevitable when man tampers with the natural order.

The 'Between' section of the collection includes both 'Temporary Job' and 'The Fence', and a story, 'Holiday', which touches upon another subject that was taboo in the thirties – in Perth, anyway – homosexuality.

The 'Now' section of wartime experience, begins, significantly, with 'Requiem', a very brief and passionately felt piece that first celebrates and then mourns the loss of youth:

> They climbed back up the cliff, and in their place in the bushes the girl lay down, and for a time he stroked her thighs and the flesh that spread now and was different to when she was standing, and then he sat still and listened to the sound of the sea, gaining, and saw the sloping coast in the afternoon light, and he felt that all time had halted there, in the middle of the afternoon, and that as it was now so it must be always. Yet I shall not know it, he thought. When we go from here it is to be dragged to the madness of unreality. I am not really part of this, else I would stay here, else this time would be all time. But we go, and these steep cliffs, the sea coast scrub, the sloping dunes and the white beach and the sea and the rocks are here. My eyes have seen these things and something, the last real part in me, has gone out and become part of this, and has felt that alone which endures. For a time I have been part

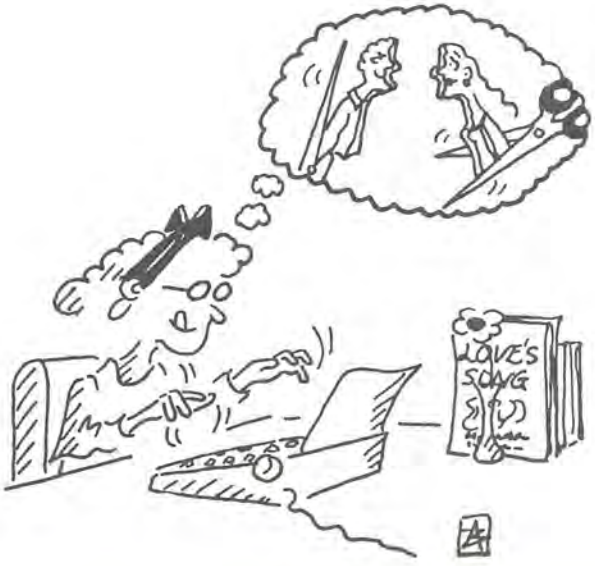
of a reality, for a time I have been fitted to this scene, have been one with the things which gave me being.

The following year the American publication *Mademoiselle*, requested permission to reprint the story 'Temporary Job', vindication as far as Cowan was concerned that it had been worthwhile to persist with his own particular style. Yet it would be fourteen years before Cowan published a second collection, *The Unploughed Land*. The indecency trial had made him wary. With hindsight he recalls, "I'd found a kind of form I was interested in and if I couldn't do anything with it I'd have given it [writing] away."

It was not until 1989, when he published *The Hills of Apollo Bay*, that he was able to confront the difficulties of that period in the 1930s and 1940s when Australian creative endeavors were moving with great effort towards "individual consciousness...rather than the resolution of a situation," a direction that was set back for years by reactionary forces, partly as a result of the Ern Malley fiasco but also because of a more general reprise of conservative values after the war.

Cowan's intention from the beginning has always been to work with states of mind, to suggest, to allow the reader a contribution in the creative process, and to leave gaps in the narrative. The direction in which he was heading was clear in his early fiction and it is worth re-examining those early stories for the insight into the processes of a writer who challenged the prevailing attitudes and practice of Australian literature at the time. In his subsequent fiction he has continued to write in ways that diverge from familiar and accepted practice.

Julie Lewis writes fiction and biography. Her most recent biography is Olga Masters: A Lot of Living *(UQP, 1991). She is presently working on the life of Mary Martin.*
A longer version of this essay was given in Perth as the 1992 Katharine Susannah Prichard Memorial Lecture.
Notes on sources may be obtained from Julie Lewis.



Bev Aisbett

ROB FINLAYSON

A Comfortable Travelogue

LET'S CALL THIS a travelogue because she awakes, yes, her eyes open up, all the zeds have finished their sawing in the air, the way is clear and here it comes, the gaze, as if out of a textbook, straight into his face, the beloved, who says, yes, he does, he says it to her, good morning darling and she replies, by now almost fully cognisant of the dawning of consciousness, she replies, O good morning darling, and there we are, we're away into the day, full of politeness and civilisation, well on the way to the other side of the world, lingering there in its mix of smog, fog, the whirring of cogs, the odd dog, that's how it could be in foreign parts, places unknown, but look, we can't wait, we have to move and yes, there it is, the arm, and yes, his arm, they both have arms that are fully equipped with the full array of digits, knuckles, cuticles, nails, prints, lines of all kinds, a callous, an ink stain, a wart, and all four hands are now flailing, that's the only word appropriate for this second or so, flailing in the well-known air, then grabbing, that most mundane of verbs, grabbing the bedclothes and throwing them back, they do this in unison, suggesting some forethought, or long practice, throwing them simply and elegantly back via a well-described arc onto the foot of the bed. From there it's a simple matter of standing up and walking into the bathroom and the kitchen, via other rooms, or even the garden, it's a pleasant morn, a good one indeed, considering the entourage of mornings that may have dragged themselves into view, standing up and looking about, not too closely at the day lest it run away, run off, become too swiftly technological, authoritative, or just multifaceted, full of strands of meaning like strands of hair, or weed, or coils of wire, or the individually painted hairs on that dog, that print of an oil painting of a dog, parked on the wall there, just above the comfortable chair, hovering godlike, stuck to the wall geckolike, not even glowing in the dark, iconlike, as mornings are wont to do between the pages of certain eyes at certain times of the morning's progression. Such certainty is companionable in the bathroom where a sundry number of activities are undertaken, with complete aplomb. Notably, excretion takes place, liquids and solids falling into the water of the closet, only to be sent posthaste on a further journey of their own into regions unknown to most of us, only guessed at, whispered about, or laughed raucously about, or even strewn about, these references, at parties and other social occasions. But look, they can't wait, they have to hurry, the pressure's on, they've noticed the time, despite the pleasure of the ritual, they've woken late, the morning being made doubly pleasant, now doubly cursed, that's how it goes, that's the supposition waiting to be made, we make it, we move to one side, we can't be standing in the way, nothing has happened yet, they've more or less just climbed out of bed. Are they both in the bathroom after all or were we just assuming they were both in there, wasn't one in the kitchen or even the garden, who knows, where are they now, one's come out of the kitchen and is turning on the television, still naked, yes, it's been a warm night and they both sleep naked when it's a warm night, and sometimes, if the night is warm but not hot and they are not too tired and one of them is nevertheless in a bad mood, despite all of these good indicators, yes, in a bad mood, then the other one wants to have a little loving, yes, that's how these two conduct their sex life, it's odd to be talking about it now, just before breakfast, but one of them has to be in a baddish mood, a bit on the grumpy side, and despite the good start of 'good morning darling', one of them nevertheless is in an irritable kind of mood, the 'good morning darling' turns out to have been a piece of form, an utterance close to cliché, one that is said when the other words don't want to be said, when it feels completely appropriate to clam up and just lie on the bottom of the sea, hoping the day will unroll another way. It doesn't, and we guessed, yes, we're right, it's the one that's turned on the television that's a bit irritable this morning,

it happened so swiftly that maybe it happened after the 'good morning darling', such things have a way of working like that, and now it's too late to speculate, we've already lost time because what's happening is happening quite quickly yes, the other one has sensed, that's the word we'll have to make do with for the time being, has sensed that the one who is irritable is irritable and now it's time for some loving, and of course, the one who is irritable doesn't want any loving, o no, no sex at all, see, they've pushed the fully equipped hand away from their genitals, being so softly stroked in the warm morning air, but it's no good, the hand's persistent and before long more drastic action has to be taken. The whole body moves. All the way to the other side of the room. What's going to happen next? It's simple, before long there's cunnilingus, fellatio, copulation and masturbation happening on the couch in the room nominally devoted to the reception of guests, that's were they ended up, and of course it hasn't been easy, there's been a lot of resistance, some bitter words like, you always want to have sex when I don't, and, of course you want to have sex, or, I know I'm a pervert, help me in my distress, and then some laughter, some of it begrudging, they don't like to leave it out, and then some sort of orgasm or two, though we can't be sure, the toast has claimed their attention, they're busy people and are now fully dressed and striding out into the world, off to the airport, or the busstop, we're not too sure, the television is still on, they've left it on deliberately to deter burglars, they've forgotten to turn it off, who cares, away they go, neat, clean, respectable, yes, we might as well call them that, it'll do, we've run out of time completely, we're just standing there, left behind, while they're off looking for adventures, words, meanings, clouds, glances, letters, names, foodshops, a comfortable chair.

TWO POEMS BY PHIL RADMALL

THE HOVER FLY

The hover fly hovers
outside my window,
the function of its wings
steadying it:
a haloed ring
around its crushable length.

Often in its beat I see
the single, faint didacticism
of its purpose,
definition beyond its worth,
wavering there,

elegiac on the air's light rhythms
sounding the hum of hundreds of wingbeats
on this difficult, still, uncomfortable heat:

imprisoned with its brevity
its frail instinct hammers in its cells.

BAT FLIGHT

Like a miraculous bat-flight
turning a fearful night-squeak out
I hear you parading the dresser
in the darkness, pulling the drawers out,
and receive the echoes of your visit
from the shrieking wood.
I imagine the complicated function
of your movements: brisk, sharp,
eclectic as a burglar's.

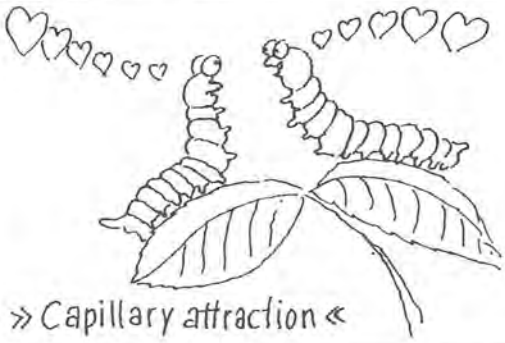
These nights I have longed for your being here;
your sudden, short, night-only stays;
the urgent instincts of the love-struck
still stubborn in me,
as I grope for you with the light out.
And if there's any richness in this
it is that this stark temerity appears just,
that these brief sightings seem ample,
tracking you across the cave-like dark.

For days I had expected your sort here,
some foreign, unknown visitant.
Now I detect you again
in the soft rustle of your nightdress,
ghostly in this rented room;
as you flit back towards me, arms out,
quick, and black against the night.

Decrease your Word Power

by Lofo

"It's a shame that words so seldom mean what they say." (Frank O'Foan)



» Capillary attraction «

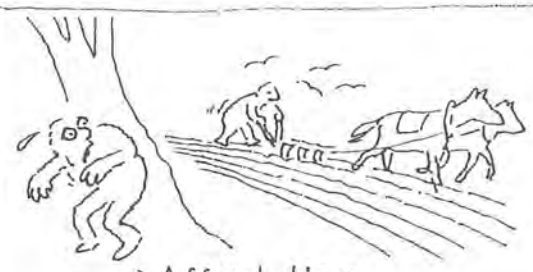
» Cryogenics «

» Rhinoplastic «

» Cannonade «

» Palmistry «

» Calvary «



» Aggrophobia «
(fear of aggriculture)

» Catacombe «

NOT TO MENTION BEHEMOTH... AUTOCRACY... BASTINADO... CAMEO ROLL... BEDLAM... CARPET... BELLWETHER...

TWO POEMS BY JILL JONES

THE NAMES OF BIRDS

Someone asked her the other day
about the names of birds
in her garden, and she found
nothing on the shelf, she couldn't explain
a name beyond the apology, "possibly...".
And then someone said:
"At this end of the road which way
is the quickest back to the city."
Which meant, time's running out,
friends always in a hurry, won't stay,
linger where nameless birds,
and trees, too, she'd never learned,
flourish in and over earth, sailing
across the back fence, the straggle
of glorious neglected abundance
which she counts as her fruit, weighed
by her ignorance, its freedom,
how she's forgotten so much
except echoes of tunes, nearly safe
from memory and bitterness,
no catechism of gods, trees, sins, birds,
clutter her mind, no weight.

As open and empty as a summer's day,
she walks through a space of echoing song,
on each small breath names are blown away,
even Kookaburra, Lorikeet, Pied Currawong.

DREAMING OF THE WELL

There's a well of memory dreamed
by so many, each dream is different,
each wish has a different thirst –
to drink at the rock the taste that was lost,
to throw odd-shaped secrets down
dark mossy sides into a liquid tomb,
or toss hope, spinning thin silvered nickel,
scuffed, hardly worth much these days.
Waiting for the splash and echo,
something will drown, drain tears into stone,
something will rise, heavy
with the pull of that old waking desire.

THE HOLE

The Council has pulled up the road
It's something for us all to look into
Like the soul's ragged caverns
It's a darkly comforting sight.

In it, a pipe as tall as a child
stops abruptly – it's tempting to crawl into
Even the cats stop and look
It's not something you see every day.

There's an odor of old earth
of drain dregs, or the foul breath
of an old man who hasn't uttered
in twenty years.

Yesterday, old Milly, with her weeds
and umbrella in hand, poked the pipe
and it made a sound like swallowing
on a dry throat.

The man in the bulldozer
had his mind on sex, I know it,
with his hand on the throttle
and his claw in the hole.

Today a dog pissed in it
And the hole was like an awry mouth
aghast and helpless against humiliation
sighing thin steam.

VIRGINIA BERNARD

RECESSION MEDITATION

Vanilla slices when I wasn't truly hungry
Cure-Em-Quicks when I wasn't really sick
After-shave in a supposed stone bottle
Soap on a real rope
If I didn't
If I hadn't
If I had it all today
With or without interest
Either way
A fortune.

Except
Having set those rules
What would I buy
Now?

MORRIS LURIE

BUSH CEMETERY IN SPRING

Western Australia

We came at midday, after miles of empty
ravaged earth, to a green oasis of mallee scrub
that hid five graves of those who'd
    farmed this land.
No church, no house, no highway, nothing nearby
but scrub, the sun-filled clouds and
    distant blue above.

Strewn on the ground were wreaths,
    as though a drunken
undertaker had been there, but they were growing
and in flower, cream pink leschenaultia
    macrantha,
a vivid tribute from the land for these
who'd fought her and lost, a lasting loving answer.

ROBERT CLARK

TWO POEMS BY CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

PRESENTABLES

At the core of being
spins a nothingness
some say
but they are wrong
in the long, short run.

All things are germed
or kernelled
by some dumb nut of being
tucked away
like an elf in a wood.

The oyster of pure space
bathes in meaning,
a slow green lapping, where to be
is to be no more than
holy grit.

FISHERS OF SMITHEREENS

Held up in the going between would and wander, towards turn,
the would-be assailed me with its monotonous wasness,
its unfree yearn.

Adrift on a blueblack eitherly (the dithering waves)
I was neither maker nor locus, a kind of moreover
that bobs and craves.

As a store in amber January, not quite yet having a sale,
but the gaudy price-tickets printed, sheer possibility
can turn me pale.

Like dither, like father, like neither, the gusting oblique strain
in tensions recorded or unrecorded slides and rubs
doggedly against the grain,

making certain marks here with a delicate uncertain hand.
The sailingness rocks,
many divers dip,
gull-cries hinting
we may be near to land.

THE LAST PENINSULA

DOROTHY HEWETT

A naked foot
placed on the peninsula
the blunt toes
grip the shingle
spread like starfish
cling like anemones

in the rock pools
left behind by the tide
tentacled webbed and finned
sea creatures float and swim
on the far horizon
where the sea foams
the albatross hangs on the wind

as the white foot
vulnerable marvelling cold
searches for foothold.

1.

Bright blood on the sheets this morning
in the chilly spring
a currawong sings with a note
as harsh as a warning
the fire in Plato's cave
burns steadily all day
death in his blue cowl
takes one reluctant step away
while the suffering flesh
cut sewn and sealed
lies still on its narrow bed
the spirit looks down and is healed
Healed for what says the voice
More of the same?
And the currawong sings *Rejoice*
I have called your name.

2.

Moving out
on the last peninsula
burdened with memory
the nurturing womb
is an envelope of torn flesh
thrown away
the feathery she-oak
under the heavy sky
turns grey with endurance
the melaleuca fence
blackens with rain
beyond, the bay
in a sieve of pebbles
advances and withdraws
with a melancholy persistence
the belly drags

and hugs its pain
it imagines the stump
of the cervix
one ovary left to swing
like a bell
like a petal blowing
alone in the dark
the black hole
that spreads and flowers
under the flesh
in the first brush
with death

3.

days pass
the body heals
around the wound
the mutilation stays
lost and found
on wavering feet
the self
staggers across the grass
and goes to ground
the air is like blown glass
one blue-black crow
hops and floats
enlarged in the wet clear light

what shall I find
in this last retreat?
this house at the end of the road
where the roots
thrust thick and bulbous
up from the sandy floor
where the bay
floods to the ocean
with its unending roar
is love a compass
life an allegory?
when the corrupt flesh
sickens and dies
from our first breath
do we carry death
in our bodies
waiting?

no answers
only questions
but the child
lives on in the ageing body
unreconciled
in a garden closed
on a lost and fabled world.

4.

A house of mystery the leaves
of moving fingers tap the glass
the grass whirrs with the energy
of secret lives
sea eagles swallows gannets
ride the air
sea beasts in the deep
roll over with the tide
pulled up on the rocks
to sun themselves to sleep

there is a hedge between
this garden and the world
a holy bestiary that swarms and sings
to guarantee the multiplicity of things.

5.

The garden darkens
underneath my eyes
the light fades out
wagtail plover wren
all creatures that rejoice
under the sun
creep home to sleep
and shall I too
eventually disappear
in a garden hat and a cloak
possibly accompanied by
a Platonic angel
leaving a note
I have been called away
from the dark cottage
but on what errand
and for what purpose?

the shadow of the she-oak tree
feathers the sky
the evening star
glows faintly from the sea
and all that I
have willed myself to be
is stilled.

6.

Grief sank like a stone
a great wind came
the cliff face tumbled
the she-oak sang

the birds were blown
about the garden

the chimney kicked back
the smoke
till our eyes were full
of tears
when the wind dropped
the sunlight deepened
balanced serene radiant
the garden glowed
the throats of the birds
were full of silver

what is the distance
between
bone and infinity?
bliss pain solitude
a breath of air

7.

what comfort there
the world goes on
without me
like the swallow
flying from dark to dark
through a lighted room
the sigh of the fire
in the hearth
before it falls
I die and the womb
and the last light
and the dark mystery
between the thighs
goes with me

ignorant and afraid
but without choice
I have taken the first step
out onto the peninsula
I hear the voices of the birds
calling each to each
from the black pine
step by step
while the crow's wing
darkens the garden
and the thickening light
slips from the bay
leaving black water
I will forget all speech
I will have moved away
out of reach
of the little birds
in the first light
dancing across the lawn

8.

locking the door
on the garden
full of butterflies
the wash of the tide
the she-oak sailing
through air
the golden hornet
flexing against the sun

on grey days under cloud
with the foghorns sounding
when the weather blows up
the seeds dance on the lawn
and the birds are silent
we do not lie in bed
reading under the lamplight
our eyes do not grow
accustomed to the dark
like the hornet the butterfly
and the bird
we cannot stay
like dead leaves
on the ground
we are blown away.

GARY CATALANO

An American Education: The Poetry of Ken Taylor

BEFORE WE CAN BEGIN to make any sense of our poetic culture, it is essential that we try to gain an understanding of the various ways in which our poets have responded to the attractions of contemporary American poetry. If someone like Les Murray has remained almost wholly impervious to the example of any American poet later than Frost, a younger poet like Ken Bolton has been more than ready to allow the work of certain New York poets to determine both his style and his most important poetic concerns.

But what of Ken Taylor? Compared with that of either Murray or Bolton, his relationship to American poetry is a far more complicated one. Although he is deeply indebted to a number of American poets who came to prominence in the 1960s, it is clear that almost every line he has written betrays an obsession with the nature of Australian life – and particularly with its provincialism.

For Taylor this provincialism is above all embodied in his hometown of Ballarat. The city in which he grew up was a perfect 'open air museum', for it formed the surreal relic of an earlier and much more confident age:

> Ballarat was the end of the British Empire, and everywhere there was evidence of the end of the great imperial maritime venture: half-finished cathedrals, great grandstands with finials and cupolas – all the Victorian and Edwardian detail of a very confident empire.

Ballarat, he went on to add in this interview with Martin Duwell, was almost "a paradigm for Australia itself".

The interesting fact is that Taylor only began to give artistic expression to these perceptions *during* an extended stay in America. His first poems of any merit were written while he was studying at Cornell University on a Harkness Fellowship in 1966.

It appears that America educated Taylor in two interrelated ways. Almost immediately on his arrival in the country in 1965 he set out to see some of those mid-Western towns that, as a youth, he had read about in the novels of Sinclair Lewis and the early stories of Hemingway. In Taylor's mind, a place like Grand Rapids represented those big and important concepts: life, reality.

But the actual reality of Grand Rapids could not have been more different. The disappointment he experienced was a salutary one, for it enabled him to understand just what he had left behind in Australia. Taylor soon realised that Ballarat, when compared with Grand Rapids, was "a far more interesting and complex city".

If this realisation gave him the impetus and motive to write about what he knew best, the example of A. R. Ammons, who was then poet-in-residence at Cornell, gave him the means. Taylor has readily acknowledged the extent of his debt to the American poet:

> Ammons has had an immense effect on me because he showed me there was a new way of writing about the natural world. I'd been inhibited from doing anything about landscape because to me it all belonged in a faded and discredited tradition – the Georgian essay. Suddenly, through Ammons, it became all significant and all accessible to me, and my own memories of it were suddenly of value.

Under the direct influence of Ammons, Taylor wrote 'A single sheet of white paper', 'Late actions at Beebe Lake', 'Maurie in America' and 'At Valentines – part one'. Although the latter is his longest and most important poem, it is appropriate that this account should begin with a brief examination of 'A single sheet of white paper'. Here are its first six lines:

In
a papery fall a
single sheet of
white paper can
card skeins of
air with arms.

The first thing we are likely to notice about this verse-paragraph is that its line-breaks occur in odd places. The indefinite article at the end of the second line, the verb at the end of the fourth and, somewhat marginally, the preposition at the end of the third and fifth line are all unconventionally located.

Taylor's purpose becomes apparent when the lines are read aloud, for the voice lingers slightly over "single", "white", "card" and "air" and gives them a touch more emphasis than they would otherwise have. In Taylor's arrangement the words seem to be invested with their full import.

What all this results in is a passage whose movement is regulated in such a way that it perfectly mirrors the sense of the words. As the voice moves from line to line, it mimics the twists and turns of a piece of paper falling through the air. Taylor's subject is objectified in the actual music of the poem.

"Taylor is telling us that poems should have the fluency and verve of a calligraphic mark."

But 'A single sheet of white paper' is a manifesto-poem in more ways than one. If its lineation serves to demonstrate some of the effects a poet can achieve if he or she concentrates on the syllable (I should add that Taylor's handling of the syllable owes as much to Cid Corman as it does to Ammons), its whole feel tells us that Taylor has identified his poetic practice with that of another art. In it Taylor is telling us that poems should have the fluency and verve of a calligraphic mark.

As it happens, this is not the only occasion on which Taylor says as much. We turn to the somewhat later 'The modern world', and what do we find but yet another acknowledgement of the naturalness of one kind of visual art. Rather significantly, no other lines in the poem move quite as easily and casually as these which describe 'Z', a watercolorist who

allowed his dry paper to
soak up the sun and
swept nineteen twenty-eight
into a great yellow curve of beach,
a few Western District dots
below the wash of clear blue sea
and the heat of that
Otway summer.

While there are numerous parts of 'At Valentines – part one' which have a comparable fluency and ease of movement, the total poem aims for a somewhat different effect. A passage like the following, in which liquid consonants completely determine the sounds of every line except for the first:

A car of cracked photographs
with Rowland
unrolling maps
forever in the flow
of land
and water

or one like the next, an equally athletic passage in which, rather interestingly, the mute consonants have the upper hand:

Valencia
oranges grown
and packed
in the limbo
lines of irrigated
flat fruit blocks

is not really representative of the poem as a whole. But this is another way of saying that 'At Valentines' is something less – correction, something *more* – than a lyric poem.

Taylor has said that the poem is an elegy and memorial to the coastal town of Lorne and to pre-war Australia. We can put this another way and say that the poem is about a pre-Americanised Australia.

Taylor begins the poem with a leisurely evocation of his grandparents' shed at Lorne, and not for one moment does he allow us to forget the frugality of his remembered world. His pre-war Australia is a model community in which people go about

saving the old
papers to do
good for someone

as a matter of course. The Depression ensured that life could not be conducted in any other way.

His Australia is also a more parochial country than the one we have come to know. Because it is still undeveloped, it possesses many of those things which distinguish one locality from another and

endow each with a sense of place. In the coming Australia, the Australia of the post-War years, the mania for development will have some extreme manifestations:

'Cleared the place
up'
was the phrase
in that shire
for
outdoor
articles
such
as
trees and
mountains.

Taylor thinks like a cultural anthropologist. He takes a particular interest in the way that things, especially utensils and other artefacts, can be made to illuminate a particular way of life. At its core, the poetry of 'At Valentines' attempts to invest these remembered things with some sort of physical presence. Hence the emphatic repetitions:

There were bottles
at Alison's,
there were bottles
in the sand,
there were bottles
in sacks,
there were bottles
in sugar bags,
there were bottles
a ha'penny each
in oil drums
cut to stand
for rubbish
for sandwiches
for paper.

And hence, too, the vaguely liturgical quality of a passage like the following, in which common things are itemised as if they were sacred objects:

A car of rope,
canvas,
an army
greatcoat of
Nineteen Eighteen
recalled at sea
from France.
A car of spades,
of Plumb axes
locked like watches
in leather pouches.
A car of small bottles
of oil and kerosene...

Given his emphasis on the particularity and the uniqueness of things, it is not surprising that Taylor is very sparing in his use of simile and metaphor. The words *like* and *as* occur just six times in 'At Valentines' – and this in a poem which runs to seventeen pages.

Taylor's preferred figure of speech is, of course, the cumulation or list. 'Creek names', one of his later poems, argues that the list is the most appropriate response to Australia, for it most accurately reflects the way in which we experience the dispersed quality of the environment:

I won't spin it out
or try again for
Zen cleverness in
Australia,
just list those
next three
creek names
that hit me,
physically, as we drove
the Nissan
on to Foster...

The three names turn out to be Old Hat, Dead Horse and Poor Fellow Me. As Taylor's tone implies, they're unremarkable but for the fact that the creeks they designate flow through "miles of bright green / dairy farms".

Taylor thinks that we need to rediscover the natural world. In the 1970s this belief would lead him to produce a series of television documentaries devoted to natural history in which he collaborated with the painter, John Olsen, and the naturalist, Douglas Dorward. But before this series was conceived Taylor embodied his personal rediscovery of nature in at least one poem. That is 'Pictures from the sea', a long poem he wrote at some point in 1969.

In comparison with 'At Valentines', 'Pictures from the sea' is notably more energetic, for it is studded with descriptive passages in which details are restlessly piled on top of each other. Somewhat like the waves of the ocean washing ashore their cargo of seaweed and broken shells, each incoming line deposits a further object for our attention:

sliding, flopping, flippering,
whipping, tumbling, pup-crushing seals
beyond the clubbing women,

over a litter of bleached seal skeletons,
fan-shaped scapulae,
curved rib-bones left in a play
of pups,
white cotton-reels of broken back-bones,
moulted fur, dried placenta,
opercula
and the worm-eaten holdfasts of seaweed.

These energetic lines are also more colorful than 'At Valentines', which could have been tinted in sepia. Although Taylor is not a notably visual poet, here and there in 'Pictures from the sea' we find him coining images of exceptional vividness. No reader of the poem is likely to forget the image of a hooked shark as

white sheets
shaken under water

or that moment when a seal lifts one flipper and immediately turns into "a tilting sail-plane".

'Pictures from the sea' is not sentimental about nature. At no point does Taylor gloss over the fact that various creatures prey on each other in order to survive. As he acknowledges in the opening movement of the poem, the food chains they establish "end with the/names of fishing boats/on wharf timbers."

"Taylor is not as widely known as he should be."

Taylor is not as widely known as he should be. To a large extent, he owes whatever reputation he possesses to the enthusiasm of Robert Kenny, who selected and edited his first full-length volume, *At Valentines* in 1975, and published his volume of selected poems, *A Secret Australia*, under the Rigmarole imprint in 1985.

In the essay which forms a postscript or appendix to the latter volume, Kenny makes it clear that he regards Taylor's poetry as above all authentic, for its lines attend to just those things about Australia which other writers have glossed over or ignored. Kenny goes on to suggest that these neglected things even include the color to be found on the furniture in repatriation homes for ex-servicemen:

Death in a secret Australia
of dark-green paint,
scrubbed floors,
shaved heads and sunlight...

Taylor's vehicle for these observations about Australia is the figure of Maurie, who occurs in at least four of his poems. One such poem, which was actually written while Taylor was in America in 1966, momentarily accommodates the figure of Whitman

standing in chains
on the top of a loaded truck.

His beard, we are told, is as black as diesel smoke.

As the poem is largely concerned with the end of the American Dream, Whitman's entry is appropriate. And doubly so when we recall the role he played in our culture in the late nineteenth century.

If Taylor knows his hometown as well as his work would suggest, it is likely that he has long been familiar with the laudatory articles 'Tom Touchstone' wrote about Whitman in the Ballarat *Courier*. Put simply, the chances are that his American education began here, in Australia.

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Gary Catalano's most recent book of poetry The Empire of Grass *(UQP) was joint winner of the 1992 Grace Lever Prize.*

books

An Encyclopaedic Companion

Kenneth S. Goldstein

Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (eds.): *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* (Oxford University Press, $49.95).

Despite several shortcomings and faults, this volume is an important addition to any serious collection of Australian folklore research tools. Because of the likelihood its inane title may discourage potential readers from purchasing it, I thought it important to begin this review by immediately stating my overall evaluation of this work. Titles, whether or not we like it, establish a direction of thought, a feeling for the subject, a condition for judging what one is likely to find beyond those few words. Oxford's 'companion' series, and its implied use for bedside or pastime reading by non-critical, popular audiences, *should* have 'fluffy' titles. And perhaps there *should* be included in such a series a volume of decontextualised songs, ballads, recitations, yarns, legends and the like, but the volume reviewed here deserves better treatment. Why not *The Oxford Dictionary of Australian Folklore*, or perhaps even *The Oxford Encyclopaedia*...? Its present title demeans the book's importance and trivialises its content and, though one can understand its use by OUP to maximise profits like any other commercial publishing house in the guise of an academic press, folklorists should be offended for having to rationalise passive acceptance of the situation by its editors for allowing themselves to be manipulated in such a manner.

The work itself includes both short and long entries of the type one finds in scholarly dictionaries or encyclopaedias. Essays include: (1) definitions and a survey of the work done on various folklore and folklife genres (e.g., songs, music, dance, legends, bush recitations, vernacular architecture, quilts, etc.); (2) institutions, organisations, and publications that deal with folklore and folklife in one or more ways; (3) cultural or ethnic groups and their folklife (e.g., occupational groups, children, Greek-Australians, German-Australians, Aboriginals, etc.); (4) folklore and legendary characters and motifs (e.g., bushrangers, Crooked Mick, bunyip, etc.); (5) folklore and folklife scholarly and interdisciplinary issues and concerns, including theory and history (e.g., The Australian Legend, folklore and popular culture, narrative literature and folklore, etc.); and (6) biographical entries on folklorists, collectors, performers and other key individuals involved with Australian folklore and other folk cultural studies. For some of the above entries further readings and relevant sources and indicated "within the constraints of space".

As with most works of this kind one of the problems has to do with coverage. For each of the essay groups indicated above, what is to be included and what are the principles for exclusion? In their prefatory statement the editors largely avoid the issue while indicating that:

> While it is not the purpose of this Companion to provide even a representative sampling of the diversity of Australian folklore – if such were possible – it does attempt to draw together the various threads of what is known and to present these to the reader in an informed and accessible manner. As well, it tracks the history of the development of folklore studies in this country, identifying significant individuals, institutions, events and movements that have both shaped and been shaped by involvement – whether scholarly, performing, conserving, or simply consuming – with the broad field or Australian folklore.

Though a great deal is covered by the editors and their selected essayists, much is also omitted. How was it decided which folklorists, institutions, or per-

formers to include or to honor with entries consisting of more than simply a name? I could not find, for example, even a cursory reference to Jeff Way, or his short-lived *Speewah*, published in 1955 and probably the first journal of Australian folklore. Why include notes on Simon McDonald and Sally Sloane, but not on the equally deserving Harry Cotter or Ina Popplewell, among many traditional or source singers; and, among numerous revival singers, why include essays on the well-deserving and talented Phyl Lobl and Declan Affley, but not on Cathy O'Sullivan or Martin Wyndham-Read?

Then, too, how can this volume claim to contribute to having "tracked the history of the development of folklore studies" in Australia when the notes on important figures in the movement are mainly bio-bibliographical, with little or no mention made of the effect upon them of – or their contributions to – the general intellectual, cultural and political milieu and fervor of their times?

Other problems to be found in using the vast amount of information found in its many essays have to do with the lack of adequate or proper cross-referencing. Notable examples of this lack of adequate cross-referencing are to be found in the case of several of the oral genres of folklore. Though extended descriptive and theoretical commentary on *yarns* can be found separately under the two headings 'Folk tales' and 'Narrative Literature', there is no separate entry for 'Yarns' that can lead a researcher to either or both of those essays. Similarly, though there is a brilliant extended essay by Keith McKenry on *recitations* under the title 'Folk poetry and recitation', there is no separate listing or article on 'recitation', *per se*, that will lead you back to the heading under folk poetry. This and similar faults can be easily corrected in future editions of this volume by using computers to create an index of every reference to every term, and then either publishing that index or establishing full, alphabetically ordered cross-references based on that index.

One final, and easily correctable, fault of this work lies in the information, or lack of it, concerning the authorship of the various essays to be found in its 381 pages. Though most of its brilliant extended essays on various topics are followed by an author's name, most of its shorter general essays, biographical notes and genre references are not. A large number of the essays are the work of one or the other of the two editors, with an additional fair number having been authored by John S. Ryan. But who wrote the rest? Was it a team effort of the editors, or was there an unidentified general editorial staff that individually or group authored the remainder? Or did some of the authors, well known in their own right, request anonymity for their contributions? While we can recognise the names of some of Australia's leading folklorists appended to various essays, e.g., Edgar Waters, Shirley Andrews, Anna Chatzinikolaou, Stathis Gauntlett, etc., what of other equally important and productive folklorists like June Factor, Hugh Anderson, Ron Edwards, John Meredith, Bill Scott, etc.? All or most of these probably were asked to contribute essays, and a number of them (not all) refused to do so on the grounds that as professional writers they should not be expected to contribute their efforts gratis. A work of Australian scholarship that might have been even better was partially impoverished for the sake of what probably amounted at the most to only a few thousand dollars. In America and in many other countries, authors of scholarly essays in anthologies, encyclopaedias and dictionaries are paid for their contributions either a flat sum or by the word. Surely one of the largest publishers in the world could have found an equal or equitable formula for paying the contributing authors to this work.

The editors of this mostly excellent volume are to be congratulated on their achievement. Readers are recommended to read it straight through at least once to familiarise them with its contents, and then to refer to it as a reference tool as frequently as needed to answer specific questions.

Kenneth S. Goldstein is Professor Emeritus and former Chair of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He is a past President of The American Folklore Society and is best known internationally for his numerous articles on folksong and fieldwork, for his often translated book, A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore, *and for his ground-breaking work on monologues and recitations on three continents.*

Eco-Fundamentalism

Paul Carter

Stephen J. Pyne: *Burning Bush; A Fire History of Australia* (Allen & Unwin, $19.95).

Pyne's thesis is simply stated. Fire has uniquely characterised Australia's natural and human history. After the break-up of Gondwana the land mass that became Australia suffered a combination of climatic and tectonic upheavals that led to a flora dominated by sclerophylls. According to Pyne, "A remarkable reciprocity developed between sclerophyll forest and fire", with the long-term result that, as Pyne puts it, "The Universal Australian became the archetypal fire coloniser of Australia".

The reciprocity between 'fire continent' and its

distinctive life forms became even more intense with the arrival of the Aboriginals who rapidly developed into 'firestick farmers': "With uncanny mimicry, the genus Homo recapitulated the experience of the genus Eucalyptus." In Pyne's thesis, the Europeans successfully invaded Australia, wresting it from Aboriginal hands because they possessed greater fire-making capabilities. Or, as Pyne says, "the Aborigine had forged, as had the eucalypt before him, a Faustian bargain with fire...the society that lived by firestick could also die by it. A landscape shaped by fire could be seized by more powerful fire".

The more powerful fire of the Europeans, variously employed to clear the way for the sheep, cattle, for mining and even the pleasures of the hunt, also brought with it a 'Faustian bargain', of course, as it threatened to engulf the very pastoral culture whose possibility it accelerated in so demonic a fashion. Fire regenerated, but it also destroyed: a paradox which, as Pyne shows in the least hyperbolic section of his history, runs like a red thread though the history of Australian forestry and forest fire management. Different states responded differently to what eventually came to be defined as the issue of 'fire protection'.

After the Second World War "European Australia became a New Australia", the "ancient Australian stratagem" of "burning off" yielding to a view of fire as a most destructive enemy to be suppressed at all costs. Or almost all costs: for in the last twenty years, as we know, the debate over appropriate forest fire practice has once more, as Pyne no doubt says somewhere, flared up.

Pyne's is a book of considerable erudition, a reliable guide to the cultural and environmental history of fire in Australia especially in the post-1788 period, although its major focus is on the twentieth century. What is rather more questionable is Pyne's claim that 'fire history' offers a different kind of historical understanding, the result of synthesising data drawn from the natural and environmental sciences with evidence derived from more orthodox historical sources.

No argument is offered in defence of this claim. Accordingly it is hard to see why an environmental history of Australian culture from the point of view of fire and its management differs in kind from one narrated from the point of view of earth, water or even air. Pyne may feel that fire is a kind of meta-element synthesising the other elements – thus justifying his claim to write a kind of meta-history. But this is at best implied rather than stated.

What is clear, though, is that Pyne is on his own admission the scholarly equivalent of a pyrophiliac. He not only seeks to write a cultural history of fire but to imitate the character of fire itself: as flames leap from tree top to tree top, so he leaps from concept to concept, igniting each with a variety of rhetorical tricks designed to make them come alive and blaze in the night of the reader's imagination.

His wildfire prose is occasionally startling (it never warms); usually one wishes it had been tamed and hearthed. But it is not merely a personal quirk: the style Pyne adopts is one that is commonplace among North American environmental writers and which involves, in essence, anthropomorphising the evolutionary principle of the survival of the fittest and presenting it as a kind of Wagnerian drama played out in the key of Walt Disney.

"What is clear, though, is that Pyne is on his own admission the scholarly equivalent of a pyrophiliac."

Admittedly the classic doctrine of survival of the fittest has taken an ecological turn: hence Pyne's insistence on symbiotic 'reciprocity', his stress on feedback mechanisms. But as a historical model it remains, even when lent a cast of Faustian and Promethean *dei ex machina* to dramatise local vicissitudes and reverses, essentially determinist and simplistic: *Homo* recapitulates eucalyptus just as, we are told, Australian fire history ultimately recapitulates and focuses world fire history.

Pyne may allude in passing to Gaston Bachelard's profoundly poetic meditations on the human meaning of fire but his own writing derives from a different source: that of product promotion. His style mixes Anglo-Saxon directness with a pseudo-Miltonic weakness for incantatory Latinisms. The mannerist energy necessary to yoke these different linguistic registers together is intended to express the visionary urgency of the author's purpose.

Thus Pyne writes, "As Pleistocene inflected into Holocene, Eucalyptus was primed for a biological explosion". With its banal telescoping of time, its mistaking of an adventitious pun for a genuinely illuminating metaphor and its mild mystification of scientific names, this is advertising copy, not well-imagined history.

It is indeed Pyne's essentialism that is most unconvincing: for hand in hand with his elevation of fire to the status of historical explanation goes a commitment to the uniqueness of the Australian spirit. As he concludes, "There was Australia; there was the bush – burning, oracular, unconsumed".

Ultimately Pyne's style is evangelical, his historical position eschatological.

The connection between the banalisation of doctrine favored by fundamentalists of all religious persuasions and the rhetorical devices of mass advertising deserves more attention. In *Burning Bush* it results in a kind of eco-fundamentalism that is in the end deeply disturbing; for to hand back historical agency to fire is, to borrow his own phrase, to recapitulate some of the most powerful myths of the Western imagination.

Pyne's advocacy of fire may have a childlike freshness about it but at the end of a century of war by fire it seems to me more like irresponsibility; certainly a fire history that had any explanatory value for our times would require a much fuller and more critical account of the psychology, technology and, indeed, the language of fire than Pyne is able to offer.

In demonstrating both panoramically and with an excellent eye for detail the significance of environmental factors in shaping a particular human history, *Burning Bush* deserves praise. Its claim to offer a new kind of historical understanding cannot, however, be sustained.

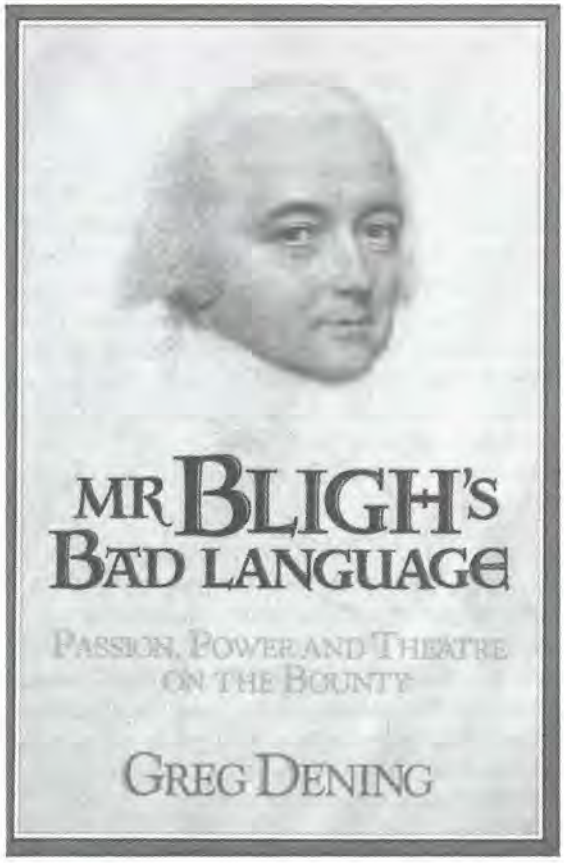
Paul Carter is the author of The Road to Botany Bay.

Mr Dening's New History

David Goodman

Greg Dening: *Mr Bligh's Bad Language – Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge University Press, $49.95).

Greg Dening's latest book offers a reinterpretation of the story of Bligh and the mutiny on the *Bounty*. Bligh, he argues, far from being a tyrannical and especially violent captain, flogged fewer of his crew than any other captain who came into the Pacific in the eighteenth century. When contemporaries complained of Bligh, it was not his violence but his language, his abusive and intemperate speech, his uncontrollable rages, to which they objected. But 'bad language', Dening argues, was more than this. It was a language of ambiguity, which frustrated the usual expectations of authority and command, dangerously mixed the public and impersonal character of discipline with personal passion. In a series of arguments over rations, in interference with sailors' accustomed rituals such as 'crossing the line' ceremonies, in acting as his own ship's purser, Bligh crossed accustomed boundaries, personalised his authority. He "blurred the public and private in his relations with others, and was in peril in this". Dening's mutineers are conservative rebels, concerned about the transgression of an established moral economy, rather than revolutionaries – and in that they have much in common with the eighteenth century English protesters at home we are familiar with from the work of E. P. Thompson and others. Historians and popular memory alike, though, have been more accepting of the violent Bligh of legend, Dening argues, because "we cope more easily with a tyranny that is distanced from our everyday lives by being extravagantly violent"; we are "uncomfortable with mutinies or revolutions



or even social changes that come by ambivalences" for we "do not want our institutions to be so fragile or nurturing of evil so banal."

So this is a revisionist history. The publisher's publicity and some of the newspaper reviews dwelt primarily on this revision. But a reader so prepared may find the book a little puzzling. These arguments are presented, confidently but almost summarily, early on. The book is much more than that. It is the

product of twenty years or so of research and teaching of the *Bounty* story. "I feel sad now", Dening notes in the Acknowledgments, "...that my long voyage with the *Bounty* is nearing its end." Books long in coming perhaps often have the quality that this one has, of being at once almost overwhelming in the depth and breadth of scholarship lavished on the topic at hand, and then, almost because of that, having a still open and almost unfinished quality to them. It is Dening's interpretative self-consciousness and empirical conscientiousness that persuade us in the end that there is still much to be said about the *Bounty*, many more revisions in store. And that, I'm sure, is how he wants it. This is no last word, no final tomb for Bligh and the mutineers.

Part of this feeling of the book opening out into something much bigger comes from the fact that it is not only a history of the *Bounty* and its voyage, but a history, parallel and episodic, of the historical consciousness that the *Bounty* has shaped and been shaped by. Dening has always been interested in the process of history making, in the politics and pragmatics of the ways in which stories about the past are constructed, told and remembered. The book opens with the trials and hangings of some of the mutineers – events which are read as crucial history-making exercises, retelling the *Bounty* story in institutionally sanctioned terms, giving the story a happy ending. There are sections along the way about the publications that arose from the affair, about the stage plays and pantomimes in London, about the museums, the Hollywood films, about the memories and preserved artefacts in Tahiti. Each of these sections is carefully contextualised in the history of its form. In order to understand the stage representations, we need to understand something of eighteenth-century theatre; in order to understand Marlon Brando's portrayal of Fletcher Christian, we need to know something of his career and of the Hollywood of the time. Dening's book at times threatens to become a series of spiralling narratives decentring the original story into a series of diverse and complex contexts.

But the distinctive ambition of Dening's approach, consistent throughout his career as a Pacific historian, is the ambition to write of both sides of the frontier, to try to see the imperial voyaging of the British from both sides of the beach. Some of this must be speculative, some of it controversial, but Dening has an argument about the mythic structures within which Tahitians might have comprehended the new arrivals, as well as a warning against assuming that Tahitian relations to their myths must be more literal than ours: "What always embarrasses the stranger's effort to understand the native is the stranger's insistence that the native perceptions should be literal, while the stranger's own perceptions are allowed to be metaphoric. So the Tahitian natives' supposed belief that the European strangers were gods 'from beyond the sky' is seen as a belief of literal equivalence between man and god, easily dispelled by the very ordinary behaviour of lusty, cantankerous seamen." There is a postcolonial controversy referred to in those remarks, as readers of Gananath Obeysekere's recent *Apotheosis of Captain Cook* will know.

One of the great strengths of Dening's project is its anthropologising of the British as well as its historicising of the indigenous Pacific peoples. In this and in his last book, Dening shows in some detail the strangeness of British customs, the complex, ritual-based and pre-modern nature of the eighteenth-century British polity. This anthropology of the British is probably for Anglo readers the most powerful of the relativising strategies pursued through the book. "If young George III of England needed to wear a crown and to sit on the Coronation Stone of Scotland and Ireland in order to be King in 1760, then a twelve-year-old Pomare of Tahiti needed to wear the *Maro ura* to be *ari'i nui*, chief, in 1791, and to stand on the robing stone of his *marae*, that sacred preserve of his titles." The British are robbed of the modern rationality, exposed as traditional and symbol-governed people.

The story of the *Bounty* is a violent one. Dening's book, reflecting the extant records perhaps, devotes considerably more space to the careful measuring of and reflection upon the violence within the navy as an institution, than it does to the violence the British inflicted upon the indigenous populations of the islands. But the book does carefully and unflinchingly document 'civilised' British violence, the approximately 139 indigenous people who were killed by the men of the *Bounty*. From the killings on Tubuai, to the "brutality towards women" on Tahiti, to the horror of the violent society created by the mutineers on Pitcairn, where the abducted Tahitian men were "flogged, hung up in irons, tortured with salt poured on their wounds", the men of the *Bounty* left a trail of death and destruction in their wake. By the end, I was more concerned by and interested in this violence than in that between ships' captains and their men, and I wanted the book to tell me more, to devote more of its considerable reflective capacity to that issue. As a study of violent British men, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* misses some opportunities. We see them sailing to Tahiti to "collect meat and women", meet them "plundering for wives, burning houses, shooting and bayoneting those that resisted." These were not just

'strangers' to the islands, British strangers interacting with Tahitians, they were also men, with a certain understanding of their masculinity and its needs, understandings which are rarely problematised here. The world of the women on Pitcairn, their shaping of the society there, is evoked to the extent possible.

"For Dening, cultural self-consciousness, awareness of the arbitrariness of one's own ways and the existence of other modes is the civilising consciousness."

But the island women generally are seen – perhaps inevitably, because of the lack of information in their own voices – as objects of trade or desire, but seldom as agents themselves.

But in the end, that violence is not the key object of Dening's concern. Or rather, he believes that the violence was the symptom of a cultural blinkeredness that was itself the root of the problem. This is a polemical, missionary book, and its doctrine is cultural relativism. For Dening, cultural self-consciousness, awareness of the arbitrariness of one's own ways and the existence of other modes is the civilising consciousness. The brief Epilogue to the book takes up the theatrical word 'claptrap' – the gestures or poses by which an actor drew attention "away from the part being acted to the acting of the part". The self-consciousness of claptrap, that drawing attention to the codes and away from the messages, that glimpse of the relativeness and arbitrariness of human constructs, Dening argues, "liberates us". "I think", he concludes, "that if there had been more claptrap in the *theatrum mundi* of the Pacific there would have been less blood. I think that if Bligh had had a better sense of claptrap, he would not have had a mutiny." This is a book eloquently written out of that faith.

David Goodman teaches Australian Studies and history at the University of Melbourne.

Turning Away from Disaster

Stephen J. Williams

Gary Dunne: *Shadows on the Dance Floor* (Blackwattle Press, PO Box 4, Leichhardt, NSW 2040, $11.95)

Dennis Altman: *The Comfort of Men* (William Heinemann, Australia, $19.95).

Gary Dunne opens his very short novel about gay life in Sydney, *Shadows on the Dance Floor*, by quoting the familiar lines of W. H. Auden's poem 'Musée de Beaux Arts', "how everything turns away/Quite leisurely from the disaster," and manages in that way to begin his writing at the fork of an ambivalence in people's reactions to the disaster of AIDS. "Someone should write a story about me," the central character of the novel says. "I lead a full and interesting life and people need positive role models these days."

Australians are taking a long time to develop an identifiably gay writing, and particularly a gay writing about AIDS. There has not seemed to be as much as one would expect. Both these books, therefore, were welcome.

Dunne has a breezy, straightforward way of writing. I only wish there was more of it, and that *Shadows on the Dance Floor* could have more effectively broken away from the constraints of the vignette form in which its chapters were written (for magazines and newspapers).

Like most AIDS stories, Dunne's novel shows how someone dies. His cast of characters gather for a dinner party to plan their contribution to the Mardi Gras parade, and it is immediately clear that no disaster will be allowed to get in the way of the great party. Synchronised swimming is suggested as a theme:

> "In short," he concluded with a flourish, "we'll be totally covered from neck to knee. On account of the fact that none of us has fabulous legs.
>
> "Nothing wrong with our legs," said Nigel, wiggling his shoulders like a washing machine agitator. "Tim's got great legs. For that matter, so have I. Tim and I work out three nights a week. Anyway, neck to knee sounds totally tacky. OK for some, I guess, but I'm planning to wear a simple but bold pair of white Y-fronts in the parade which will save having to change for the dance party."
>
> "Where will you keep your money and ticket?"

asked Lil, a practical woman in all matters except romance.

He replied that it was secret. Pointy doubted this, implying that a location couldn't be secret if half of Sydney had already been there.

It is a landslide of innuendo. But Dunne is also very adept at handling the tension of humor released in serious circumstances. When one HIV-positive man is found dead in his apartment, having killed himself, friends are left to think of reasons, while a policewoman listens:

> "He was a neurotic bitch long before AIDS happened...Of course he got depressed from time to time," said Pointy. "You do when you've got the lurgi...His ex, John died about three months ago. They'd stayed good friends for years after separating. I don't know why, couldn't stand him myself. She-whose-knuckles-drag we used to call him. Big butch thing she was, and as plain as a Milk Arrowroot biscuit. They looked after each other. Mainly it was Matt looking after him because John was pretty sick on and off...who doesn't get depressed? I think it's gutless, giving up."

Dunne shows the whole range of emotional and practical problems faced by people affected by the virus, and frames his snapshots of these problems carefully against the backdrop of a city preparing to party. "It was the night before Mardi Gras and Mr Pointy Head was still saying no. 'I don't give a fuck,' he said, 'I simply refuse to go in a wheel chair. And don't feed me some bullshit line about confronting people's prejudice towards the handicapped. I'm not interested.'"

Shadows on the Dance Floor is a simple, moving, funny book.

Dennis Altman's *The Company of Men* is the sprawling story of half a dozen lives that span decades of change, burgeoning sexual freedom, and great political struggles. It records their sexual preferences, changes of preference, friendships, successes and failures in love and in bed. And there is a liberal sprinkling of sex scenes. "I have never known how to write about sex, now that it has become a de rigeur set piece in modern novels," Steven, the fictive author, tells us on page 168, 168 pages too late, and as if we hadn't already guessed.

The novel is an uneasy settlement of how the central character's life is *told* and how it is *written* after it is told. "But only if you tell me more about your life...I want to be like King Shahryar sitting at the feet of Scheherazade and listening to her stories," we hear at the end of the first chapter, and only a page after suffering this faintly ridiculous sentence:

> It would take another volume to detail the success of the Independists, and their story goes far beyond the limits of this one: their first two members of State Parliament; their success in holding the balance of power within the state at the next election and the very real prospect that they would repeat this in the Federal Senate; the two referenda campaigns, in the second of which sixty-three per cent of Tasmanians voted for independence; the protracted negotiations with Canberra and the brief period of car-bombings when these seemed stalled; the threats to invoke the United Nations and the visit of Eric van Gelder to the International Anticolonial Rally in Prague.

A few car bombings might have made the whole thing more exciting. Instead, we sit on the fence between speech and writing, between imagined and real pasts and the present, where the action is for the post-modern novelist.

I kept thinking: weren't the 1960s and 1970s interesting enough as they actually happened, or even as someone imagined they happened? Apparently not. Altman's readers are feasted on a counterfeit past – the monster sub-plot from the black lagoon – which, I think despite itself, poses some worthwhile questions about the relationship between popular movements and minorities.

Altman's problem, as a novelist, is not his imagination, but what he has chosen to waste it on. After a couple of hundred pages of sweaty, arduous, cultural excavation of what the publisher's press release calls "the common roots of feminism and gay liberation," Altman appears to have forgotten that his characters might need credible, complex inner lives if we are to care what happens to them.

In the margins of *The Comfort of Men*, or so it seems, James is dying of AIDS. It is surprising to realise, by the end, how little one knows about him and his relationship with Steven, how atrophied all the characters are, and not always by Altman's avoidance of their inner lives but by the blandness of the language used to depict them. When James dies, off stage – as though this moment were obscene – I wondered who is turning away from disaster now.

Stephen J. Williams is a writer and editor.

History, Imagination and Little Red Riding Hood

Mark Roberts

Liam Davison: *Soundings* (University of Queensland Press, $16.95).
Carmel Bird: *The Common Rat* (McPhee Gribble, $14.95).

From the earliest days of white settlement in Australia writers and artists have struggled to come to terms with what they often saw as an alien landscape. At first many attempted to make the Australian landscape fit their preconceived European concepts. By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, some were beginning to accept the differences between Australia and England and to try and capture these differences in what was still a very European cultural framework.

In common with many post-colonial literatures, Australian writing in the closing years of the twentieth century remains concerned with this search for a recognisable cultural identity. Liam Davison's third book, *Soundings*, clearly belongs to such a tradition. Davison's novel is an ambitious examination of the way in which the Westernport area of Victoria has been perceived by Europeans over the last two centuries. Davison also makes the important step, late in the novel, of acknowledging the cultural importance of the land to the Aboriginal people and contrasting it to the way in which land has been viewed by white settlers.

At the centre of the novel is Jack Cameron, a photographer with the Ministry of Lands whose job it is to photograph the landscape for the surveyors to examine. Cameron leaves his job and rents a large house on the Peninsula between Port Phillip and Westernport Bays for six months while the owner, an antique-book dealer and his family, is in Europe. Almost at once Cameron becomes obsessed with the landscape around Westernport Bay and, in particular, with the remains of the swamplands around Koo-Wee-Rup. This obsession also increasingly involves Anna Jasper, the daughter of Theodore Drostre, the original owner of the house. Anna married a swamp-channel digger in the early days of the draining of the swampland and left the family mansion to live in a mud hut in the middle of the swamp.

As his obsession grows, Cameron finds himself increasingly cut off from the outside world. He immerses himself in the life of the long-dead Anna Jasper and senses her coming alive around him. He sets out to 'find' her, endlessly photographing the swamp and travelling along the drainage channels into the heart of the remaining swampland.

Intertwined with the story of Cameron's obsession are a number of other narratives concerning particular periods of Westernport's history which Davison has skilfully weaved through the main narrative. They range from the early sealing settlements, the arrival of the French warship, *de l'Astrolabe*, and the subsequent French scientific observation of the area, to the original unsuccessful official English settlement and Hovell's puzzlement over the bay which bore no resemblance to the area he and Hume had earlier travelled overland to find, as well as Strzelecki's overland journey from the Alps to Westernport and, finally, the draining of the swampland and the farming settlements at Koo-Wee-Rup.

At the beginning of the novel each of these narratives appears separate, linked only by their common location. As the novel progresses, however, the narratives seem to converge. At the centre of this process are the mudswamps. The swamps are a barrier, drawing people in while the mud slowly drags them under. The shape of the shoreline is constantly changing, as mudflats form overnight only to suddenly disappear, making carefully drawn charts useless in an instant.

As Cameron is drawn deeper and deeper into the mud he finds himself suddenly seeing incidents from the swamp's history unfold for an instant. He sees a child running towards a drainage channel, a party of French sailors dragging a boat through the mud and a convict being whipped. Finally, when these images appear on his negatives, he realises that his sense of reality, like the mudflats, is beginning to shift.

Soundings is an ambitious novel that, overall, Davison handles successfully. There were only two or three brief occasions when I felt Davison lost control of the narratives, but given the complexity of the novel's structure such lapses were perhaps almost inevitable. Overall, however, the unconventional structure works extremely well. As in his previous work, Davison's use of language is almost poetic in its intensity; the result being that it is difficult to reconcile the overall impact of *Soundings* with the fact that it is only 216 pages long. With this novel Davison has firmly established his reputation as an impressive and imaginative writer.

The obvious structure of *Soundings* contrasts the seemingly random nature of Carmel Bird's collection of short stories and essays *The Common Rat*. In her perhaps appropriately titled introduction

'Asking for Trouble', Bird suggests that this book should be seen as something more than just another collection of short stories:

> I could introduce the whole thing with an essay. People collect your work when you're dead. They find the unpublished manuscripts in filing cabinets and notebooks and the drawers of desks and they make posthumous collections and start off with an essay.

The author, however, is very much alive in *The Common Rat* – although Bird's interest in death, which appears on a number of occasions in her introduction, runs through the entire collection. In fact, had she not already used the title for her first self-published collection, *Births Deaths and Marriages* would have been the perfect title for this collection.

While the combination of essays and short stories may seem an unusual choice, Bird's essays are often easily read as fiction. 'Regular Engagement', for example, an essay on creative writing classes, begins with a detailed description of driving into the city, parking the car and walking to the building where the class is being held. Only gradually do readers become aware they are not reading fiction.

The most important essay in the collection is, however, 'The Red Riding Hood Virus' as it provides the reader with a useful insight into much of Bird's fiction. There has always been an element of the fairy tale in Bird's writing. In this collection 'Coczka' and 'All the Household Linens' are two obvious examples, while in a number of other stories, such as 'Special Connection', 'The Sea is Going to France' and 'Setting Up' there is a simple, sing-song tone that is reminiscent of a fairy tale.

In 'The Red Riding Hood Virus' Bird discusses the attraction young girls in particular have for fairy tales such as Red Riding Hood and Cinderella and points to the obvious sexism that is a part of many traditional fairy tales. While it is not possible to see the stories in *The Common Rat* as ideologically sound fairy tales, it is, I believe, possible to see in them Bird's reaction against the traditional stories that are many children's first introduction to fiction.

While *The Common Rat* is not as important as the author's introduction might suggest, there are some fine stories in the collection and the combination of essays and short stories does provide the reader with unexpected insights into Carmel Bird's fiction.

Mark Roberts is a Sydney-based writer and critic. He is editor of P76 *magazine and is currently doing postgraduate studies at the University of New South Wales.*

A Legend Well Done

Andrew Moore

Peter Cochrane: *Simpson and the Donkey: the Making of a Legend* (Melbourne University Press, $29.95).

Peter Cochrane's work would be familiar to many *Overland* readers. His first book, *Industrialisation and Dependence*, was a tome of Fitzpatrickesque importance in the field of Australian economic history. His 'Company Time: Management, Ideology and the Labour Process, 1940–1960' in *Labour History* No. 48 [1985] may well be one of Australia's most cited journal articles. So why is an accomplished economic and labour historian interesting himself in donkeys and the life and times of John Simpson Kirkpatrick, water carrier and rescuer of wounded soldiers at Gallipoli in 1915? Surely this is the sort of topic that would be better left to the military history chappies from the Australian Defence Force Academy?

Far from it. Exploring myths and legends is a current preoccupation among Australian historians – Tim Bonyhady's book on Burke and Wills [see *Overland* 127, pp. 78–81] being one example. Yet it should not be forgotten that the subject of myth and legend has interested Australia's historians since Russel Ward. In *Simpson and the Donkey* Cochrane steps up the pace of this inquiry, arguing that understanding the "allegorical riches" and "inner meaning" of the legend may be a means of understanding the symbolisms of a broader national culture.

As this language suggests, the legend of 'The Man with the Donkey' is approached with a quizzical post-modernist eye. Yet theoretical sophistication does not supplant clarity of expression. Here is a *rara avis* – an historian influenced by 'cultural studies' with its search for 'text and sub-text' without the accompanying penchant for obfuscation. Beautifully written, *Simpson and the Donkey* is very much in the mould of another fine book, Sylvia Lawson's *The Archibald Paradox*.

Cochrane also has a most interesting story to tell. It transpires that the geography of Gallipoli was such that when he died in May 1915 Simpson's heroism was known only to a small number of soldiers at Shrapnel Gully. The 'legend' of Simpson owed its origins to the British war machine's insatiable need for cannon fodder, as well as the domestic rancor caused by the conscription referenda in Australia. Invested with an obvious Judaeo-Christian reference point, Simpson and his faithful

'donk' became symbols for selfless patriotism, obedience and submission – as Winston Churchill tellingly put it: "self-surrender". Moreover the legend proved to have a continuing utility. In the 1930s it could be harnessed against the evils of pacifism, in the Cold War it was a weapon against communism and as Vietnam came along it was used to demonstrate a continuing bond of "mateship in action" that was all about defending a democratic heritage, at the very core of which was "a human spirit that the most terrible blows of adversity could not crush"[p. 233].

The point is of course that it was necessary for Simpson to die. The job description of 'martyr' after all depends upon mortality. Equally, he might have held his hand up and shouted 'foul'. In a superb chapter that surveys the historiography of Simpson, Cochrane shows how the unctuous Reverend C. Irving Benson, the first 'biographer', censored the bits of Simpson with which he was uncomfortable. Having determined that he wanted to present the story of Simpson as a Christian tale that would inspire the reading public in the fight against international communism, Benson found that the crucial

"But had he been alive in 1965 he would at least have blown a 'raspberry'..."

letters he obtained from Simpson's family revealed the lad from South Shields to be something of a radical labour man and a cranky bugger at that. The cloying cleric who specialised in unsuccessfully crawling to Prime Minister Menzies for free meals developed a convenient dose of amnesia. The real Simpson was filleted and sanitised. None of his references to Benson's "green and pleasant land" as being "Louse bound" and needing "a good revolution ...that will clear some of these Millionaires and lords and Dukes out of it" [p. 18] would find their way into Benson's parable about an uncomplicated man who loved his country, the empire and his mother.

If Simpson had escaped the carnage it might be overstating the case to argue that he would have thrown his lot in with that small band of diggers like Hugo Throssell VC who declared for socialism. But had he been alive in 1965 he would at least have blown a 'raspberry' in the direction of Benson's *The Man with the Donkey*; *The Good Samaritan of Gallipoli*. Had he seen a truly awful recent play, Richard Beynon's *Simpson J. 202*, which depicted him as a perennially smiling half-wit, Simpson could easily have descended from the audience to attack the director with his fists. As opposed to the pacifist of the legend, the real Jack Simpson Kirkpatrick was not averse to fisticuffs. Working on a coastal trawler before the war he enthusiastically reported to his mother that during a Christmas Eve brawl that left him with one eye closed: "You couldn't see anything for blood and snots flying about until Mates and Engineers came along and threatened to log all hands forward"[p. 15].

This is a satisfying book at a number of levels. The research is most definitely old-fashioned slog rather than 'post-modernist'. Cochrane is assiduous is seeking out 'Simpson-iana': aside from the famous Nolan painting that is reproduced on the book's cover and apart from manuscript references, included are films, photographs, monuments, references in primary school texts and stamps, all of which validates both Cochrane's project and his claim that Simpson was a national icon and part of popular culture. [There is but one reference which I can add. In Roy Slaven and H. G. Nelson's infallible, if eccentric, guide to popular memory, *This Sporting Life; Diary 1992* (Angus and Robertson, 1992), it is claimed that Simpson's donkey died on 5 April 1918. Cochrane's discussion of what happened to 'Murph' [p. 158] does not support this claim. With all due respect to Dr Nelson I feel that Dr Cochrane gets my vote for accuracy.]

Equally impressive are the care and precision with which *Simpson and the Donkey* is crafted. A scholarly postscript explores the differing cadences of the words 'legend' and 'myth'. Elsewhere Cochrane painstakingly discusses the issue of diaries that were rewritten to incorporate Simpson *after* he became a 'legend'. Ion Idriess is apparently one of those who felt the need to spice their war diaries in published form by referring to Simpson and thus bask in the reflected glory of the national hero [p. 46]. The telling of this 'simple story' of Simpson has a way of shedding light in unexpected areas: the extent of the menagerie at Gallipoli or the role of the Red Cross as a vehicle for disseminating ideas, for instance.

Finally, *Simpson and the Donkey* is also a triumph for the research grants scholarship system conducted by the Australian War Memorial. In recessionary times they are a ray of hope, providing sustenance to not just military hagiography, but to disciplined, progressive and illuminating projects such as this book.

Andrew Moore teaches Australian history at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur. He is currently working on a Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement 1788–1975 *and a general text on right-wing politics in Australia.*

Sing Sign

Alex Selenitsch

Richard Kelly Tipping: *The Sydney Morning Volume III* (12 silkscreen prints in a signed edition of 50, in folder and slipcase; Thorny Devil Press, PO Box 123, Wangi Wangi NSW 2267, $440).

'The Sydney Morning'...drop the 'Herald' implied by the *gottische* typeface and the phrase turns back on itself. In *The Sydney Morning*, the newspaper meets the water and also the sky, implied by the Recketts blue of the cover and slipcase. The title announces Richard Kelly Tipping's subject and language in one hit. It points to the public space that signs inhabit and the constant struggle for their ownership, for their control.

Until *Roland Barthes et Fils* stole the word *sign*, it was (and often still is) used to describe something on sticks or on a wall, something like a road sign, a company sign or the 40-miles-to Griffiths-Tea sign. Tipping anthologised such images in his *Signs of Australia*, issued by Penguin in 1982. Signs like these depend on their contexts: Tipping's photographs in *Signs of Australia* give common signs that extra something by including some unexpected aspects of their context. For example, photograph 70 shows a huge billboard with its cartoonish man "looking for the green dot" (the manufacturer's logo). He stares straight – in the photograph, that is – at a set of traffic lights. In photograph 39, a bank of cubicles with T-E-L-E-P-H-O-N-E in large metal letters across them reveals, after a bit of searching, that the telephones have vanished.

Much of Tipping' work in *The Sydney Morning* reverses this method. By manipulating a common sign, the context is re-charged and significantly (no pun intended) altered. AIRPOET (from Volume I) is an oldie but a goldie: here the sign AIRPORT is altered so that its arrow points up into the sky and not as convention would have it, straight ahead. In this new portfolio the method continues. FORM ONE LANE becomes, with the addition of two letters, FORM ONE PLANET. By deletion CROSSING and HUMP become SING and HUM. Both of these otherwise standard road signs completely alter the space they occupy through a shift from mechanical instruction to imaginative provocation.

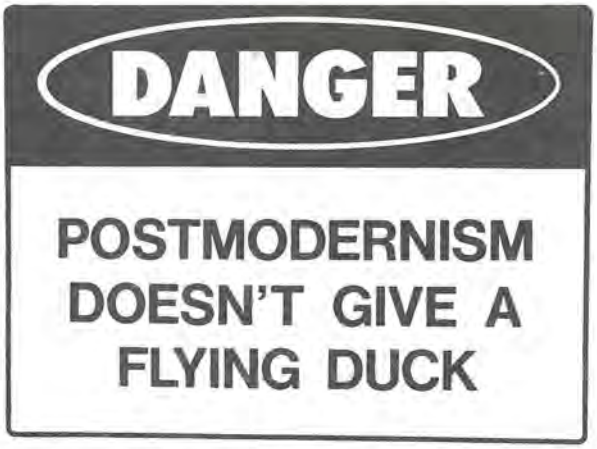
This method of 'spatial adjustment' is present in all volumes of *The Sydney Morning* so far. Volume I (Word Works & Ideagraphics 1967–1988), issued in 1989, is a mixed set of 12 typographic and logographic prints. Volume II (Word Works 1967–1991), issued in 1991, is also a set of prints but is purely typographic. This new collection, Volume III, contains a further twelve images. All are two- or three-color silkscreen prints. It is the best collection so far, with a sure touch to both the ideas and their presentation. Although the silkscreening unifies the set, there are really two sets of prints in this collection: those which are images of real signs installed in real places and those which are signs that can be pinned up to interact with real space.

Twenty years ago, it would have been enough to label these prints as visual or concrete poetry. So much of this work has been put in place over that period that different modes – or spatialities – of this kind of poetry can be clearly identified. One of these is Tipping's. In *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (The University of Chicago Press, 1991), Marjorie Perloff devotes a chapter called 'Signs are Taken for Wonders' to this particular spatial aspect of contemporary media. Being a North American, she relates the literary appropriation of this space to the democratic necessity of connecting art with daily life, that is, with consumerism and corporate identity. This is one possible genealogy. Another might trace back to Mallarmé, who wrote of the newspaper as an innovative literary model. Yet another goes back to tribal religious symbols. The single word manipulated visually and placed in

a public context is common to all of these traditions. But advertising extends it by providing a hothouse of techniques for condensing a message in time by relying on space as the major semantic element.

Indeed, most of Perloff's examples are taken from advertising to complement her limited examples of classic European concrete poems from the 1950s. Tipping's work would have been better support for her arguments. His poems are the best realisation I have seen of Eugen Gomringer's call for "poems...as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs". (The words 'airport' and 'traffic sign' are particularly apt.)

Tipping's achievement is to handle such seductive media images and nimbly sidestep the dangers of parody, where the advertisement and its status quo is extended further than the original could ever demand. It is instructive to note how he does this. In mass media, there is very little 'time' but there is lots of 'space'. This is one thing that the US and AUS have in common – bulk space – and is the reason why an American critique could apply here. This 'space', moreover, is not just volume but is filled with power. Put simply, as messages become briefer, they take up more room. In the workings of this space, in its everyday manipulation of us, there is a



totalitarianism that can be used against itself because of the human presence in all media systems. Graffiti is one manifestation of this unpredictability, another is the high culture borrowing of pop art. But while graffiti may be subversive and pop art celebratory, it isn't poetry unless it is, like Tipping's work, an open conduit to new and unpredictable meanings. Tipping's signs themselves (in contrast to the effort required to ensure their installation) are effortless and the 'message' simple but surprising. Nearly always, his signs ask us to do or imagine something totally different to the expected. Every one of his altered signs suggests a new context – an imaginative one in which the altered not-so-different original sign is remembered for its stupidity. By doing this *and* opening up the imagination rather than restraining it, Tipping shows how one can transform advertising and bureaucratic space into poetry *on its own terms*. He puts the OVID back in OMO (or O MAO as he puts it in an earlier as yet uncollected poem). FORM ONE PLANET!

Alex Selenitsch is a poet and architect. Some of his architectural work appears in Fin de Siecle? and the 21st Century, Architectures of Melbourne *(RMIT, 1993).*

Off the Planet

Joseph Johnson

Colin Duckworth: *Steps to the High Garden* (Calder, $37.50. Available in Australia from Nyroca Press, 3 Evans Street, Burwood, 3125).

Some time after coming in contact with the Creative Force of the Universe in a Coptic monastery in Egypt, Simon Prescott, the hero of this novel, states that "the only work really worth doing is work that enables us humans to evolve into a moral and spiritual species that can be worthy of continuing to exist. Worthy of Jesus, of Mohammed, of the Buddha..." By implication, that, combined with the infighting and bureaucratisation of university life, might be why Colin Duckworth, after a distinguished international career, resigned the Chair of French at the University of Melbourne a few years ago to pursue his own inclinations in literature and the theatre, of which a couple of operas with Michael Easton, and this novel, are early fruits.

Duckworth's prime concern might be the spiritual salvation of mankind, but he is too much the born story-teller to let that spoil a thundering good tale – well, in the first two-thirds of the novel anyway. In this psychic thriller in the postmodern mode the non-stop action ranges from a country house in Healesville, outside Melbourne, where a theology professor is murdered (and Victorian 'social' types lampooned brilliantly), to the cloisters of Cambridge, a ruined castle in the South of France, the Coptic monastery and an international foundation in Geneva. A multi-layered texture is deftly built up as many of the main characters are reincarnations of people involved in an earlier chain of events that led up to the assassination, on Napoleon's orders, of a French *émigré* Count in London in 1815. So the contemporary goodies have plenty

on their plate, working through their karma and trying to make sense of the bewildering events that are battering their lives as the four agents of cosmic evil pursue them with murderous intent. Ironies abound, such as Napoleon come back as a traitorous and bitter English detective, still trying to impose his own kind of order. If you don't believe in out-of-body-experiences, auras and astral travelling your credulity will be strained to breaking point, though the author anticipates your scepticism by quoting Spencer: "There is a principle which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance; that principle is, contempt, prior to investigation."

There is much to savor along the way. Duckworth knows his academics and nails them, including the humorless female power player, though naming a professor Merdrillard is a bit arch, as is calling your copper Sherlock. Still, what can you expect from a Beckett scholar? There is a beguiling double love story, Freyssenet and Min-ha reincarnated as Prescott and Sara, the tenderness and sensuality of which the author handles with surpassing skill. I must confess, however, to being a little startled when the intense affair between Prescott and the pianist Anna – "human warmth and tenderness which neither had experienced before" – was moved to the back burner, and then off the stove altogether.

The four groups trying to capture the Cosmic Force, which has the alarming effect of bringing irresistible harmony and love to those who come in contact with it, are the Vatican, Islam, the Mafia and a shadowy group known as the Square of Eskar. The Vatican doesn't want the Copts to get the credit for it, Islam sees it as yet another Christian plot, the Mafia wants to sell it to the highest bidder and the Square wants to use it to quell all political perturbation. It seems to me somewhat of a shortcoming that Duckworth does not take us inside the mind-sets of these very important players in contemporary history. They operate more as abstract forces in the story rather than as wholly developed entities. It might be self-evident to the author that Catholicism and Islam, for example, are forces for evil but I, for one, require further convincing. Perhaps he thought that development in this direction would compromise the novel as a thriller, but the plot is taut enough to support a lot more exploration of the dynamic interplay within and between these forces, particularly at the high level at which Duckworth can examine such matters, as evidenced by his article 'Religion and World Conflict' in the Spring 1991 issue of *Overland*.

Instead, there is a lot of speculation in the later parts of the novel among the characters ranged on the side of goodness as to how the world might be saved. It would seem to be the author's view that this is no longer possible – the ring of evil around the earth has all but closed – but that the attempt it absolutely essential to delay global destruction while we work out a way of colonising another planet with superior human beings, or agapons, who have transcended what has become the most destructive part of the genetic legacy, the aggressive use of intelligence. Perhaps only an international academic could propose that setting up a Swiss foundation might help achieve this end, though if he had had his heart in it he would not have allowed the terrorists to blow it up and kill Prescott, Sara and her children. The novel ends with the hero and heroine in bliss in the "High Garden", with earthlings facing very bleak prospects.

So what does it all add up to? Well, I think that these days novelists should be canny enough to leave the salvation of the world to environmentalists, New Age deists and the like – that such types should people a novel rather than colonise it. (See Ambrose Pratt's *Lift up your Eyes* [1939] as an earlier poignant example of the salvation novel – "The discipline of Buddha, the discipline of Christ. The preservation, the very salvation of civilisation demands the exercise of a sublime unselfishness.") The world has never been short of people who have the answers. But story-tellers who can have you sitting on the edge of your seat, who can recreate love, who can take an almighty bite out of human vanity – these are not found in every dustbin. And I suspect that Samuel Beckett would agree with me.

Joseph Johnson is a Melbourne novelist and historian. His novel A Low Breed *won a National Book Council Award for Australian Literature. He is currently writing a history of the Yorick and Savage clubs.*

Perseverance Pays

Michael Dugan

Louise Craig (ed.): *Perseverance Poets' Collection 1991–1992* (Perseverance Poets, PO Box 24, Clifton Hill, 3068, $12.75).

The Perseverance Hotel, in Melbourne's Brunswick Street, has been the venue for weekly poetry readings for the past couple of years. An invited reader is featured and reads for 20 minutes to half an hour. The rest of the Saturday afternoon is taken up with short readings from the floor. The Saturday afternoons are consistently well attended.

Here I must confess a personal weakness. Two

years of hosting a weekly poetry reading killed my enjoyment of hearing poetry read aloud. Consequently I am pleased to see the Perseverance Poets in print, a medium in which I am likely to enjoy them more.

The collection contains work by nearly 70 poets made up of featured readers and some readers from the floor. They range from well-known Melbourne poets such as Shelton Lea, John Forbes, Alan Wearne and Barbara Giles, to others who "go into print for the first time".

The result, inevitably, is a collection that is very uneven in quality. Like the readings it is a presentation of poems rather than an anthology assembled to meet specific, or even vaguely formulated, poetic criteria.

Perhaps because of this it is a much livelier collection than many anthologies, although this might also be a result of many of the poems having been originally written for performance. Most of them speak simply and directly, which is not the case with all anthologies.

There are a few poems in the collection that I felt were pretty awful. There are a few among those written for performance that probably need to be performed to give them life. But they are well outnumbered by poems that are moving, witty, thought provoking and well written.

This is a collection that I would recommend to anyone teaching English at a secondary school as the poems are generally accessible and many have either the humor, thoughtfulness or themes to which teenagers relate easily. I showed a 14-year-old, to whom poetry is anathema, Shelton Lea's 'In Answer to a Younger Person Who Tries to Arrest You for Being Drunk and Disorderly' (p.58). After reading it he burst into laughter and said that if more poets wrote poems like that he'd read poetry. There are other poems in the collection to which he would also be responsive.

This is a handsome large format book, well designed and with illustrations that include some very witty cartoons. The poems in it reverberate with life and liveliness. A remarkable production to emanate from a room in a little Fitzroy pub.

Michael Dugan, best known as a children's author, has also published books of poetry and books on aspects of Australian social history.

The Worm Turned – and We Just Watched

Michael George Smith

Morris Gleitzman: *Gleitzman On Television – Just Looking* (Sun, $14.95).

The complete pervasiveness of television was confirmed during the recent Federal elections when the entire nation's newspapers, radio current-affairs pundits and their television equivalents and even your next door neighbors seemed prepared to expend as much mental energy analysing the convolutions of what was dubbed an 'electronic worm', ostensibly measuring the collective reactions, untrammelled by prompted responses by pollsters, superimposed in one corner of a commercial channel's broadcast of the ironically named 'Great Debates' between Keating and Hewson, as they were on the actual content of the debates themselves.

Ostensibly measuring the reactions of a politically balanced audience invited to 'respond' to the discussions, it ultimately proved as reliable an indicator of the subsequent election results as any number of scholarly investigations into the long-term effect of television on the average viewer and society in general. After all, those same media analysts were, a mere six months before, expending just as much energy responding to the tribulations of a woman named Noeline and her family, the owners of a million dollar house that an English documentary maker had chosen as the most accessible archetype for the Australian way of life his researchers could uncover. That debate may now be rippling through Great Britain as the series goes to air there, but Noeline and crew are relegated to an occasional appearance on *The Midday Show* and feature stories in the *Australian Women's Weekly* and *New Idea*.

To a certain extent, these examples signify the best and worst of the problems faced by any popular (as against academic) commentator on 'television culture'. As Clive James has put it, in his collection of writings on television culled from his column for the British newspaper, the *Observer*, *The Crystal Bucket* (Jonathan Cape, 1981), "In ways that blessedly cannot be quantified, the programmes to which gifted people have devoted months and sometimes years of their lives make fleeting marks behind our eyes and slip away." Like his essays, those written by television script-writer and children's novelist Morris Gleitzman, written over a five-year period for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, stand or fall more on their capacity to amuse or edify than on any

permanent addition to our canon of understanding of the nature of television as a medium or cultural artefact. And in the main, Gleitzman achieves both, though I wouldn't go so far as to describe him as the "one gem, one great writer" on Australian television Don Anderson claims for him on the jacket blurb. Gleitzman is certainly more accessible than the James of *The Crystal Bucket* and thankfully *nothing* like the glibly self-conscious aphorist James of his latest opus, *Fame in the Twentieth Century*. But Gleitzman, like James, is best served in small doses, *Just Looking* is very much a collection to be dipped into rather than attempted at one sitting.

Part of the problem is, of course, the brevity required of him by the column format. But there are also the obvious problems inherent in the ephemerality of much of television, the contemporaneity which quickly disappears, neatly summed up in the essay 'Young People Today', which has Gleitzman attempting to extol the virtues of Monty Python's Flying Circus to his two cynical young children, who fail to see any relevance in that seminal series other than parental nostalgia. Even more telling in terms of the increasingly 'generational' chasm developing between sets of television viewers, a subject I've not seen examined elsewhere, is in the essay 'Orson's Quickie', in which Gleitzman tries to present the classic film by Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*, to those same children (an obvious 'device' but let it pass). The viewing eventually collapses under the youthful arguments as to whether so weighty a topic as the rise and fall of a character of Kane's proportions can justifiably be made in under six hours, i.e. in mini-series format. (It's interesting, by the by, to note that academic commentator on television, Stuart Cunningham, rates the development of the Australian mini-series the major achievement of local television production in the 80s, in his essay on television in the text, *The Media in Australia: Industries, Texts, Audiences*, edited by Cunningham and Graeme Turner, recently published by Allen & Unwin.)

As you can gauge, the tone throughout the Gleitzman collection is light, often funny, quite flippant and certainly not analytical, and he makes no apologies for that in his introduction. He was asked to approach his column not as a critic but as a normal person for whom watching television was simply part of the daily life of his young family. Consequently, the essays suffer the inevitable variations in quality and inspiration of the medium of which they write, occasionally falling into some very suspect formulae when it is obvious the week's viewing has been less than dazzling. Still, that's the nature of a weekly column and for the most part, there is enough in most of these essays to entertain. Long gone are the days of the essayists whose every word demanded collection and critical scrutiny, though the masterly Alistair Cooke still makes a good fist of it.

Gleitzman does, however, present, in admittedly frivolous form, the odd more serious thought about the nature of Australian television. Take, for instance, the whole idea of Australian-ness and what that means for contemporary audiences. Since the embracing of multiculturalism, the image of Australians as 'bronzed Anzacs' has, naturally, fallen by the way, and yet there are plenty of commentators, academic and otherwise, demanding an *Australian* component to our television viewing. There are well-founded fears of the increasing Americanisation of Australian television, and that's certainly not helped by 'copy cat' productions like *The Vizard Show*, which looks to successful American precedents (i.e. *The David Letterman Show*) rather than past Australian successes, from Graham Kennedy, to, dare I say, Don Lane. The problem is, just what *is* Australian and therefore what would make legitimate local content? In 'Laugh, Or The Plants Will Die', Gleitzman makes the very good point that without the advent of SBS, we would never have had a television producer courageous enough to put *Acropolis Now* on commercial television. Love it or hate it, it is a legitimate reflection of suburban Australian life as many of our newer Australians know it. Ultimately, *more* programs presenting our ethnic diversity need to traverse the gap between SBS and the ABC and the commercial channels before we can fruitfully discuss the impact of local content on television audiences.

"without the advent of SBS, we would never have had a television producer courageous enough to put Acropolis Now *on commercial television."*

It's a pity this collection from Gleitzman finishes with an essay from January 1992. It would have been interesting to read his reactions to *Sylvania Waters* and the electoral 'electronic worm'. There are some nice ironies in his essay 'Baghdad Nights', on the coverage of the Gulf War. But if nothing else is recalled from this collection in years to come, I'd like to quote him on the brilliant BBC production, *A Very British Coup*: "We hope Seven broadcasts

this superlative British piece nice and loud so we don't hear the sobs of all those local writers and producers who've toiled to build an Australian identity with drama and comedy, only to be silenced by a few men who thought they could do it with debt." That was written in 1989. With the ABC co-producing the likes of *Brides of Christ*, *The Leaving of Liverpool* and *Seven Deadly Sins* since then, I think we have every reason to feel secure with the current state of at least non-commercial television.

Michael George Smith is Associate Editor of The Drum Media, *a Sydney-based youth arts and entertainment weekly newspaper, and survived the first twelve years of his life viewing* only *the BBC in London without any discernible ill effects.*

Secret Deals and Slush Funds

Max Teichmann

Ari Ben-Menashe: *Profits of War* (Allen & Unwin, $24.95).

When this book first appeared it was pronounced a tissue of lies or a pot-pourri of wild surmises by a junior cipher clerk who knew nobody, went nowhere and had imposed an excitable beat-up upon a sensation-hungry world. Those who took him seriously should have known better; or else, were obsessional anti-Americans, or people forever trying to trip up Israel as she struggled to run a decent society in the face of the blind hostility of a hundred million Muslim fanatics, and their dupes. These last critics were frequently closet anti-Semites.

Unfortunately, revelations since Ben-Menashe's book first came out have amply confirmed many of his assertions, and made most of the remainder highly probable. Of course Ben-Menashe was no obscure cipher clerk, but an important agent of the Israel Defence Forces/Military Intelligence over a period of years, and seems to have met many important people, and travelled to many countries on behalf of Shamir's government. Some of this came out at his American trial when he was indicted, along with two minor arms dealers, for trying to sell three C-130 military transport planes to Iran, in breach of the arms embargo upon military sales to that country. The production of testimonials from high Israeli officials and the evidence of his passports, showing extensive foreign travel, incompatible with the life of a cipher clerk but consistent with that of an important agent/negotiator for Israel, sufficed to kill the charges against him.

Ben-Menashe thought he had been set up by Israel and the US, so was itching to go public. Quite a few publishers expressed interest but were pressured to back-off. Only a small publisher in New York, Sheridan Square Press, and Allen & Unwin in Australia, were brave enough to take him on. Allen & Unwin should be congratulated: such books should see the light of day, so *we* can make up our own minds. Of course it will be said, or shouted, that we couldn't possibly know or judge: only the experts behind the scenes really know. That argument was introduced round about the time democracy started to loom as a possibility. The contemporary difficulty is *not* an overload of information; but of official and media *disinformation*.

Ben-Menashe provides ample details of the secret sales by America of arms to Iran, at a time when it was the number one hate figure of official US policy and propaganda. The hypocrisy of charging the author for trying to do the same is obvious. Then there was the Republican deal with the Ayatollahs to hold up the release of US hostages (for Iran had been ready to free them) until the Presidential election was over and Carter beaten. Even the bizarre attempt by US helicopters to rescue the hostages *before* this – a tragi-comedy of remarkable ineptitude – didn't elude Menashe's attention. Oliver North was, of course, involved in that fiasco.

Menashe speaks about Israel's long-standing nuclear force, going so far as to give estimates of three hundred A-bombs and 50 H-bombs by 1981. Plus a force of B-52 bombers. However, as he says elsewhere that Israel started making H-bombs in 1981, I doubt the figure of 50 at that time. But nuclear weapons Israel had, and now has aplenty. Congress is talking of over two hundred and Russian files contain their estimate of at least two hundred. Menashe estimates this number is being added to by thirty or forty each year. Recent South African disclosures of a close Israeli/South African military and technical alliance, and of Israel testing in the Indian Ocean with all help from South Africa, some from France and a benevolent interest by America, point up the truth of Ben-Menashe's observations. And, of course, Pretoria had the Bomb, too – another fruit of this network.

A fellow Israeli, Vanunu, is serving a long sentence and in solitary confinement, for releasing similar evidence, having been kidnapped with the help of one of Robert Maxwell's associates. Ben-Menashe shows no sympathy for Vanunu, whom he regards as a nut, an amateur who got religion – the wrong one. This author is no compassionate idealist. Western complacency about the Israeli and South African nuclear armouries contrasts vividly with

concerns about the unacceptable prospect of Iraq, Iran or North Korea getting the Bomb. Since the collapse of Russia, America and the UN haven't bothered to conceal their double standards. The Yugoslav civil war is a nice ongoing example.

Ben-Menashe belonged to a security service rival to Mossad – in fact set up in the wake of the Yom Kippur War security fiasco. The rivalry between the IDF and Mossad has taken on the dimensions of the Howard/Peacock conflict – but the results have been lethal, not banal. Like the CIA, both services ran enormous slush funds parked in different countries, and operated lucrative arms-selling and cocaine networks on the side. Arms and cocaine have become alternative currencies. Robert Maxwell seems to have been the linchpin of many of these operations centring around Eastern Europe, from where many of the arms came. Maxwell appears to have drawn lavishly upon these funds for some of *his* operations, including the buying of the *London Daily Mirror*. His eventual inability to pay back some of these loans may have led to his death. Ben-Menashe says quite simply that he was murdered.

"Ben-Menashe says quite simply that he was murdered."

These slush funds, of hundreds of millions per fund, were planted all over the world, including Australia. The author describes deals with Burke government figures, Yosef Goldberg and the ALP, covering arms and monies, as though they were simply part of the game. Arms sales during the Iran-Iraq war may have reached 60 billion dollars, so the millions which passed through Australian hands would seem chicken feed to him. Still, they are of the stuff which wins elections – that green stuff.

Ben-Menashe is a Shamir man – considering Israeli Labor corrupt, opportunistic, in the American's pockets. He particularly disliked politicians like Perez and Sharon. In fact party political interference and favoritism has seriously harmed the Israeli security services, while letting them get away with a degree of unaccountability and unilateralism which has made the reputation of Mossad, more especially, a very poor one among world security services. Incidentally, Shamir comes out as very anti-British from the forties onwards, and resentful of the Americans. Neither of them helped Europe's Jews in war-time, he felt, and this in fact led the factions headed by Begin and including Shamir to attempt a deal with the Nazis, in the hope of saving the Jews and dishing the English. The Nazis refused, so shortsightedly anti-Semitic were they.

The author is an unrepentant Zionist; he says that Jews are the chosen people, but wider experience and dawning compassion has made him feel that every people are chosen. The greatest threat to world peace is the enormous power of the security services over their governments, and their links with the drugs industry, the thousand billion dollar arms trade, and the now innumerable banks and finance groups, more obsessed with money-laundering and illegality than with proper banking. I wouldn't disagree with that.

For many years Max Teichmann taught Politics at Monash University. He has edited or co-written many books on politics and is now a freelance lecturer.

Chaos and Old Language

Paul de Serville

Nicholas Hudson: *Modern Australian Usage* (Oxford University Press, $29.95).

In the time it has taken Nicholas Hudson to consider the matter of *Modern Australian Usage*, Standard English has fallen into decay, the teaching of grammar has largely disappeared, the distinctions between written and spoken English, and correct and vulgar English have become blurred. An enormous number of technical words has entered the language, while the size of the ordinary person's vocabulary is supposed to have shrunk. An educated accent is now regarded as a disadvantage, and even the Australian accent has begun to change. Political correctness is causing the demise of certain words and euphemism rules a wider empire than it did in the 1850s.

As the influence of informal English becomes more pervasive, it grows harder to speak and write Standard English. One forgets the rules or does not wish to sound stilted. Who bothers now about ending a sentence with a preposition? Who cares to use, at least in speech, the accusative form of *who*? Does it really matter that someone uses *imply*, when *infer* is meant? Many people find the complaint of the pedant as unattractive as the mistake which provoked the rebuke.

Such defeatist attitudes obviously do not appeal to Hudson, who offers in some 440 pages a guide to the use of English as written and spoken in Australia at present. The entries are ordered alphabetically

and the result is an amateur lexicographer's impression of the current state of Australian English. In a far too short preface, Hudson sets out the aims of the work: a guide to grammar for those who were not taught or who are uncertain of the rules; a handbook for writers, preparing a manuscript for publication; a survey of words, misused or confused; and a celebration of Australian English.

The role of a lexicographer in a mass democracy is not one to be envied. The tone must be light, humorous and relaxed; the crisp edicts of a Fowler of a Gowers must be eschewed; and opinions (rather than judgements) must be shaped by a sympathy as all-encompassing and catholic as possible. Hudson adopts the middle way, avoiding the strictness of the grammarian and the indifference of the unlettered: comprehension, clarity and pragmatism are his watchwords, and a benign Darwinism operates throughout the book. New words are welcomed if they express a precise meaning (as in *update*); old words are saluted if they perform a function which no other words can quite do, and if they do so in a succinct way (see entry for *Saxonism*). The death sentence is pronounced on words which are already in the author's opinion dead. *Home* (i.e. England) 'is now dead', which will come as a surprise to those who still use it.

When does a usage of a word become acceptable? And who decides? Hudson's middle way operates with considerable flexibility. *Due to* was regarded by Fowler as 'a fledgling proposition'. It is now full-grown and according to Hudson 'There is something seriously wrong with a grammatical system which cannot accommodate proven usage'. The tone of the entry is lightly mocking of grammarians and pedants but Hudson avoids giving the new usage anything other than an oblique endorsement. His treatment of *hurt* shows an adept player in action. People no longer *suffer*; they *hurt*. Hudson points out the mistake in grammar, recognises that some wince when they hear and read the usage, but suggests that in its new form it has a specific meaning, and will therefore probably survive. The geniality of tone reminds one of Rumpole expanding on the little ways of the Timsons.

Lashings of geniality are needed to deal with the entry on *yous*. Since the word is plebeian slang, it is not clear why it is included – in fact by noting it, Hudson is domesticating it. We are given a short history of *you* in its various forms and a brief account of the evolution of *yous*. In the end, Hudson criticises *yous* because it is used both in a singular and a plural sense. That will not do. But it has got as far as the kitchen.

Haitch has got as far as The Lodge, which is perhaps one reason why Hudson treats it with such delicacy. He acknowledges the possible Irish Catholic origin but does not mention the fact that many people educated in government schools also use it. Since vocabulary and pronunciation are as much reflections of class as exercises in English, it is no surprise to read about the ambiguities of *tea*, in the entry for *meals*. The battlefield of grammar is briefly abandoned for the treacherous ground of etiquette and kindly advice is given on what to listen for, when asked to tea in England.

Hudson is English born and bred, but the bent of the book is strongly nationalist, in keeping with current feelings. *Dunny* and other Australian expressions are warmly recommended and Americanisms are correspondingly rejected when they supplant a native word. Perhaps the most flagrant examples are not included in his list (*ranch* for *station, on* Toorak Road for *in* Toorak Road, *city* hall for *town* hall). To maintain the evenhandedness which he has demonstrated throughout the book, Hudson also advises against the use of Britishisms which supplant native words. Unfortunately the only example he gives is *lorry* for *truck*. *Lorry* does not sound awkwardly British (to me, anyway) and it is hard to think of British words which have in fact crowded out the native.

In the politically correct areas Hudson seems to have said all the proper things, and if he is brave enough to prefer the traditional meaning of *gender* as a grammatical term (and to say so directly, what is more), Hudson compensates by suggesting that *Mrs* and *Miss* will disappear completely over the next decade. This looks like a serious miscalculation of the strength of bedrock conservatism. Again,

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"...more than ever English is a set of prejudices and inherited or taught views, and not a logical language."

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one is reminded how subjective is the personal viewpoint when Hudson declares that calling friends by their surnames is now extinct. This is a premature ruling. In Australia the social rules are still at times reversed. One may call an old friend by his surname; it is acquaintances (of the same sex and junior in age) whom one would address by Christian name.

Trawling through this book (which has a most

elegant and clear typeface) one is beset by conflicting feelings. The very people who should read it and follow its advice are not likely to do so, as Hudson admits in the entry for *hoi polloi*. The grammatical entries are most useful for those of us who have forgotten the rules. The personal reflections will amuse or irritate according to one's disposition; more than ever English is a set of prejudices and inherited or taught views, and not a logical language. With the collapse of Standard English, Hudson's kindly liberalism seems inadequate to deal with the chaos which has followed and which has affected most of us. The grammarians will find him too indulgent; radicals will judge him too élitist; the indifferent may find him amusingly eccentric; and the rest will not know what he is talking about.

In the end one is left with a feeling of sadness. Standard English is dying and there is no point in attempting to resuscitate it. Society at large is not interested in its fate.

Paul de Serville is best known as a historian of Port Phillip and early Victoria. His most recent book is Pounds and Pedigrees; the Upper Class in Victoria 1850–80 *(Oxford).*

Different Directions

Michael Dugan

Alan Gould: *Momentum* (William Heinemann, $14.95).
Marjorie Pizer: *Journeys* (Pinchgut Press, $11.00)
John Jenkins and Ken Bolton: *The Gutman Variations* (Little Esther Books. PO Box 21, North Adelaide, 5006, $9.00 or $11.00 posted).

Momentum is Alan Gould's sixth collection of poetry. In it he ranges widely, from traveller's tale to elegy, domesticity to satire and from poems written in rather prose-like form to formal rhyming verse. It is not a collection that can be reviewed as a step in an anticipated progress of poetic development but it may be one that will later be seen as having marked a change in direction.

The poems are accessible and, as a result, have an immediacy that is lacking in some of our more intense poets. However, they are also disciplined and thoughtful. For example, the first stanza of a poem titled 'Electrician':

> For sure! I like this light-fingered work,
> and high on my aluminium ladder
> would happily stand with my small screwdriver
> re-wiring sun and moon could I ever
> win that contract from the angels.

Gould's ironical humor runs through the book, most apparent in the series 'Six for a Cabaret' in which he adopts personae ranging from a Canberra bureaucrat to an academic surveying his hippy youth.

The publisher describes this as "Gould's...most experimental book so far". With a couple of exceptions, such as a rather undergraduate attempt at satire in 'Her Stable of Poets', the experiments appear to have been successful.

Marjorie Pizer's poems read like a diary of her thoughts and emotions as she chronicles the minutiae of her daily life, although those written from her experience of a visit to Europe are more objective. The best of these poems are warm and human and present thoughts and feelings we can all relate to. However, the risk of writing poems so closely focused on the self is that they can become self-indulgent, such as 'Moonreader':

> Sometimes I leave my poems on my desk
> After I have written them.
> At 2 a.m., as I looked into my study,
> My desk was covered in silver light.
> The moon was reading my poems
> As it passed by my house in the night.

The Gutman Variations is the third collaboration between John Jenkins and Ken Bolton. I wouldn't define its contents as poetry – in fact I'd have difficulty defining them at all! The springboard for the book is Caspar Gutman (played by Sidney Greenstreet) in the film classic *The Maltese Falcon*. The variations extend Gutman's dialogue and allow him discourse on the theories of Jacques Lacan. The result is witty and nonsensical while remaining consistent to its own absurd logic. The book is an inspired piece of wordplay that reflects its creators' enjoyment of their collaboration.

Michael Dugan is a Melbourne author and poet.

WRITERS IN PRISON **P.E.N. Report, 13**

DOAN VIET HOAN, VIETNAM

Professor Doan Viet Hoan and his wife and son were preparing to leave Vietnam for the USA on the Orderly Departure Programme in November 1990, when he was arrested at his home in Ho Chi Minh Ville.

He has been held without trial ever since, in Phan Dang Luu camp. He is accused of leading a group to plot against the government by publishing the reformist underground newsletter *Freedom Forum*. Five other writers have been arrested in connection with this magazine.

In November 1992 Doan, 50, who requires treatment for kidney problems made a public statement calling attention to the end of "the capitalist/communist confrontation", and asked for the release of political prisoners, free elections and "new political perspectives leading rapidly to a truly free, democratic and pluralist society".

Overland readers are invited to write appeals for the release of Professor Doan Viet Hoan to: La Duc Anh, President of the Council of State, Chu Tich Hol Dong Nha Nuoc, Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam.