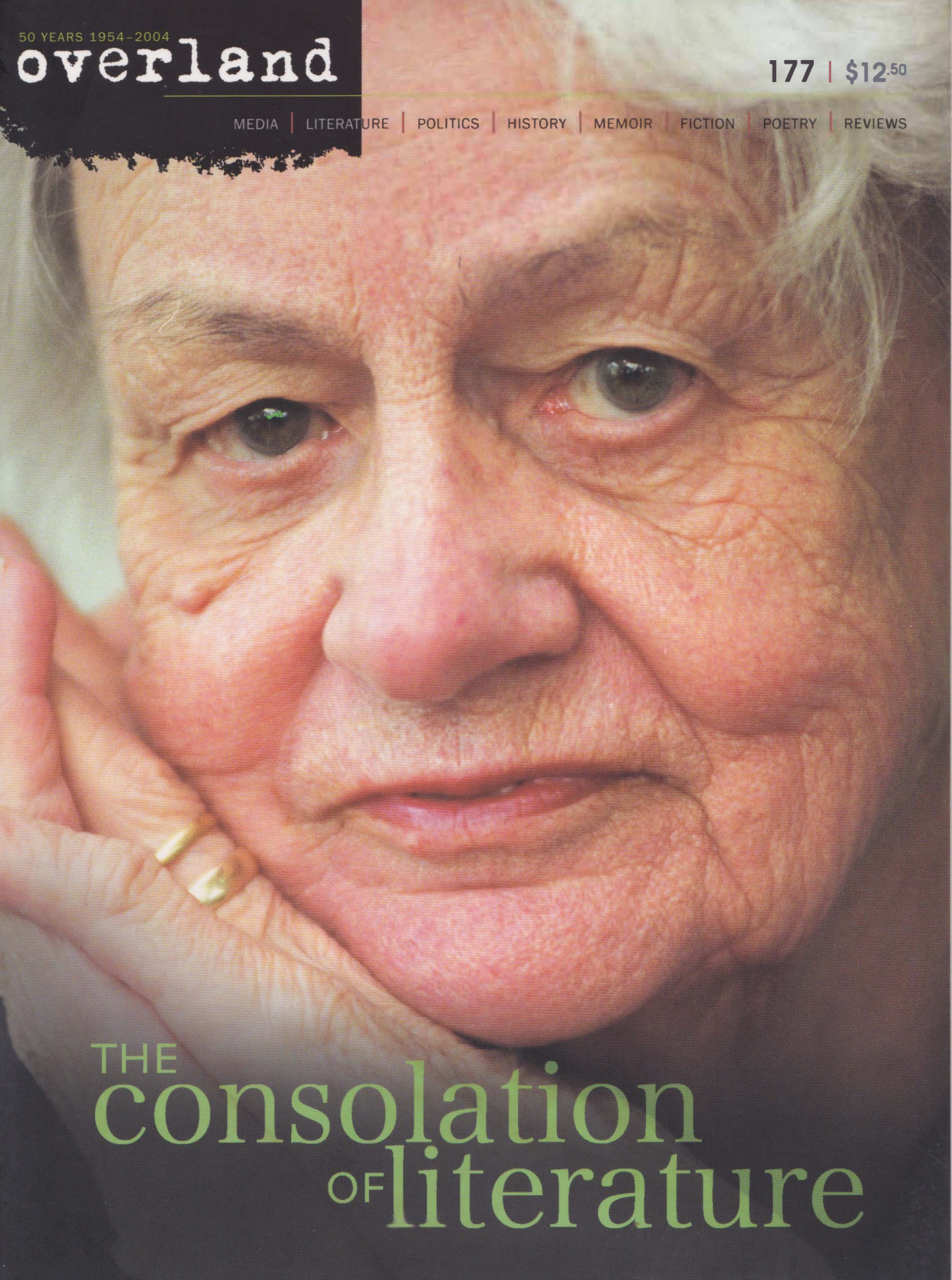


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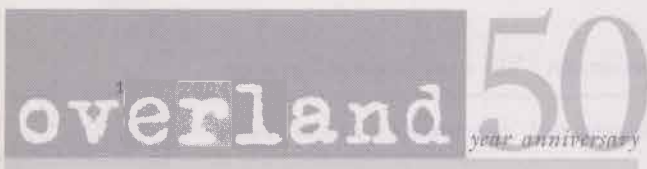
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email overland@vu.edu.au | tel (03) 9919 4163
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POETRY EDITOR John Leonard*

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REVIEWS EDITOR Jeff Sparrow

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE Louise Craig, Katherine Wilson, David Wolstencroft, Sarah Day, Kalinda Ashton, Trent Holden

COORDINATOR Alex Skutenko

CONSULTING DESIGNERS Vane Lindesay & Kath Wilson

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“WHAT IS LITERATURE if not a consolation for the unsatisfactoriness of living?” This question comes from Graham, the central character of *Wildest Dreams*, Michael Wilding’s 1998 autobiographical novel dealing with literary life in post-1950s Australia. It came to mind while we were putting this issue together: life can rarely be more unsatisfactory than in the immediate aftermath of a federal election in which the conservatives have increased their majority and obtained control of the Senate. Like David Marr in our previous issue, many people are now asking if or asserting that Australians have demonstrated a radically individualistic and materialistic culture. Andrew Milner reminds us here that if left politics seems disconnected from the lives of ordinary people, this is a problem for the politics, not the people.

This issue has a particularly literary flavour, and in hindsight it is no coincidence that many of the pieces of fiction, including our beautiful lead story by Peter Farrar, have a deeply melancholic tone. As *Wildest Dreams* demonstrates, the consolations of literature are constrained by the structure and nature of society. Over the course of the novel Graham pursues the literary life in a world where the spaces for and status of serious reading, writing and evaluation are steadily shrinking. The novel ends with him teaching creative writing in a US college; by now paranoid, jaded, cynical, convinced of the fundamental corruption and amorality of modern Anglo-American society, and, through his teaching—which he does only for money—resigned to taking part in this corruption. As Gough Whitlam suggested in the 1985 history he wrote of his 1972–1975 government, and as Labor leaders since have largely forgotten, a society that does not value literature and the arts is likely to be one characterised by narrow materialism, selfishness and greed. In this issue Tom Shapcott recalls the heady first days of Whitlam’s Literature Board. Judith Wright, a strong supporter of Whitlam, perhaps worked harder than anyone to bring literary and social concerns together, and so continues here to inspire interest (from Georgie Arnott) and admiration (from Martin Mulligan).

Graham’s question alludes to a famous work of the Middle Ages, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in which Boethius tells us, among other things, that the purpose of literature is to entertain *and teach*, or to provide “sentence and solas”, as Chaucer put it in his Middle English translation. Valuing literature, within our society, means

looking to works of the imagination not only for entertainment but to learn something about the world. As Andrew McCann points out in this issue, this entails actively preserving a notion of literary value as something separate and distinct from its entertainment or market value.

In maintaining our particular interest in both literary works that have something to say about society and in the need for a society conducive to their creation, we have sometimes felt ourselves to be on the outer within literary circles, where literary beauty or quality are still commonly set against the grubby world of politics. While these popular perceptions are unlikely to change soon, it was nevertheless pleasing to hear of Barry Hill’s winning of the 2004 Alfred Deakin Prize for an Essay Advancing Public Debate, in the recently announced Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards. Hill’s winning essay, ‘The Mood We’re In, circa Australia Day 2004’, published in *Overland* 174 earlier this year (and still available), admirably brought together the literary and the political, the personal and the public.

Overland staff drank a toast to Barry in the front bar of Young & Jackson’s on the night of the Awards, and I didn’t make it to work the next day: one perk of editing “one of Australia’s many taxpayer-funded loopy-Left little magazines”, as a recent editorial of that august American publication, the *Australian* newspaper, described us. It is tempting to remind whoever put this finishing touch on Murdoch’s fish-wrap that day, of his literary editor’s assessment of *Overland* earlier in the year as “well worth a look”. But the bigger point is that in the absence of proper public support for literature (public support which in our case incidentally goes to the writers we publish, not to us), private and financial concerns will inevitably come to dominate public and artistic concerns within the literary production process. The purpose of literature set out by Boethius, and the possible role of literature in helping to create or sustain a morally aware culture, are lost.

The effect of this social structure on Australian literature is most clearly evident in the career of the nation’s foremost literary journalist, Peter Craven. Paradoxically, as Peter Hayes argues in this issue, Craven sustains the myth of the literary life in Australia only through neglecting to live the actual literary life—of serious and considered reading, writing and evaluation—of which Wilding’s Graham once idealistically dreamed.

☆ **ON JOHN McLAREN'S *Free Radicals***

IT WAS INTERESTING for me to read *Free Radicals*, particularly your account of my brother's [Ian Turner's] life. However, there are some family details which are incorrect. These occurred on page 7.

You refer to my mother's great-grandfather as Andrew Dennistoun Lang, but his name was Alexander Dennistoun Lang and he was her grandfather and Ian's and my great-grandfather. He was an early Victorian pastoralist and artist. He had two station properties—Terrinallum, not Derrinallum, and Lyne Station, both in the Western District.

Our father could claim descent from the Dean of Norwich, formerly Master of Pembroke College, Cambridge, where Ian was pleased to see his portrait hanging in the dining hall. He is buried with his wife in the Norwich Cathedral. Ian was derogatory in saying that we came from a long line of town clerks. We have a family history dating back to the sixteenth century which shows Turner involvement in land ownership, law, medicine, army and clergy.

In 1999, before visiting the Somme where my father had served, we obtained his war records from Canberra. There was no mention of him being mentioned in dispatches. I am certain that the only 'secret' organisation my father belonged to was the Masonic Lodge, and that for only a short time. I would not like anyone to think that he was involved in The White Army or League of National Security. He was a mild, liberal, apolitical, irreligious man.

I have a small detail about Ian's schooling. He won a scholarship into sub-intermediate, not Form 5 and had four years at Geelong College, completing Leaving Honours. He also won a scholarship to Melbourne Grammar, which was not taken up.

—JUDITH GREGORY

☆ **ANOTHER SIDE OF THE STORY**

THERE IS ANOTHER interesting wrinkle in the tale of the two Leonards (see *Overland* 174). Leonard the Elder has, for many years, given a good deal of editorial help to individual poets, who have thanked him in acknowledgement pages of their books. My own recent collection, *Dark River* (Five Islands Press, 2003) bears just such a note of thanks. Unfortunately, it was published just before Leonard the Younger became *Overland's* poetry

editor. It is important to me, however, that readers understand that it refers to the anthologist Leonard. The consequences of Leonard the Younger not taking up a middle initial, it seems, are many—and still productive of much confusion.

Vane Lindesay, recalling his fifty years with *Overland* (174), remembers the late Barrett Reid as being quarrelsome, given to outbursts of pique, "deceitful" and "overbearing". Lindesay also mentions, to his credit, that Barrett undertook a long and debilitating course of chemotherapy for cancer, and this might have altered his moods towards the end. Obviously, Lindesay did not care for Reid—and the sentiment of dislike between the two men was almost certainly mutual. If Barrett were alive, he might be able to defend himself. Alas, he is not. There are many friends and colleagues who worked with Barrett, however, who remember him with warmth and amused affection. Barrett certainly loved to tease and 'take the piss'—but this was just a game, and meant to liven things up during dull weather or duller conversations. In my experience, Barrett was a born stirrer, an odd fish, a witty 'larrikin mandarin', but also a man of considerable talent, generosity and good humour—not to mention loyalty.

Barry Hill (*Overland* lecture and article in 174) is to be commended for making us all feel a little less alone, a little more empowered, as we struggle with the mood of recent times, under the worst government Australia has ever had to suffer. His talk/essay helps us to see things clearly, in a time when clarity itself is under attack—a consequence of the dismal 'package' of moral vacuity and cynical spin-doctoring wrapped up in a smokescreen of deceit that, one hopes, Australians will soon have seen through as 'the Howard Years'.

Finally, in his *Overland* talk at Melbourne's Trades Hall, Phil Cleary very passionately and persuasively pointed to the misogyny that all too often attends the legal handling of Australian criminal cases involving crimes against women—particularly rape and murder cases. Recently, a woman I knew slightly—I knew some of her relatives much better and wanted to support them—was tragically killed by her husband. At the committal hearing, which I attended, I was dismayed to hear a counsel for the defence, in his questioning of witnesses, probe and circle around what I supposed might be developed later, in the trial itself, as a try-on of the defence of 'provo-

cation'. It seems, on one rare occasion, the deceased woman had gone to a pub with a woman friend and the two had chatted with a group of men. What was the inference here: that this might provoke an angry husband, and she should have known better; and therefore it was her 'fault' if he 'spat the dummy'? It was also mentioned in passing (why, I don't know) that the murdered woman was 'attractive'. Perhaps some more skewed logic here: i.e., that she therefore 'attracted' what happened to her! In normal criminal trials, you can't trot out a defendant's previous charges, because, as I understand it, a case must be tried on its own merits. How much more should this be the case in matters of personal morality and social behaviour, where there is not the slightest hint of anything criminal ever having taken place! Cleary is spot-on: the tired old sexist and misogynist defence of 'provocation' in cases of rape and murder against women should no longer be entertained by Australian courts. It perpetuates a gross travesty of justice and the victimisation of women.

—JOHN JENKINS

★ ON MAX WATTS'S ISRAELI HISTORY

MAX WATTS'S MEMORIAL to the American writer Howard Fast (*Overland* 175) has an old-fashioned flavour. I have some reservations about Max's vocabulary and concepts.

1. The use of the Spanish word *presente* as an accolade to Howard Fast. In many memories this word is associated with the funeral of Pablo Neruda who was on a much higher plane, both as a writer and politician, than poor Howard Fast. Neruda was part of the Allende government overthrown by the Pinochet junta on 11 September 1973. Neruda died on 23 September, and his funeral was the last public assembly of the Left authorised by the Pinochet government. Thousands of people followed his coffin, and the question and answer, "Pablo Neruda?" "*Presente*" was repeated by individual members of the cortege until the very end. Words are free, but connotations are indestructible.
2. When Max's explanation of the 1948–50 war is that of the 'old historians' or standard Zionist version, which has been discredited by the 'new historians' (their nomenclature). The Israeli State-approved ver-

sion of the war and its aftermath had been put in question by several Israeli writers as early as 1959, but a watershed came on the fortieth anniversary of the State with Simha Flap's *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, and Ivan Pappé's *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1948–1951*, to cite two of many examples. These new challenges to the canonised version were authenticated because the Israeli government had followed British law regarding declassification of official government documents after thirty years. Thus much new material was available to confront the official Zionist version.

3. In a collection of new-historian articles (*The Israel-Palestine Question*, edited by Ivan Pappé), Avi Shlaim writes: "... Whatever sins were committed by the British foreign secretary as the British Mandate in Palestine approached its inglorious end, inciting King Abdullah to use force to prevent the emergence of a Jewish state was not one of them... If there is a case to be made against Bevin, it is not that he tried to abort the birth of the Jewish state but that he endorsed the understanding between King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency to partition Palestine between themselves and leave the Palestinians out in the cold."
4. Max implies a relation between the Hagana and the communists; I do not know what his evidence is. Mendy Weisgal was certainly not a communist. On the other hand, there is much proof of the many massacres the Hagana organised in the Palestine villages, where its soldiers were known as "the angels of death". (The 11–12 July 1948 Ludd or Lydda massacre is described by an old man in Elia Suleiman's film *Divine Intervention*, Jury Prize at Cannes 2002.)

Also an old-fashioned device is the use of quotation marks as a way of showing that the writer has reservations but has not the time to go into them: "For us, the Left, the invading 'Arab' armies, even the Palestinian fighters, were but British puppets, colonial troops." The real fighters in 1948, therefore, were the British and the Jews, the white men in the OK corral of the Middle East; in other words, here is the usual Orientalism, unfortunately still in fashion.

I was introduced to your magazine by Australian friends here in Greece and certainly find it a good read.

—JUNE VAN INGEN, AEGINA, GREECE

THE TWENTY FACES OF LORRAINE

I'D DECIDED TO PAINT Lorraine again. Mixed paint to match her skin, the way it looked under arms where it stayed young. Paint turned like beaten cream in the bottom of the pot. My brush eased along canvas, bristles splaying. Prepared to start on her fingers. They had to be thin and long, stroking, waving, working or cupped in her lap. Hadn't decided yet.

I relied on memory. Was easier to paint her after knowing how she felt. Remembered her colour against mine. How her cheeks were warm but feet cold, even under three blankets. Knew how she looked in sunshine and in the brooding grey of cool changes. Memory brought her back to me more than photographs or my piles of charcoal sketches.

In the corner was the chair she used to pose in. She was sitting there anytime I closed eyes. Lorraine would recline, draped over armrests like clothes laid out to dry. Dabbed a freckle to her chest and rinsed the brush.

Old sketches were piled in a corner. There was nowhere to hang them, Lorraine already looked at me from every wall. Next to the picture of her fishing a window framed heatwaves, rippling upwards in summer like a tablecloth being shaken out. Ambulances passed by that window easing over speed humps. They came each week for the heart attacks, people who died in their sleep, the occasional phenomena. Neighbours pressed faces sadly to the glass, waiting to see which unit it would stop outside. It could be someone we'd bent over a card game with last night. Or possibly that grandfather we'd spent a day next to, arms linked and singing Christmas carols in our cracked voices. Perhaps a resident in the

next block we hardly knew. There was the Korean War veteran that never spoke and all those people down at the hostel that had to be hand fed.

I CHANGED THE PICTURE of Lorraine. Speckled more light around her face. It shone over her, brightening the folds of skin under her cheeks. At first it was like whisking on make-up to hide her paleness. But then I smoothed the paint to make her younger. That was difficult on her hands but I touched them up over knuckles and around the wedding ring. I painted her at that time of life when she used to sing in the bath. Her voice would tremble and break at the end of notes she meant to hold. I brought back her singing with brush strokes, so that her sound channelled through me. I heard her singing quiet songs she loved, her voice quivering in still air.

After she died people kept coming to the door. They invited me to bridge. Asked me to beef roasts. "Thanks but no thanks," I said. I'd look across the room to the sketches. Told them I was staying home with my wife.

Lorraine died last July. She never liked winter. We used to drive north when it turned cold, hiring a camper van and staying just out of Noosa Heads, where the river swirled in. She died before another winter would leave her hands without circulation, dangling by sides like empty sleeves. Cold days meant she couldn't write or tie a shoelace. I'd rub her hands between mine until they turned pink.

When I started my picture I'd painted her in half light. It was from a moment forty years ago. A candle had burned to her left, shadow sliding back and

forth over her face like a night tide lapping in and out. That had been our first night out. After returning home, imagined being with her so hard the bed smelt of her. Dreamed pocked bruises in my shoulders where her fingertips burned into pores.

Within a week of that night I gave up university, resigned from the bank and left home. We drove to Queensland, finding work picking from long rows of tomato plants. We ate lunches in a shed where everyone discussed cricket and had a certainty for the fifth race at Toowoomba. We slept in sleeping bags where the bones of my legs fitted into the arches of her feet. Would have finished painting her like that. Would have smoothed in the colour sunshine left in her face. But that complexion didn't last once we returned to Melbourne. The colour came off in tram shelters and under drizzle. So I started the picture again, painting her next face. I painted her under layers of coats, tangles of scarves, hair blown back and creases of wind in her sweater. But hardly started when I changed it again. I remembered her after childbirth, her skin bloodless. Hair hung in wet clumps, curled into eyes so it twitched when she blinked. Looked for the grey paint to complete that picture.

THEY BROUGHT MEALS to me. Wheeled them in, taking lids off so mushroom clouds of steam billowed up. Everything was overcooked. They said it made food easier to chew. Pumpkin broke apart in my mouth like a tissue. I ate by the window. Could see all the way to hills shaded in heat haze. They sloped gently into blue distance.

All through the cup of tea I stared at Lorraine. She didn't look right. Her partially finished face was like someone else. Maybe it could have been her sister if she'd had one. I painted her in my mind behind closed eyes, the pink darkness my canvas. Later that day I gave up on the picture. Faced it away. A shadow from the hard angles of canvas striped the wall. All my other pictures had been painted when she was alive, except that other one I'll never forget.

After our first few years Lorraine left me. I'd been unhappy at work but we needed the wages. Blamed Lorraine for being stuck in the job. Told her she made me feel I was only good for cash flow and

sperm count. Kicked through the cottage garden she had planted with ankle-high bursts of English countryside colour. Eventually she left, taking our son. We stood in the doorway yelling. As she carried him outside a spray of damp wind made her hunch down. For a second I had two voices. One was calling quietly to her. It begged her to stop, going to her like warm currents through water. But the angry voice pushed in front. "You'll be back," shouted so hard it stayed in the air like initials in a tree trunk.

Told the neighbours she'd left for a holiday. Taken our son along too. Left travel books on the coffee table. Drew lines in them that marked bus tours through Ireland. Sent myself a postcard of green hills and tore off the corner where it said Apollo Bay. Copied Lorraine's handwriting and wrote about how thick the mists were.

The day Lorraine came home she walked slowly up the front path, carrying our child. In the glare her eyes were as thin as pinstripes on a suit. I held open the front door.

"What are we doing?" she said.

"Sulking."

Lorraine walked around, balancing our son against a hip, fluffing up a cushion or straightening magazines. Then she faced me. She held out her free arm. There was a little bend at the elbow, ready to fold around me. That was when she was back.

I'd drawn her like that. Twenty times probably. I was never satisfied. Twenty faces, none of them right. I could never capture the softness that had broken through her like light. It was a picture that would die with me. I'd tried to draw the face that she had when I took things too seriously too. When my hair was greying I'd put through a sandy brown rinse that'd left colour like dirty quarter moons under fingernails. She'd laughed and asked would I also have cosmetic surgery. Those pictures of her were still lying around. I'd hold them up so they could scold me when I was annoyed because the ice-cream they brought had melted. Her pictures sent me telepathy of what she used to say to break me out of bad moods.

I left her once. It only lasted four hours. Drove down to St Kilda and walked the pier. Wind ached through bones as if I had no calcium. The sea was

choppy, slate grey as far as the dark line of land on the other side. Let dusk close around me. Eventually returned home to her disbelieving face. Maybe she was still standing where I'd left her. Walked back into where old anger hung in air, brushing through its heat. When we touched she was rigid. Had to warm her until she leaned into me. Her body sighed against mine. To this day I could only imagine her face at that moment as it was turned away on my shoulder. For years I'd sketched her bowed head and rounded back.

LAST YEAR LORRAINE needed a hip replacement. She'd fallen against a kerb, lying there with a shoe off and her shopping scattered. Cold had moved through her like internal bleeding. Next day she talked in a frightened voice about the operation. Lorraine suggested the retirement village could bring me dinners while she was gone. I asked her to stop worrying about practicalities.

"If they put it in back to front you'll only be able to walk backwards," I said. She didn't smile.

We took a taxi to the hospital, sitting in silence. I stroked the swollen veins on her hand. We strained towards each other but the seatbelts held us back. Light and shade kept changing, between clouds, buildings and trees. When sunlight glared against the car window fingerprints glowed on the glass like x-rays.

For that picture I sketched myself waiting stiffly in a chair. Drew the empty seat next to me. Lorraine was in all my pictures except that one. Her handbag could be seen, magazine left on the seat while I stared into the space she had left.

At home I waited for Lorraine to return from hospital. One afternoon an ambulance came. They wheeled out Brenda who lived two doors down. A blanket covered her tightly. I saw the outline of her body. Her face pushed through like a statue no-one had put any mouth or eyes on.

Her husband came over later. We drank a beer in silence. His eyes were dull, face still. He held his drink with both hands, staring at carpet. I patted the hard bone of his shoulder.

I only brought home Lorraine's shadow. Eased her into the chair she used to pose in. Then stood

back and rattled the paintbrushes. Tried to bring her back that way. She sat and stared.

"That's my expression when I watch television," I said.

I painted her. Painted her face without laughter. Shaded grey clefts into her neck. I painted dignity. Worked until she was slightly sideways in her seat and I had to ease her up. Cried in her lap and her shuddering hands cupped my head. The room turned slowly dark.

Lay her in our bed. The red button that would bring the nurse was just above her head. When I reached for it she stopped me. Lorraine lapsed into sleeps where her breathing was so shallow I was pressing fingertips to her wrist to find a pulse.

During the night I went for a scotch. Liked the calm and warmth of scotch. It went down like a back rub on the inside. For a few moments I stood sipping. The taste slowly absorbed into me. When I went back she'd died. Knew it before I was in the room. It was as if I'd passed her as she left.

Sat with her like she needed comforting. Adjusted the pillow around her head. Closed her eyelids.

Knew about the next day as if I'd already lived it. It would start with the ambulance arriving. People would gather around as they were used to doing. A couple standing stiff and straight either side of my arms would hold me up as if they were crutches. There'd be a table filled with cups of tea. They'd look at my sketches of her. My shoulder would be stroked. Arms with soft muscles like something half melted would go around my waist.

I never showed anyone that last sketch. I'd fought to still the pencil on the paper. Could still see the lead's little jumps from my sobs. People would have said it was callous. Like photographing a body. But I'd drawn her as the heat faded off her face. Drew her because it was the last part of her life. Just like I'd drawn all the others. People would snip announcements from the classifieds. Listen to Ray Charles being played at the funeral. Touch up their memories of her as if they'd added dollops of paint to their own canvas. And when they all left, drew myself into that last picture. I had to be there, it'd always been like that.

LEARNING WITHOUT BEING TAUGHT

MY FATHER WILL NEVER throw away the cast-iron mould of my grandfather's foot that has sat unused in our aluminium shed for twenty years. For the famous and infamous there are death masks; macabre reminders of the precise form of a face, the sloping of a nose, the shape of unseeing eyes. For my father what remains above ground as a tangible vestige of his father's earthly form is the mould around which he wrapped leather in order to make and repair shoes. Uneven patches of rust have not yet robbed the cast of its shine. Large bent nails commit it permanently to an unlikely angle. Upside-down, it is flexed, with toes slightly bent and heel protruding, poised to take a step forward.

Looking at it from above, the sole seems perfectly formed. It remains true to the mounds and crevices of this miniature landscape. Yet underneath, the slope of the foot tapers in with unnatural acuteness to join a rectangular ankle, which splays out to a circular base. It is not a tribute created to capture the true form of Nonno's foot. It was acquired to be of use. Careful inspection reveals that both sides of the sole curve inwards to create the negative space of the instep so that both left and right shoes could be placed upon it.

My grandfather repaired shoes out of necessity. There was no artful modification made to the shape or materials that formed the requisite puzzle of pieces; nor was there a variation in the colour of the leather

or the style of the sock. When they were young, my nonna would call him a stubborn old man as she watched him persist in weaving the thick thread attaching sock to sole with a sharp, hooked needle that protruded like a sinewy, crooked thumb from a stout wooden handle.

The leather shoes my grandfather constructed were a vital contribution to his appearance. Until the combination of asbestosis and emphysema ripped the lining from his lungs, he wore a full suit every day of his life. In my father's youth, he watched the proud ritual by which my grandfather assembled his image: the meticulous selection of a shirt, the matching tie and the shining of his brown leather boots. My father, a chubby 10-year-old, would stand beside him in a suit made from the same fabric: a perfect miniature replica that was sewn using the offcuts of wool from its larger counterpart. He would imitate his father's methodical looping of his tie before Nonno turned to him to grind Brylcream into his fringe.

In the photograph of the *Grade Three Class of 1960* at St Albans East Primary School, my father was given the honour of holding the sign in the front row, on account of his immaculate appearance. The only child in a suit, he smiles out of necessity amongst a sea of grazed knees and refugee faces. Age gaps are exaggerated by height differences. The Babel of children arriving with the rich, heavy-bottomed Mediterranean vowels rolling from their tongues were

placed in prep and taught to count to ten. My father learned two new Italian dialects in his first year at school and ate sandwiches with thick slices of capocollo, the top-neck salt-cured ham that was the cheap alternative to prosciutto. Scarlet red, it glistened harlequin green if left out in the heat. Starting school in summer, he wrestled with a sun that plastered his shirt to his back and air so thick with flies that they smacked at the back of his throat if he dared speak while riding his bike.

Once, my father asked my grandmother to make him hot dogs with sweet sauce like the Australian children always ate. To surprise him when he returned from school, she bought two from the butcher wrapped in glossy paper. He arrived to see them neatly diced up, floating in a pool of thick tomato sauce, accompanied by a wedge of soggy bread. The homemade sauce was made sickly sweet by heaped tablespoons of sugar. His mother beamed widely. He could only do the same.

My father proudly chaperoned his mother to Australia to reunite with his father when he was seven. He knew this man only from a wedding photograph and spidery handwriting in letters he had sent. My father had written to Nonno only once with the unsteady, particular writing of a child who had just been taught. My grandfather sent this letter back with spelling and grammatical corrections neatly marked.

Their trunk contained a present for my grandfather, a handmade set of wooden lasts in size 42. Shaped like enlarged elfin prostheses, they were inserted into worn shoes to repair the soles; tracing around softened leather with a sharp knife, new soles could easily be nailed on with tacks. The lasts would eventually develop a border of pockmarks from frequent use, driving nails in too deeply.

When my father arrived in Port Phillip Bay, he stood on a lemonade box in order to see out to the harbour and hurled a pair of white dancing slippers over the edge of the railing. He had already forgotten the ease with which they had propelled him along the ship's wooden decks, altering his walk so that he bounced on the balls of his feet. When another pas-

senger asked incredulously what he was doing, he replied, "I don't need these old shoes. My father is in Australia. In Australia we are rich."

Indeed, on his first night in Australia, he felt rich. His father allowed him to measure out their block of land, foot by foot, explaining that the land was theirs. They did not have to give the best produce to a Baron or share with others, as they had done in Calabria. Working into the night, the sparse paddocks of the Keilor Plains stretched out on all sides. My father took his task seriously, diligent in his measurements. My grandfather's long shadow extended a great distance from his feet, elongating his statuesque frame and creating a broad-shouldered giant for his only child who had met him for the first time that day.

My father does not remember what happened to the smaller lasts in his shoe size. As a boy, Nonno would take his shoes apart and strengthen the tips with secret metal caps. He would make him lace-up boots with decent heels so that he wasn't the smallest boy in his class. Even the littlest wogs were forced to kick their way through primary school.

My grandfather also continually welcomed the battered shoes that his friends brought for him to repair, knowing that some had scoured the tip nearby for shoes that had been discarded merely because the heels had been worn down or the leather on top was velvety and fine like cloth. Never asking where the shoes came from, he swiftly repaired them, polishing the toes. As a result, my grandmother's house never wanted of homemade sauce and pickled, marinated eggplants and my father had three hairdressers, intent on repaying a favour to my grandfather.

Even when his lungs were weighed down by thick fluid, his intake of breath cruelly converted to gurgles and coughs, Nonno insisted on breaking in the rigid heels of my school shoes. He would soften them by repeatedly collapsing them inwards with his palm, to ensure I did not get blisters as I broke them in. A tube connected his nostrils to an oxygen-making machine while he sat in airy pyjamas on a foam donut. This blue box that rattled on lino and hummed on

carpet became part of the sound that my house made. Forming part of the silence, it was only noticed when it was switched off.

After Nonno died, my father proceeded to walk around the garden. The dark grey concrete path had sucked up the wet hanging in the air. It bordered muddy earth that mourned the desecration of a vegetable garden pulled up impulsively when it had started to look overgrown from lack of attention. Retrieving any rusty nails, which had escaped into gaps between concrete, he added them to the collection kept in a cracked margarine container in the shed.

The shed, holding Nonno's tools, was built on the foundations which originally supported the first bungalow my grandfather constructed. Garlic still hangs from the original structure of the internal wooden frame. The mint-green paint of the cabinets supporting the warped, mock-marble laminate bench remains now as flecks and patches preserved in door

jamb and inside drawers. The gap where a primus cooker used to sit still exhibits scorch marks and blistered, peeling plastic from kitchen fires. When my father was satisfied that this shed contained all of my grandfather's tools, he locked the door and proceeded to use the gutted outhouse for his own tool collection.

He found a box to neatly stack the old scraps of brittle leather hanging from nails on the wall. The darkened leather was scaly like sunburned skin. Unable to fold or give, it dissolved into fine, fibrous strands when roughly handled.

He deliberately placed the tools of Nonno's DIY shoe-repair enterprise near the doorway, saying, "You know, one day I might need these." I asked him when he would possibly need these tools, or the iron foot that stretched uselessly towards the sky. He did not even know how to use them.

"Of course I do. I watched him all my life. He never taught me, but nobody ever taught him."

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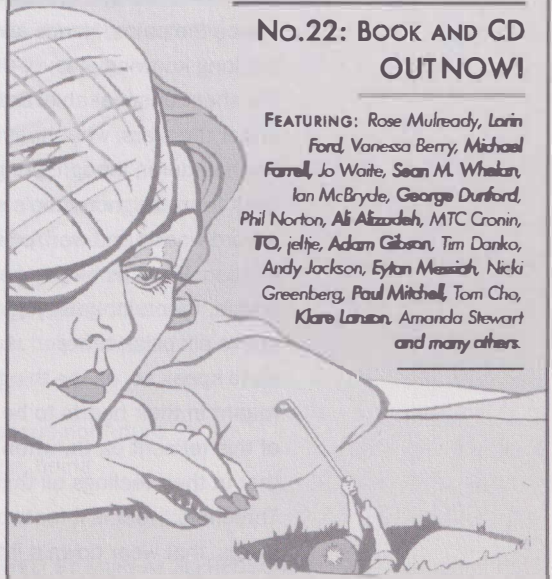
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The Ninth Elegy

Why, therefore, when we could spend our lease of
being as laurel, a little darker than all
other green, with tiny wavelets around each
leaf edge (like the smile of a wind) —: why, then,
do we have to be human — and, evading fate,
do we yearn for fate? . . .

Oh, not because happiness *is*,
that hasty profit out of near loss.
Not from curiosity, nor as exercise of the heart,
that could also be in the laurel . . .

But because to be here is much, and because to us it seems
that everything needs the here, this dwindling, that
seldom concerns us. We, the most dwindling. *Once* each,
only *once*. *Once* and no longer. And we also
once. Never again. But this one time
to have been, indeed, even if only once:
to have been of this earth seems beyond revocation.

And so we pressure ourselves, and want to achieve it,
want to hold it within our simple hands,
in a glance beyond overfull and in the speechless heart.
We want to become it.— And give it to whom? Best of all
to keep all for ever . . . Alas, in that other respect
(how it hurts!) what do we carry across? Not our thinking, the things slowly
learnt here, naught that belongs here. Naught.
Hence the pains. Hence above all, the heaviness,
the long knowing of love,— hence
the sheer unspeakable. But later
under the stars, what does it matter: *they are better* unspeakable.
The wanderer, though, brings not a handful of earth
back from the mountain's edge into the valley, for all unspeakable, but
a word wooed and won, pure, the yellow and blue
gentian. Perhaps we are *here* in order to speak: house,
bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit-tree, window,—
above all: pillar, tower . . . but to *speak*, understand it,
oh to speak so, as the things themselves never
meant in their hearts to be. Is it not the secret craft
of this reticent earth, when she so pushes the lovers,
that in their feelings all things take delight?
Threshold: what is it for two
lovers, that wear down a little the door's own
more ancient step, even they, after the many before them
and ahead of those in the future . . . , lightly.

Here is the time of the *speakable*, here is its homeland.
Speak and avow. More than ever
things fall away, things we can live, for
what displaces them so with force is imageless doing.
Doing among crusts that readily burst, as soon as
within the action grows large and sets new bounds for itself.
Between the hammers our heart
lasts on, as the tongue
between the teeth, but yet,
notwithstanding, remains the appraiser.

Praise the world to the angel, not the unspeakable world, you cannot
show off to him with what feels splendid; in the cosmos,
where he more feelingly feels, you are a novice. Therefore, show
him the simple, that which, formed from generation to generation,
lives as one of our things, close to hand and to sight.
Tell him the things. He will stand more astounded; as you stood
beside the rope maker in Rome, or near the potter by the Nile.
Show him how happy a thing can be, how guiltless and ours,
how indeed the wail of hurt purely resolves itself into the form,
serves as a thing, or dies into a thing —, and in the beyond
blessedly slips the violin.— And these things that live
on the path away, understand that you praise them; fleeting
they trust in us, the most fleeting, to save them.
We want, we ought in our invisible heart to transform them wholly
into — o boundlessly — into ourselves! Whoever we finally be.

Earth, is it not this, that you want: invisibly
to arise within us?— Is it not your dream,
some time to be invisible? Earth! Invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your urgent task?
Earth, you beloved, I will. Oh believe, your springtimes
would be no longer needed to win me for you —, one,
o even a single one is too much for the blood.
Nameless, I am destined for you, from afar until now.
Always you were in the right, and your holy thought
is an intimate death.

See, I live. What from? Neither childhood nor future
grows smaller . . . Beyond abundance, being
springs up in my heart.

RAINER MARIA RILKE (1922), TRANSLATED BY MURRAY ALFREDSON

THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARE

Peter Craven's influence on Australian Literary Culture

FOR GOOD OR BAD, one name dominates Australian book-reviewing—that of Peter Craven. He began his critical career at Melbourne University in 1981, with a little magazine sold from a small table in North Court. Who would have guessed what lay ahead? There is now no quality newspaper or popular literary magazine in which his work has not appeared, while at the *Age* he seems free to write as much as he likes, as often as he likes, on subjects entirely of his own choice. In a profile of him, Susan Wyndham was able to quote glowing testimonials from Murray Bail, Robert Dessaix, Don Watson, Michael Heyward and others; Hilary McPhee qualified her praise, but she needn't have bothered.¹ Criticisms have no effect upon his career. His position as Australia's foremost literary critic has become unassailable. The reason that he gets as much work as he does, of course, is his perceived ability to write about everyone and everything; he is hired for his expertise, as a literary editor once told me privately. However wide-ranging, though, this 'expertise' often seems shallow. Reading his work one finds sweeping statements and bland generalities, but little evidence of an intimate, first-hand knowledge of 'the canon', or even much *feeling* for literature.

There are many moments in his work at which he seems rather to be giving himself away. In a review of *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, for example, he refers off-handedly to Nabokov's "novels and ludic anti-novels such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada*."² This *sounds* like the work of someone who hasn't read either *Pale Fire* or *Ada*, but who knows just enough about them to be able to pretend to know much, much more. In an article on Homer and the motion picture *Troy*, he writes:

THE  AGE

 THE AUSTRALIAN

There are paperbacks of Chapman's Elizabethan translation of *The Iliad*, which Keats liked (one with an introduction by the American political commentator, Garry Wills) and you can still lay hands on Pope's magnificent neo-classical version.³

Keats *liked* Chapman's Homer! And in a 2003 piece on Proust he drops a hint to the effect that he wishes he didn't have to read all those boring old classic English books in the original, but could instead be reading them in translation:

A lot of us have probably had the experience of reading an English classic that is heavy going because of its cumbersome style and wished that we were reading a modern translation the way a Frenchman or an Italian can.⁴

Craven's fondness for the plot summaries in literary encyclopaedias⁵ and for 'talking books'⁶ is similarly dubious.

At these moments, Craven sounds like a fictional man of letters created by a third-rate playwright or novelist who doesn't know how such a person would really speak. As a man of letters he ought at least to be wishing he could read the French and Italian classics in their 'cumbersome' originals too. He ought to be *scorning* the inclusion of plot summaries in works of literary reference, just as he ought to be looking down (with pity or contempt) on people who want to listen to an actor read a book out *for* them.

The limits of Craven's expertise can be seen most clearly in his 2003 Proust article.⁷ His main contention here is that the new translations of Proust are inferior to the old Scott Moncrieff version in its later revisions. To argue this, he compares selected pas-

sages, faulting the new against the old. Craven prefers “there has survived them” to “has been outlived by”, because he says “*has been outlived* is not English”, and *survived* is “the natural English word”.⁸ But the words ‘survived’ and ‘outlived’ are almost exact counterparts in their structure and etymology, and of the two, it is ‘outlived’ that is the Anglo-Saxon word—the undeniably more natural English one. There *are* sound reasons for preferring the words that Craven prefers here; he simply manages to come up with blindingly invalid ones instead.

He objects further to “a grandiose finale on a theatre stage” because this is incomprehensible: “What is ‘a grandiose finale in a theatre’ when it’s at home?”⁹ What part of it doesn’t he understand? It’s an awkward phrase, to be sure, but at least as clear in meaning as “some apogee of effusiveness”, which he uses in his own previous sentence. When Craven objects to the modern translator’s use of the verb ‘to frequent’ as a word for visiting a *woman*,¹⁰ he again exposes his ignorance—in the OED such usage *is* recorded—and he ignores the French original, which does indeed use ‘*fréquenter*’ here, as we might have guessed.¹¹

But Craven’s *entire* analysis of the translations ignores the French original. At no time does he go to Proust’s own text in deciding which of the English versions he prefers—a failure that renders his ‘analysis’ of them worthless. Without some knowledge of the French original, no-one can assess any translation of Proust, but Craven is so quiet in the article about his own French we can presume it to be negligible. If he had looked at Proust’s text he would surely have pointed out the *infidelity* of the version he dislikes, in the very passages he quotes. Here, then, as so often elsewhere, Craven simply doesn’t know what he’s talking about; he is just sounding off like a bar-room loudmouth.

Possibly the most painful feature of Craven’s writing, though, is its tone. Craven talks about himself and his glorious past a little too often and a little too loudly. Even in an obituary (for Peter Levi) he can’t help eulogising himself:

He is one of the few critics I have noticed myself being influenced by, long after the die might appear to have been cast, and I think that was because of Levi’s extreme eloquence and the way he used it not to fabricate or adorn but to express feeling and indicate enthusiasm.¹²

His style itself is excruciating. Often cloyingly familiar (“It’s a sad story, isn’t it, the life of Oscar Wilde?”¹³), Craven as often disregards the reader in sentences that run on and on:

One of my favourite moments in the good deal of striking higher journalism published over the past few weeks comes from the current *London Review of Books*, in which R.W. Johnson, formerly of Magdalen College, Oxford and now head of the Suzman Foundation in Johannesburg, takes time off from his survey of contemporary South Africa to reflect on the fact that his ex-student William Hague is now head of the British Conservative Party.¹⁴

In 1989 when Penguin published ‘I for Isobel’ it became apparent that we had a writer in our midst who was absolutely distinctive and had been at the game for years but who had somehow gone unacknowledged and who did not seem to have received the attentions of any sort of literary world which might have helped her to realise what was clearly a remarkable talent.¹⁵

Too many of his articles begin with a mechanically ‘stylish’ adverbial clause of time:

When I was a young man discovering literary criticism[...]¹⁶

A few years ago, British film director Mike Leigh [...]¹⁷

For the past 40 years Susan Sontag [...]¹⁸

Too many of them begin with a famous name:

Ian McEwan is arguably the most readable [...]¹⁹

Guy Davenport is approaching 80 now.²⁰

Joe Eszterhas is the most famous screenwriter in recent film history [...]²¹

The opening sentence is the reader’s first (and quite possibly last) taste of an article. A lazy, predictable opening is, for this reason, the worst possible mistake a writer can make. But Craven’s opening sentences are lazy because almost everything he writes is lazy.

The most obvious self-indulgence in his articles is their sheer length. The 2003 article on Proust—a newspaper piece—ran just short of 4500 words,²² to be followed a year later in the very same Saturday supplement by a 3000-word article on the very same subject.²³ (The *Age* even used the same photograph of Proust to illustrate both articles. Thrift, Horatio!) Yet another article for the *Age*, on Homer and *Troy*,

ran to more than 3700 words.²⁴ In his most recent article for the *TLS*, Craven refers to “a 4000-word piece about Thomas Bernhard”²⁵ that he had published in the *Australian Financial Review*.²⁶ But he was being modest; the article in fact ran close to 5000 words.

Length itself is not a fault, of course, but Craven’s articles—whether long *or* short—are monstrously overwritten, their overblown style helping to camouflage a lack of content. Note, for instance, in the extract I quoted from his tribute to Peter Levi, that (translated into English) Craven is praising Levi for using his writing to express his thoughts rather than to pad them out or dress them up (“to fabricate or adorn”)—praising him, that is, by declaring him not to have been an extremely bad writer!

Craven himself does write to ‘fabricate’ and ‘adorn’—insufficiently influenced by Levi, it would seem. One often feels, when reading him, that truisms and statements of the obvious are being sold to us as critical insights. In his ‘second look’ at *Henry V*, for example, he writes:

Henry *is* a dynamo of everything you would want in a great political and military leader, a man who can bounce like an athlete, full of grace and muscle, marshalling all his spontaneous feelings in order to effect the spectacle he wants. He uses words like a weapon, a terrible and gleaming one.

[...] the whole play is a kind of miracle of stagecraft because we do imagine we have seen the battles and the armour and the clamour because the words evoke them so potently.²⁷

Admirers mistake his overwriting for Paterian rococo, or lush, lordly, Wildean extravagance of language; but his pretensions to *de haut en bas* grandiloquence are continually being undercut by lapses into squashiness and cliché:

The idea of “Humbert is us” would be enough to give anyone the heebie-jeebies.²⁸

Still it abounds in rich vivid characterisation and snazzy dialogue of every kind.²⁹

Herbert and Donne and Marvell were very big-time poets [...].³⁰

I’m a literary critic of the kind who goes to town on Shakespeare and Proust [...].³¹

These ‘lapses’ beg the question: how can someone who writes so badly be trusted to judge anyone else’s prose?

However weak the style of Craven’s articles, their substance is weaker. He writes lengthy articles on Dickens, Shakespeare, Wilde, Joyce, Homer and Proust³² without saying anything even mildly striking about any of them—unless one counts the striking inanities, such as “*The Letters of Oscar Wilde* are like no others”³³ and “He really is a wonder, Shakespeare.”³⁴

But Craven rarely really has anything to say. What, for example, is the *Troy* article really about? What is the *TLS* piece trying to say? As far as I can tell, little or nothing. The *Troy* article tells us that Craven prefers Christopher Logue’s translations of Homer to any other version. In the *TLS*, he claims to have been a victim of the cultural cringe. That’s all. Craven doesn’t present sustained, detailed arguments in support of an intellectual position. He doesn’t do the critic’s job, that is: he merely opines.

His views regarding ‘the canon’ are too hackneyed to call for argument:

And beyond that, like a mountain the mist clings to, there is the greater certainty that is paid homage to here: Dickens’s greatness as a writer.³⁵

We ignore Shakespeare at the peril of our own impoverishment, because Shakespeare represents such a great part of what has been achieved in the English language.³⁶

When Craven writes about modern authors, he simply makes assertion after assertion:

Iris is a remarkable book. The urbanity of its surface almost succeeds in disguising the fact that this warm, nearly desolated book is also a great piece of writing.³⁷

I say it because as a reader of fiction, during the past 30 or so years, White seemed to me, self-evidently, to be a writer of the same rank as Beckett, Nabokov and Faulkner.³⁸

But in the poems where Les Murray is not imitating Les Murray but is only Les Murray, you can see why he deserves the Nobel Prize and why no other living Australian writer can hold a candle to him.³⁹

If you can’t see such things yourself, if they are not self-evident to *you*, there is no reasoning to be persuaded by, nothing for the mind to engage with,

nothing to test one's own views against.

Often the dicta that he throws out are not even his own:

She is his greatest female character, of course, and, as Germaine Greer says, one of the most totally womanly creations in the whole of literature.⁴⁰

Spark is, according to her contemporary Frank Kermode, one of the greatest living writers in English [...]⁴¹

Shakespeare, for instance, as George Steiner has said [...]⁴²

Such borrowings highlight his failure to say anything interesting himself and, wrenched from their original contexts, they highlight his failure to *argue* his way to a conclusion.

When Craven does try to back up an assertion, his usual method is simply to make further bland assertions. Trying to argue that Sonya Hartnett "is one of the finest practitioners of fiction at work in this country today",⁴³ for example, he writes (in the article's most cogent passages):

What makes her so distinctively mature as an artist—and a *major* one—is that she is willing to take on the blackest material around and make that blackness integral to her vision.

She understands the tears in things but for that very reason she knows the exhilaration that comes from creating a pattern that will release this tumult and destruction. And that's why a novel like *Sleeping Dogs* is the opposite of depressing. It may rack you with sobs, but you won't go gently into the right apprehension of what's wrong with youth today.

At the end of the day what dazzles the mind about the novelistic art of Sonya Hartnett is the command of dramatic structure and the steadiness with which she orchestrates her sense of the catastrophic.⁴⁴

There *are* premises here amid the gibberish and gush—that Hartnett has a command of dramatic structure, for example—but nothing said to substantiate them. Craven is too fond of general statements (and too shy of particular details and close reading) to convince *us* of what he believes himself.

Craven would argue more forcefully, perhaps, if he were ever kicking *against* received opinion. But

he never is; his work has a pollyanna-ish good word for everything and everyone that has (or has ever had) an established reputation. Craven has a good word for all the currently fashionable Booker-types, of course: A.S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes etc.⁴⁵ He has a good word for the establishment authors of yesteryear too (and the year before that): Sir Walter Scott, John Galsworthy, T.S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, Graham Greene, William Golding, Anthony Powell, zzzz . . .⁴⁶

Reading his work is like reading an official history of literature in which no reputation is ever reconsidered, from which all personal likes and dislikes have been rigorously expunged. What one misses in it is any sense of being in the presence of an individual intelligence responding to literature for itself. One doesn't need, consequently, to read what Craven writes: one can read it in any well-equipped reference library before he has even written it; one can make it up oneself. I don't know what he has had to say about Virginia Woolf, for example, but I can guess what it would be: very fine, influenced by Joyce, Bloomsbury, high modernism, Helen Garner, *A Room of One's Own*, feminism, pioneering, *Scripsi*, *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, made into a movie, Meryl Streep, Helen Garner, marvellous.

In all of this—in *everything* he says—Craven gives a stronger impression of being in love with the literary life than with the adventure of reading.

Whatever he does know about literature, he certainly knows at second hand. He knows that Joyce is a great writer because Hugh Kenner told him so. He knows that Dickens is great because Peter Ackroyd has said so, and that Shakespeare is great because Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode keep saying so. Left to himself, he thinks that Helen Garner is a great novelist, and Hannie Rayson a great playwright.

The problem here, oddly enough, is a failure not so much of taste as of intellectual rigour. Craven knows that *Monkey Grip* is a mess,⁴⁷ just as he sees much of what is wrong with *Life After George*, but simply cannot accept the conclusions that his own observations are pointing him towards. In an introduction to the published script of *Life After George*, he writes:

There are a hundred details that you can quarrel with in *Life After George*, as well as some articulations of Big Issues, and perhaps a trick or two of

dramatic coherence, but the overall power of this play is not in doubt. It belongs to the marketplace of human thought and feeling, it is full of public debate and private desolation, and although not everyone will like it, and however much they may find its hero a tin god of irritations or its dialectic a bit factitious, this very Melburnian play is going to make everyone sit up.⁴⁸

Unconvincing in its hero, dramatically incoherent, dialectically factitious, but its power is not in doubt. No, of course not—it wouldn't be, would it?

Partisanship such as that is a notorious Craven trait by now, because anyone whom he does take up as one of his favourites he pushes relentlessly. His main sales technique here is old-fashioned repetition of the authorial brand name on every possible occasion. (And then some. Helen Garner got two separate mentions, for instance, in his *TLS* article about being sacked from the *Quarterly Essay*,⁴⁹ for which Garner had never written, and with which she had had no association.) A slightly more sophisticated technique is to jumble the hobbyhorse's name up with the names of canonical writers:

Perhaps there are people who catch their trains or drive into the city with the words of Proust or Shakespeare or David Malouf ringing in the ears via personal stereo. I hope so, anyway.⁵⁰

Rayson is a bit like Chekhov [. . .]⁵¹

Our own Gerald Murnane is in his way as fine a stylist as Nabokov and as consistent a writer as Bernhard.⁵²

Evelyn Waugh said that “[t]he whole of thought and taste consists in distinguishing between similars”;⁵³ one doesn't need to go that far, fortunately, to see Craven's blurring of all distinctions as the antithesis of criticism.

Mark Davis has already pointed out this habit Craven has of likening his favourites to canonical authors, and cited many more examples than I have done, to considerable comic effect.⁵⁴ It is only fair, then, to consider Craven's reply, which was that he isn't *equating* his favourites with the canonical writers he names in connection with them, but rather using those canonical names as “points of reference”.⁵⁵ In support of this contention, he said he would be referring to both Shakespeare and Anthony Powell (“the greatest living English novelist”) in an article about Mark Davis himself, so there. The reasoning was that if Craven's

technique could link Mark Davis's name to those of Shakespeare and Powell, it obviously wasn't a technique that equated the names it linked.

But when the article duly appeared, it turned out that Craven wasn't playing his usual game there at all. He was likening Mark Davis to Falstaff, and quoting one of Powell's cracker-motto “observations” against him;⁵⁶ he wasn't writing ‘Davis is a bit like Shakespeare’, or ‘Our own Mark Davis is in his way as fine a stylist as Powell’. The article proves nothing, then, either for or against the method that was in dispute. It proves, at most, that Craven is capable of using canonical names in a variety of ways. To look at even the three examples I have given, though, is to see that one of those ways *is* to use them to talk up his pets, and to look at his work in any quantity is to see that Craven is too much a publicist, not a critic. He would reject this too, so let us again look at what he has said in his own defence.

In Susan Wyndham's profile of him, he said “I've written a lot of tough reviews”, and a list appeared (almost certainly supplied by Craven himself) of the famous names he has reviewed toughly:

Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Christopher Koch, Elizabeth Jolley, Murray Bail, David Malouf, Tim Winton and Peter Carey[. . .]⁵⁷

There isn't one writer on that list, though, that Craven would be prepared to dismiss outright, and (as Mark Davis, again, has already pointed out⁵⁸) when one looks up the ‘tough’ reviews, one invariably finds them to be praising the author in general terms, whatever they have to say about the work at hand. The Ishiguro article, for example, does savage the novel *The Unconsoled*, but ends:

the worst thing about *The Unconsoled* is that it will necessarily devalue the *oeuvre* of that fine writer, Kazuo Ishiguro.⁵⁹

Of course.

Against the specific charge of being a log-roller for David Malouf, Craven replied that this was a laughable accusation given that he had “written negative reviews of his last three books.”⁶⁰ But note that not even this induces Craven to revise his opinion of Malouf's greatness; Malouf can write three bad novels in a row, according to Craven, without diminishing his reputation. And the logs roll on.

When Craven does deliver a negative verdict that isn't laughably hedged about, he shows an equally

In all of this—in everything he says—Craven gives a stronger impression of being in love with the literary life than with the adventure of reading.

unprofessional *lack* of self-restraint. I can think of only two unqualified negative reviews by Craven—his reviews of *Gould's Book of Fish* by Richard Flanagan⁶¹ and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by Elliot Perlman⁶²—but neither, even of these, is a completely professional piece of work. In the first of them, Craven is reviewing a book that he tried to exert an editorial hand upon;⁶³ he is, in effect, passing judgement in the review upon his own editorial advice. He should have known better than to do that, and the *Age* should have known better than to let him.

Both of these reviews suffer from an appearance of having been motivated by personal pique. In the Flanagan review, Craven risks the appearance, at least, of having been provoked to his negative opinion of the book by Flanagan's disregard for his offers of editorial help. In the review of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Craven seems (even more strongly) to feel that Sir William Empson is his own personal property, and Perlman a trespasser to be thrown off it by force.⁶⁴

The Perlman review also tries too hard to be funny and to be clever at Perlman's expense. It isn't the measured, professional demolition job that the novel might well have deserved, but a shrill, over-long attack on someone who (for whatever reason) simply hasn't made it into Craven's stable of hobbyhorses. In both articles one senses the same partisanship that appears in Craven's 'tough' reviews of his pets, with the kid gloves merely replaced with knuckledusters. The two approaches are mere flip sides of the same unprofessional coin.

The thing I like least about Craven, though, is the use he makes of his power.

He used his column in the *Australian*, for instance, not merely to reply to Mark Davis's criticisms of him but to praise Guy Rundle for having replied to those criticisms himself.⁶⁵ (Comically, he praised Rundle's ability to "think for himself", which is evidently Craven-speak for the ability to agree with Craven.)

When he was given an opportunity to write about Australian literature for the *TLS* in 1993, he used the

space as his own personal soapbox, to promote the then-obscure Catherine Ford, sister of Helen Garner, as "one of the best Australian short-story writers".⁶⁶ Ford had no book published at that time, her status as "one of the best Australian short-story writers" resting, at most, on only five short stories, none of which set the *Yarra* on fire, and four of which were published by Craven himself in *Scripts*.⁶⁷

True to this form, Craven nominated his boyfriend for a mentorship with Toni Morrison, having been put in charge of drawing up a short list. The boyfriend had even less to show than had Ford: he had only *two* stories published, and Craven was his *only* publisher.⁶⁸

Craven's defence of such actions is, essentially, that they express his honest opinion.⁶⁹ No doubt, but of what *public* value are his absurd and capricious opinions, however 'honest'? Of what public value is *any* opinion unsupported by argument? And what public interest is served by putting so much power into one man's hands?

I ask this last question because Craven has never hesitated to use his power to shout down the honest opinions of anyone else. At the *Australian* he repeatedly used his columns to hose down criticism of his personal obsession, Helen Garner,⁷⁰ and to quell attempts to reassess the reputations of Patrick White and Christina Stead before *they* got out of hand.⁷¹

Such actions show his pre-eminence among Australian literary journalists to be an example of power entrenching itself. Craven works hard to keep the views he supports unexamined—to keep unexamined, that is, the views that support him.

Even more clearly, though, his triumphant career is an illustration of Gresham's Law applied to the intellectual marketplace. Craven's false critical coin has driven real criticism out of circulation, his only achievement as a critic having been to take up space that others might have filled productively. There must be someone, even in Melbourne, who really does know something about Proust or Homer and can write an engaging feature article about it. But who-

ever that is, he or she hasn't a hope of being found and published as long as the editors can simply ring up Craven instead and order another hundredweight load of the usual.

Peter Craven's status within Australian criticism is the stuff of nightmare—of Poe's 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether' or H.G. Wells's 'The Country of the Blind'—an inversion of the natural order, a 'tyranny of the weak over the strong'. He lacks the true critic's authority but has unlimited power to voice his opinions. It would be hard to imagine a situation more grotesque.

1. Susan Wyndham, 'The power of one critic', *Spectrum*, Sydney Morning Herald, 13–14 July 2002, pp.8–9.
2. 'True colours', *Weekend Australian Review*, *Weekend Australian*, 5–6 April 1997, p.9.
3. 'I liked the book better', *Age Review*, *Age*, 22 May 2004, p.1.
4. 'A life without Proust is a life not worth living', *Age Review*, *Age*, 1 March 2003, p.2.
5. 'Terms of reverence', *Weekend Australian Review*, *Weekend Australian*, 4–5 February 1995, p.6; 'Born writers', *Weekend Herald Sun*, 25 May 1996, p.15.
6. Rarely out of sight for long, this predilection surfaces in 'Why we adore Harry', *Age Review*, *Age*, 12 June 2004, p.8, for example, and 'Temperature of the soul', *Australian*, 12 July 2004, p.8.
7. 'A life without Proust is a life not worth living', *Age Review*, *Age*, 1 March 2003, pp.1–2.
8. *Ibid.*, p.2.
9. *Ibid.*, p.2. Craven misquotes the phrase from one of his paragraphs to the next, but let it pass, and he is alluding pretentiously to *Ulysses* here, but let that pass, too.
10. *Ibid.*, p.2.
11. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Gallimard, Paris, 1987, Vol.1, p.629.
12. 'Vale to an elegant scribbler', *Australian*, 9 February 2000, p.42.
13. 'Wilde about the words', *Saturday Extra*, *Age*, 24 February 2001, p.7.
14. 'How Hague learnt to turn on the charm', *Australian*, 30 July 1997, p.38.
15. "'Lighting" provides that warm inner glow', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 8 May 1994, p.10.
16. 'Second look: *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1959) by Northrop Frye', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 30 May 2004, p.25.
17. 'The very model of a modern major musical', *Age Review*, *Age*, 29 May 2004, p.8.
18. 'Through the eye of history', *Age Review*, *Age*, 28 February 2004, p.4.
19. 'Second look: *Atonement* (2001) by Ian McEwan', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 16 May 2004, p.25.
20. 'Second look: *Stories* (1974–) by Guy Davenport', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 9 May 2004, p.25.
21. 'Animal instinct', *Spectrum*, Sydney Morning Herald, 8–9 May 2004, p.10.
22. 'A life without Proust is a life not worth living', *Age Review*, *Age*, 1 March 2003, pp.1–2.
23. 'Give Proust a chance', *Age Review*, *Age*, 10 July 2004, pp.1–2.
24. 'I liked the book better', *Age Review*, *Age*, 22 May 2004, pp.1–2.
25. 'Still cringing?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 2004, p.14.
26. 'Serenading the black sun', *Review*, *Australian Financial Review*, 28 November 2003, pp.6–8.
27. 'Second look: *Henry V* (1598) by William Shakespeare', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 27 April 2003, p.10.
28. 'Moral irresponsibility is part of art's power', *Australian*, 31 March 1999, p.38.
29. 'Second look: *Post Captain* (1972) by Patrick O'Brian', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 15 February 2004, p.25.
30. 'Second look: *Selected Essays* (1917–1932) by T.S. Eliot', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 26 January 2003, p.10.
31. 'Gun ho for trash', *Books Extra*, *Weekend Australian*, 22–3 February 2003, p.2.
32. Examples are noted throughout this essay; for a typical Craven article on Joyce, see 'The big day out', *Review*, *Weekend Australian*, 12–13 June 2004, pp.4–5.
33. 'Wilde about the words', *Saturday Extra*, *Age*, 24 February 2001, p.7.
34. 'Brightest heaven of invention', *Australian*, 23 April 2004, p.13.
35. 'Master of the ripping yarn', *Australian*, 23 May 2003, p.13.
36. 'A Bard act to follow', *Australian*, 23 April 2003, p.11.
37. 'Love illuminates a darkened Iris', *Spectrum*, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 December 1998, p.7.
38. 'Whitewash and cultural cringe return', *Australian*, 6 March 1996, p.27.
39. 'Second look: *Poems* (1961–) by Les Murray', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 16 February 2003, p.8.
40. 'Brightest heaven of invention', *Australian*, 23 April 2004, p.13.
41. 'Second look: *Aiding and Abetting* (2000) by Muriel Spark', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 13 June 2004, p.25.
42. 'At odds with classical conditioning', *Australian*, 20 September 1995, p.34.
43. 'Second look: *Sleeping Dogs* (1997) by Sonya Hartnett', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 8 June 2003, p.10.
44. *Ibid.*
45. 'Possessed by a lesser spirit', *Review*, *Weekend Australian Financial Review*, 24–29 December 2002, p.11; 'When the human race is run', *Review*, *Australian Financial Review*, 13 June 2003, pp.4–5; 'Second look: *The Information* (1995) by Martin Amis', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 14 September 2003, p.10; 'Finedining at the lemontable', *Review*, *Australian Financial Review*, 23 July 2004, pp.8–9.
46. 'Second look: *The Talisman* (1825) by Sir Walter Scott', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 23 May 2004, p.25; 'Second look: John Galsworthy: *The Forsyte Saga* (1922)', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 25 August 2002, p.8; 'Second look: *Selected Essays* (1917–1932) by T.S. Eliot', *Agenda*, *Sunday Age*, 26 January 2003, p.10; 'Sixties myths keep swinging back', *Australian*, 11 November 1998, p.36; 'Satisfaction at last for a Nobel effort', *Australian*, 24 October 2001, p.32; 'In praise of the middle man', *Review*, *Weekend Australian*, 24–5 July 2004, p.12; 'Word power is open to abuse', *Australian*, 5 April 2000, p.39.
47. See, for example, 'Of War and Needlework: The Fiction of Helen Garner' (1985), *Meanjin*, vol.44, pp.209–11.
48. 'Introduction' to Hannie Rayson, *Life After George*, Currency Press, Sydney, 2000, p.x.
49. 'Still cringing?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 2004, pp.14–15.
50. 'Evil that newspapers do', *Australian*, 23 May 2001, p.50.

51. 'Second look: *Life after George* (2000) by Hannie Rayson', *Agenda, Sunday Age*, 9 March 2003, p.10.
52. 'Season's readings', *Agenda, Sunday Age*, 10 December 1995, p.5.
53. *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1986, p.214.
54. *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, pp.122-26.
55. 'Inspirational speech puts PM to shame', *Australian*, 24 September 1997, p.44.
56. 'Gang Warfare' (1997), *Australian Book Review*, October 1997, no.195, p.7.
57. Susan Wyndham, 'The power of one critic', *Spectrum, Sydney Morning Herald*, 13-14 July 2002, p.9.
58. Mark Davis, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1999, p.352.
59. 'The horror, the horror', *Saturday Extra, Age*, 20 May 1995, p.8.
60. 'Inspirational speech puts PM to shame', *Australian*, 24 September 1997, p.44.
61. 'Something fishy going on', *Saturday Extra, Age*, 10 November 2001, p.9.
62. 'A Blander Shade of Grey', *Australian Book Review*, November 2003, no.256, pp.47-8.
63. 'Peter Craven Responds to Hilary McPhee', *Australian Book Review*, March 2002, no.239, p.6.
64. Craven has boasted that he published Sir William Empson in *Scripsi* (see Rebecca Lucas and Ralph Humphries, 'A Critical Vocation: An Interview with Peter Craven', *Meanjin*, vol.56, 1997, p.173), on the strength of having reprinted, with the *London Review of Books*'s permission, an article that Sir William had had published there; see *Scripsi* 2:1, p.ii.
65. 'Room for radical departures', *Australian*, 5 November 1997, p.41.
66. 'A fund of good stories', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 August 1993, p.8.
67. Catherine Ford's published stories to August 1993 were 'Anything But Food', *Australian Short Stories*, no.21, 1988, pp.75-82; 'A Hundred Years As a Snail', *Scripsi* 5:3, 1989, pp.117-23; 'Empty', *Scripsi* 6:1, 1990, pp.89-95; 'The Remover of Obstacles', *Scripsi* 7:1, 1991, pp.303-15; and 'July Four', *Scripsi* 7:3, 1992, pp.163-80.
68. Wyndham, 'The power of one critic', p.9.
69. In 'Surprise victory clouded by loss', *Australian*, 18 October 2000, p.36, he rejects the notion that he expresses 'partisan' opinions. Susan Wyndham has quoted him as saying in defence of the Perlman review, "The right thing to do is to honestly articulate your reaction" ("No turn unstoned", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10-11 January 2004, p.16). Elsewhere, to the question "But isn't that just your opinion?" in Wyndham's profile, he responds, "There's no other opinion I can lay claim to, Susan": 'The power of one critic', p.9.
70. 'She who miscasts Garner's Stone', *Australian*, 16 July 1997, p.39; 'Celluloid's lease of life for literature', *Australian*, 3 December 1997, p.43; 'Words soothe in a time of fear', *Australian*, 10 October 2001, p.37.
71. 'Whitewash and cultural cringe return', *Australian*, 6 March 1996, p.27; 'Banjos go to plucky authors', *Australian*, 29 June 1994, p.28.

Peter Hayes is a law graduate and freelance journalist.



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HOW TO FUCK A TUSCAN GARDEN

A note on literary pessimism

SPEAK TO INDUSTRY INSIDERS. Australian fiction is struggling, sales are woeful. On the other hand, books set in Tuscany seem to be doing well. So are 'how-to' books. Anything about Australian flora, landscape or gardening seems like a safe bet as well. The bookshops and bars, not to mention the university classrooms of a city like Melbourne, are full of people who seize on this sort of information. Some want to write novels, some have written novels, and some have already received a reasonable degree of critical acclaim, even the odd prize. But in terms of the relentless logic of the marketplace, most of them will fail. The sense of demoralisation many writers experience suggests the degree to which the marketplace has displaced other forms of critical evaluation and become, to a large extent, internalised as the measure of a writer's self-worth.

Ironically the panic-mongering over the state of Australian fiction that appears regularly these days in our major newspapers, usually around writers' festival time, perpetuates this syndrome. With only a vague sense that it might be possible to discuss writing in non-commercial terms, the sad litanies of poor sales figures and the foreboding accounts of growing slush piles have the ironic effect of reinforcing the logic of the market with which most writers are already wrestling. Even those articles celebrating the emergence of a bright new hope usually do so in terms of a discourse of literary celebrity that imposes upon the first-time novelist the same set of expectations that we might expect of an emerging rock star: the "hot new thing" (that was Sophie Cunningham, introduced with more than a little irony on ABC radio), or the "hot ten" (that was a group of young writers, most of whom have slipped between the cracks, being hyped before a recent festival event).

Mournful discussions of the state of literary fiction in this country, though pessimistic enough, only give us a glimpse of how bad the situation really is. The possibility of literary expression outside of the restrictive space defined by market-capitalism is almost non-existent. We can sense this by looking not at the mass of failures, but at the few that make it and seem to do well. There is a pervasive logic at work here—the logic of celebrity, in which circulation is a function of mainstream media exposure, as much as it is an indication of anything intrinsic to the work itself. This is a point that Graeme Turner has suggested in his discussion of Peter Carey's representation in the mass media. The depressing prospect that Turner presents—"national heroes writing their fiction for an audience whose conservative expectations are easily satisfied but rarely extended"¹—gets bleaker if we imagine that the "national hero" is primarily a function of mass media visibility, a scenario that Turner's article easily supports. So you want to publish a novel? How are you going to pull it off? Get out there and gain a degree of notoriety in another field. A radio personality, a journalist, a musician or an actor, someone with public exposure, already has a considerable degree of literary capital. Once this is established, the logic is self-perpetuating. So an author who has been lucky enough to do okay once, might get another shot simply based on a kind of brand recognition. At the top end of the market this is out of control. It is inconceivable that Tim Winton or Peter Carey will fail in terms of the marketplace simply because of the degree of literary and commercial capital they already command. People know the names. People have expectations tied up with them. Elliot Perlman, bookshop people assure me, always had the advantage of having a name

It is only through struggling independent presses that we might glimpse the possibility of more varied forms of writing directed towards groups of readers defined by interests at odds with the prevailing mood of middle-brow complacency.

that people seemed to remember. Richard King, on the other hand, whose *Carrion Colony* is one of the genuinely innovative and stylistically original novels published in recent years, is virtually invisible. By the same logic, the sensational popularity of Nikki Gemmell's *The Bride Stripped Bare* also seems to have resurrected some of her previous novels that share little in common with it.

Once, so the story goes, the literary implied a realm of production that was relatively autonomous in respect to other forms of social and cultural practice. Its awkwardness with regard to the market was cultivated and preserved as a sublimated form of dissidence, to use Herbert Marcuse's famous account of the paradigm in *One-Dimensional Man*. Even if this sense of autonomy were false, the idea of literature surviving through diverse reading publics that self-consciously differentiated themselves from a standardised public sphere made a culture of aesthetic resistance at least imaginable.

Today, the fall into the marketplace seems virtually complete, and the apparent lack of marketing nous displayed by major publishers reflects a withering of diverse reading publics capable of sustaining varied modes of literary expression. The result is a set of undifferentiated strategies that reflect the erosion of the public's autonomy: throw a book out there and hope that it is picked up by a major broadsheet, reviewed with a flattering photo of the author or an evocative biographical sketch, and carried by a major retail chain. The correlation between mainstream media coverage and sales is about the only sure bet in the whole process, which doesn't say much about the existence of counter-publics or even the possibility of reaching niche readerships. In lieu of those possibilities, the epithet of voodoo marketers everywhere, 'word of mouth', indicates that readerships existing independently of mainstream media outlets are about as tangible as a game of Chinese whispers.

In 1931 Siegfried Kracauer commented on a series of articles published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*

under the heading 'On Bestsellers and Their Audiences'. What is known about the new, at once more diverse and inclusive class formation that is responsible for bestowing fame and wealth on a handful of authors, he asked. His conclusion is that next to nothing is known about the reading public and the choices it makes: "As a result, every literary creation that becomes marketable is like a winning number in a lottery".² The sense of cluelessness seems true today. Beyond the publicity machine that circulates celebrity and defines a readership in its image, publishers seem to have little sense of who reads what books and why. That impression might be erroneous, but it is hard to imagine trade publishers harbouring armies of sociologists in their bowels thinking through the problem of class stratification and its relationship to reading habits.

Kracauer's thinking about the topic ultimately points to the conservative function of the bestseller. He excludes "dime fiction" (*Kolportage*) and books that sell because of a momentary topicality (something like Helen Garner's *The First Stone* comes to mind), and focuses on books that are presumed to sell because of "the plenitude of their authentic and generally convincing contents".³

The conclusion he reaches is that as bourgeois idealism is eroded or challenged by new political realities, literature becomes a kind of refuge: "Using every conceivable means, they [middle-class readers] strive to avoid the confrontation of outdated ideals with contemporary social reality, a juxtaposition they evade by taking flight in all directions and into every hideout".⁴ A study of what constitutes the field of literature in contemporary Australia might bear this out: an interest in questions of individual and historical identity that invariably devolves upon the integrity of bourgeois aesthetic experience coloured by nostalgia, melancholia, lyricism, natural grandeur and an insistently belletristic interface. Hence the various forms of intertextuality, magical realism and fabulism that we find in the work of Carey are often more important than any enduring interest in the political-historical

issues Carey's novels otherwise raise, issues that might ultimately compel us to question the aesthetic tradition in which he writes. This tendency is full-blown in Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*, a novel that opens as a critique of "dun-coloured" realism and that promises to engage with the ideological baggage of cultural nationalism, but that finally settles for the seductions of storytelling and a predictable claim on the reader's desire for textual pleasure that is bound up with a tokenistic sort of cosmopolitanism. Similarly the mysticism of David Malouf, indebted to Patrick White's modernist transcendentalism, returns us to the spiritual and the lyrical as the bedrocks of a literary aesthetic that has apparently survived its entanglement with colonial ideology. The overwhelming tendency is to supplement one pattern of limitation (realism) with a series of gentle and unthreatening upgrades designed to consolidate the 'literary' character of a text without running the risk of alienating readers: "art's reconciling glow enfolding the world", as Adorno, full of an irony bordering on disgust, put it.⁵

One of the things Kracauer's analysis reveals is a faith in the idea of class-consciousness as a guide to


reading habits. Against his idea of a conservative middle-class readership it is possible to imagine counter-publics, dissident literatures and experimental avant-gardes attacking the institutions of middle-class literary solace. Diversity, in other words, is possible to the degree to which classes actualise their interests in cultural production. Today, the homogenising impact of a public sphere defined by the relay between trade publishers, commercial media and what seems to be an infinitely malleable readership, puts this kind of agency in doubt, even though the middle-class, middle-brow tone of Australian literary fiction is probably undeniable. The end result of this process is the impossibility of a literature capable of questioning its own institutional or ideological function. If we want to think through the current journalistic trope of 'mediocre Australian fiction', the undifferentiated nature of the reading public and its dependence on a top-down dispersal of information might go a long way towards explaining the lack of innovation and experimentation.

In these circumstances an avant-garde (one even feels foolish writing the word) seems utterly impossible. A literature that attempts to alienate the reader from the pleasures of 'cultured' entertainment, or a writing based on montage, on a deliberate attempt not to tell the same old comforting stories of closure, spurious mysticism, self-discovery, or personal reconciliation, all seem perversely counter-intuitive. It is only through struggling independent presses that we might glimpse the possibility of more varied forms of writing directed towards groups of readers defined by interests at odds with the prevailing mood of middle-brow complacency. In the meantime, complaints about the mediocre state of Australian literature are like hungry rumblings from the belly of the beast. The structures that are constantly calling out for innovative Australian writing are the very same structures that impede its development.

1. Graeme Turner, 'Nationalising the Author: the Celebrity of Peter Carey', *Australian Literary Studies* 16:2, 1993, p.138.
2. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimer Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p.92.
3. *Ibid.*, p.90.
4. *Ibid.*, p.98.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p.1.

Andrew McCann teaches in the University of Melbourne's English Department.

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FIRST DAYS AT THE LITERATURE BOARD



IN JANUARY 1973 a phone call from someone at the Australian Council for the Arts in Sydney (one of PM John Gorton's cultural initiatives) came when I was in my office. Would I be prepared to serve on a shortly-to-be-announced Literature Board? A new structure was to take over the work of the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF).

I was excited. With the recent election of Gough Whitlam and the Labor Party there had been a surge of national elation. The widespread belief that if you wanted to succeed, particularly in the arts, you had to go abroad, was already being challenged. "We will buy back the farm," Whitlam had said.

The expansion of the Australian Council for the Arts was announced by the PM on Australia Day 1973. The Literature Board was to have as its foundation members at least some representatives from the old CLF: Geoffrey Blainey as Chairman, with Manning Clark, A.D. Hope, and Geoffrey Dutton. The new names included four people still in their 30s: David Malouf, Richard Walsh, Richard Hall and myself. Older 'new' names were Nancy Keesing, Judah Waten and Elizabeth Riddell.

What to make of the grouping? At that stage I had only met Hope, Keesing, Dutton and Malouf; and Malouf I had only become acquainted with that Christmas. Judah Waten I knew of as an old communist stand-by whose real claim to fame was his classic migrant semi-autobiography, *Alien Son*. Nancy Keesing was a stalwart of the Australian Society of Authors. Richard Walsh's appointment attracted great interest: not only was he notorious for being a co-founder of *Oz* magazine, he was the punchy young publisher of a reconstituted Angus & Robertson.

Much speculation related to questions of 'conflict of interest' that might arise.

Richard Hall I did not know. Elizabeth Riddell was also a complete stranger. She was living in London, but would be returning to Sydney later in the year. I did have one piece of insider information. I owned—and admired—her book of poems, *Forbears*, published a decade earlier by A & R.

The first meeting was in North Sydney. We were there for two days, and began to get to know each other. I suppose I went into that meeting with new-broom thoughts. I had been giving much attention to reviewing the operations of the CLF. In its last year the CLF introduced a handful of small Young Writers' Fellowships (to Michael Dransfield, Mark O'Connor, John Blay and G.M. Teychenne), the result of strenuous criticism of 'the same old names': Hal Porter, Roland Robinson, David Ireland, Tom Keneally and Donald Stuart had become regular recipients, though Les Murray and Frank Moorhouse were new 'regulars'.

When we sat down at the Board table Jean Battersby let us know that the expanded Australian Council for the Arts would have a substantial increase in funding. We lost no time in dealing with a request from the Australian Society of Authors to bring members to their Annual Conference.

It was to become apparent, later, that the Board was but a twig of the Australia Council and the Australia Council merely a small example of landscape architecture in some Federal Ministry garden.

On that first day, as the afternoon drew on, we began to move towards new policy. Of inherited traditions we voted to continue 'literary pensions'. These

began in 1908 and were currently worth three times the Social Service old-age pensions. To test our policy, one of the first letters tabled was from Douglas Stewart (a suddenly 'deposed' CLF member). These pensions had never been open for application; they were conferred. Doug Stewart would turn sixty in May. "There are two or four books I want to write and I realise that I shall never get them done if I keep on in regular employment . . . I think I could get by if I had the help of a CLF pension." This award to Stewart was one of the Board's first decisions. Dick Hall asked that his dissent be recorded. This was noted. It was also reported that Christina Stead would probably welcome a pension.

On that first day Dick Hall and I were charged with reporting back to the next meeting on our suggestion for guaranteed minimum incomes (I referred to the Scandinavian schemes), three-to-five-year fellowships, research grants, writers-in-residence at universities, subsidies for poetry readings, and tax concessions. Dick Hall had been Gough Whitlam's private secretary before the 1972 election and was a well-known Sydney literary-café identity. His Friday lunches were famous.

The second day involved submissions personally presented by Gus O'Donnell, Chairman of the Australian Copyright Council. These were to lead the way to the eventual establishment of Copyright Agency Limited. The Literature Board was to have nothing to do with these later developments.

In a sense, by these early decisions, the Board defined not only priorities but agendas. It developed and expanded recent initiatives of the dying CLF; it did provide an infrastructure to further the important principle of Public Lending Right (PLR), but it drew back from being seen as a 'front' for pressure groups such as the Copyright Council. It also began to define its international targets, its need for priorities on 'youth and the arts', and its responsibilities for regional literary encouragement.

That first evening I attended a public meeting held at the North Sydney Town Hall to discuss the Australian Council for the Arts. In one sense it was a stacked PR exercise. In another sense, it was a meeting torn by internal warfare and jealousies—people not appointed venting their spleen; opponents of any government assistance; members of minority groups desperate to stake their claim; right-wingers who foresaw a Soviet style arts bureaucracy; dogged individualists; individual lapdogs who wanted to be heard—the

evening was anything but dull, although there was no doubt that all the real decisions had been made.

In those first months one thing emerged. Board members would be required to devote a great deal of time to the new organisation and the development of policies. Our next meeting was a fortnight later, in Melbourne. The Literature Board decided it, alone of all the Council Boards, would be based in Melbourne.

As a Queenslander I came without bias to this debate. Geoff Blainey was the chief proponent, and his argument was that Melbourne had been the meeting place for the CLF Advisory Committee; Australian publishing was centred mainly in Melbourne; the most vital literary journals had always been based there. There was another reason: the Literature Board, inheritor of the oldest federal arts fund, would have its individuality threatened if it allowed itself to be absorbed into the Council web of intrigue up at North Sydney.

The accountant in me saw problems. Cut off from the other Boards and from Council, Literature could find itself in danger of being ignored at vital moments, especially in the carve-up of funds. I think Board members did not fully realise funding now came through the Australian Council for the Arts, not through direct allocation from the Prime Minister's Department. That was the crucial new factor. If we were to argue for our slice, we had to be there not only at the formal decision-making sessions but long before that, during the initial bidding and bartering processes. North Sydney was where all that would happen. I was not popular.

The wilfulness of the Literature Board in refusing to relocate in Sydney was an irritant to the Council and especially, I suspect, to Jean Battersby, who saw her grand plan of a powerful arts edifice threatened. I remember travelling to Melbourne with her at one of the early meetings when she berated the Board's stubborn attitude. Jean and Geoff were at loggerheads. Jean won. Geoff was not reappointed after his initial 'interim' term expired in June of the next year. A few years later he was to become Chair of the Australia Council itself and it became Jean's turn to be displaced.

Journalists certainly contributed to the downfall of Jean Battersby, whose 'extravagance' became signified by an expensive craftmade tea service—part of an early Australia Council policy to purchase art as patronage. The journalistic hubbub led to the

termination of that policy, and perhaps an eventual loss of long-term assets. Some of the acquisitions in Aboriginal artefacts accrued great value, as well as complexities.

The first day of our mid-March 1973 meetings in Melbourne was at the Old Customs House, down in the dip from Flinders Street Station. I turned up with Nancy Keesing and David Malouf. As we entered the rickety old lift to the first floor for our meeting we were joined by Alec Hope. "It's beginning to get exciting," I said. "This promise of greatly increased funds; the thought of interacting with other art form boards."

Alec grimaced. I realised I was the new boy. This new Board was stacked with new boys and, so far, the one new girl. "Well, the first meeting was not exactly the disaster I had feared," Alec muttered dryly.

Nancy Keesing joined Judah in urging from the outset a responsibility to the increasingly multicultural nature of our country and its development. Nancy also became famous for her description of those first Fellowship grants as "running away from home allowances", especially for younger women writers.

Richard Walsh proved the usefulness of having a publishing representative on the Board. He scrupulously absented himself from any vote to do with publishing during our meetings, but was energetic in helping the Board develop revised publishing policy. He was also, from the outset, keen that we should encourage 'middle level writing' to the eventual benefit of such writers as Geoff Pike, Peter Corris and Patsy Adam-Smith.

David Malouf made his early contribution to the Board when he was asked to develop the policy on writers-in-residence that Dick Hall and I presented to that meeting. We had also recommended:

- a guaranteed minimum income for established writers of talent
- renewable three-year grants of \$9000 p.a.
- renewable one-year grants in the range of \$3000–\$9000
- special grants up to \$2000 for travel, research etc.
- readings, lectures, writers' workshops, factory visits etc.
- pensions should be at or close to the level of the guaranteed minimum income scheme for working writers
- the Board to reserve the right to offer any of the above grants or awards to writers, irrespective of whether they had applied.

Looking back, the ambition of these policy proposals was breathtaking. We were envisaging how the career paths of new and emerging writers could be assisted, initially through this system of grants, then by a more flexible publishing subsidy scheme, and through structures that would help develop public awareness: readings, conferences, residencies, festivals, overseas contacts.

Almost none of them was at that time in operation. Even payment for publication in the literary journals hardly existed. A writer usually accepted a few free copies in payment. That had to end.

The idea of writers being paid to give readings was virtually unheard of (though Grace Perry had set the ball rolling with the Macquarie University functions, sponsored by Farmers, then still a thriving emporium). There was an educative task ahead, and Literature Board seed funding to pay writers established a new norm that is now taken as read. Our aims were to influence Australian writing over the next thirty years.

In setting our fees for major fellowships we proposed a solid increase from the CLF sop of \$4000, up to \$9000. Our argument was that \$9000 represented both a middle-range journalist's salary, and was also equivalent to that payable to backbenchers in federal parliament. We proposed that our writers were worth at least as much as a parliamentary drone.

The system eroded, in some programs quicker than others. The guaranteed minimum income scheme did not survive its first year, or the 1974 inflationary leap that saw inflation move into double figures. The major fellowships were almost instantly frozen (and the ensuing Coalition government gave Arts increases only to the Australian Opera). What began as equivalent to a federal parliamentary backbencher's salary has ended up as being much less than that same backbencher's tax-free allowances. His/her salary is now far more than double that of 'senior writers'.

In those early days we fondly believed that the Board would be able to control the bureaucracy—hence the proposals about the Board's right to offer grants. After the first year, and the floods of applications, the Board was flat out coping. We were, too soon, to become a Board based on response mechanisms, not an initiator. Formal applications in the right manner, on the right form and at the right time, became the only way.

Ward McNally was our first *bête noire* and he ha-

What began as equivalent to a federal parliamentary backbencher's salary has ended up as being much less than that same backbencher's tax-free allowances.

ranged us severally and individually for years, as well as writing the equivalent of several novels in the form of correspondence with any who would listen: the Chairman, the General Manager, his Federal Member, the Minister, the Treasurer, the PM, and of course the press. He eventually was offered a grant to write a biography of Ted Strehlow (okay, it was to shut him up!). The book, when published, disappeared without a trace. As so often happens, those with least talent are loudest in their claim.

We did lay down some ground rules. For fellowships we insisted that the assessment process would be based not on the 'academic' approach, with supporting references, but on specific examples of writing. This emphasis on the text was also an attempt to underline our concerns with eventual 'product'. The claims of those with real talent were high in our priorities. We believed it would be possible to continue underwriting major talents. The first, and most spectacular example, was the poet Les Murray. When he was offered one of the first three-year fellowships, Les accepted but with the proviso: "If I accept this, you will make me unemployable elsewhere: you, therefore have a moral obligation to support me for the rest of my life." The Board laughed, and thought: let each future application be considered on its merit. For twenty years, Les did not have one application to the Literature Board rejected.

The very first three-year fellowships were to Richard Beilby, Michael Cannon, Kenneth Cook, George Farwell, Rodney Hall, Jack Hibberd, Gwen Kelly, Morris Lurie, Peter Mathers, Frank Moorhouse, Les Murray, Barry Oakley, Randolph Stow and David Williamson. From that list an interesting cross-section of fiction writers, non-fiction writers and playwrights is revealed. The initial Board also made some ad hoc offers of fellowships, to writers who had been under former CLF grants and, under the old terms, could request extensions. For instance, Tom Keneally was offered a three-year fellowship. Shortly after taking this up he wrote to advise that he had been contracted by a major American

publisher for *Blood Red Sister Rose*, his first non-Australian theme and the beginning of his international career. He requested that his three-year fellowship be discontinued.

Alex Buzo also handed back an early fellowship, as did Randolph Stow. Stow had returned to Australia in 1974, partly because the grant gave him a sense of obligation. But in the following year, upon the defeat of the Whitlam government, he handed his grant back as a gesture of protest. He resumed his freelance work as a bartender in rural Suffolk.

In May 1973 Michael Costigan took up his appointment as Executive Officer. A former priest who had married, Michael was Literary Editor of the raffish and politically lively *Nation Review*. He was quiet, unassuming and very efficient; a behind-the-scenes man. Given the high profile of our initial chairman, Geoff Blainey, and the political tensions between the Board and Council, Michael's tact and discretion were an asset. He could show his claws, though, if occasion demanded. I recall once when Jean Battersby came to the Board to break its obstinacy on the Melbourne/Sydney issue. She hinted that Michael Costigan was only a temporary appointment. No contract had yet been signed. Michael quietly murmured that his twin brother was a barrister. Jean saw the point.

1973 was a demanding year: there were nineteen meetings between March and the end of the year, as well as various sub-committees. But if that was the year of excitement and grand plans, 1974 saw both consolidation and drama. The publishing subsidy scheme was debated. Minutes of the April 1973 meeting include the following:

After Mr Waten and Mr Dutton had outlined the plight of the novel—only nineteen new novels were published in Australia last year—the Board resolved to experiment by giving certain publishers an outright grant to enable them to publish the novels of their choice. In effect, a publisher willing to publish, say five novels would be given a specified sum which

he could then spend in his own way. The Board's only condition would be that the publisher encourage a proportion of new writers, that he uphold literary standards, and that, at the end of the year, he give a detailed report of his novel-publishing campaign.

This bulk-grant idea, based on the Canada Council's program, gained initial acceptance. Unfortunately, one publisher used this general subsidy to produce a group of novels that were attacked in the *Age* as "common library fiction" or "bodice rippers". Use of federal government funds for such trivial products was forcefully criticised. The Board retreated from its initial position of delegating responsibility to publishers, and reinstated the title-by-title system.

After many discussions and consultations the Board developed a publishing policy based on a per-page fee. After minor refinements, this has continued throughout the Board's history. For years now the Board has supported around one hundred books per year. Australian trade publishing though has multiplied prodigiously in this same period. The success of the Vogel/*Australian* Prize for young first-novelists transformed that most risk-taking area of publishing, as Allen & Unwin, the publishers who from the outset took on the task, have discovered to their satisfaction.

Hobart, in May 1974, was the meeting where Geoff Blainey formally announced he would not be re-appointed. Alec Hope and Geoffrey Dutton were also finishing. Furious whispering and campaigning. Who would be Geoff's successor? Manning was the obvious choice: continuity, prestige, seniority, rank. Reluctantly Manning agreed. Nancy sat in the background and was silent.

The next Board meeting, in June 1974, brought together old and new members. Manning Clark, Richard Hall, David Malouf, Elizabeth Riddell, Richard Walsh, Nancy Keesing and myself from the former Board, with newcomers Lorna Hannan, Noel Macainsh, Barrett Reid, Rosemary Wighton and Victor Williams. Nancy announced that she was the new Chair. She had been appointed by Jean Battersby.

In the next year the Australian Council for the Arts would, at last, be legally constituted with its own Act of Parliament naming it The Australia Council. The Literature Board would move up to Sydney in December 1975.

My early fears about the Board being disadvantaged when the cake was cut up were, I think, justi-

fied. We began with over 10 per cent of the budget but by the time I returned as Director of the Board, at the end of 1983, this had dropped to just over 6 per cent. A more important change had taken place, though. Literature was among the bright achievers of all the Australia Council areas of support.

Early journalists had delighted in mocking writers' grants as hand-outs (to 'dole bludgers'). After only ten years, subsidies had enabled a whole generation of brilliant new writers to emerge; not only to emerge, but be popular and successful. That success had extended internationally. In addition, the residency schemes transformed contact between writers and readers—a key measure of this was the decision by subsidised host organisations to select Australian writers, even though they could apply for overseas people.

Perhaps less well appreciated has been the Literature Board's substantial support, since 1974, of the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week. Before 1974 in Adelaide, audiences of twenty were considered adequate; one hundred people at a session a prodigy. Board money enabled a cross-fertilisation between established and new writers, it gave programmers the widest possible choice of participants, and the new flourish of publishing activity fed back into the escalating sense of adventure, so that within a decade the Adelaide Writers' Week was without precedent in Australia. It had become a meeting place of writers, agents, publishers, journalists, commentators, editors, the media. As writers became more confident of a 'public' role, so audiences—readers—were drawn into the sense of participation in writers as 'event'. Audiences at Adelaide events are now measured up to the thousands. The Australian writing world we juggled with in 1973 has now changed, and for the better.

I was in Melbourne in November 1975, after a Board meeting. I recall that I had offered to read a new manuscript submitted by Christopher Koch, in support of a request to extend his existing fellowship. The book was in an advanced draft and his publishers, Chatto & Windus, wanted some final polishing. Koch had forwarded the original manuscript, complete with paste-up emendations. I became worried that I was handling perhaps the only copy. But it seemed to be a breakthrough book, and its subject matter—Indonesia in the Sukarno crisis—struck me as refreshingly pertinent, in focusing on Asia but a different Asia from that of Vietnam, of

painful memory. The manuscript was called 'The Year of Living Dangerously'. Yes, I noted, we certainly must give Koch the funding to buy what time it took to polish the work.

I finished this job around 3 p.m. and decided to leave the motel, near Treasury Place, and find a stationers for a new typewriter ribbon. In the lift I bumped into Betty Riddell, a suave older man on her arm. "I've stayed on a few days too," she grinned. Then I went into the street. It was 11 November.

The sense of shock in the air was palpable. Something had happened. A shop assistant in Penfolds told me. The Whitlam government had been sacked.

Already, in these first hours, rumours were circulating. There was a military coup? The Army was behind Fraser? The Governor-General's action was unconstitutional? No public servants would be paid? There would be a double dissolution?

Although the streets looked the same, I felt something profound had changed in the internal balance of our country and our culture. When I returned to the motel I wondered if the Literature Board, if the whole edifice of the Australia Council would survive? Would we revert to 'advisory committees' only, once again? Judgement by one's peers may be fraught, but it is far preferable to judgement by one's political overlords.

My term on the Board lasted until June 1976. In budget debates I argued for the retention of two

basics we had achieved: 50 per cent of Board funding to go to individual writers; and the Literary Pension scheme to be retained. I was conscious of its links with 1908 and the beginnings of federal arts funding; and I was aware of its value to older and distinguished writers in their times of need—Christina Stead was the latest addition to the list, which had included people from Christopher Brennan, May Gibbs and Mary Gilmore to Francis Webb, Eve Langley and even Vance and Nettie Palmer. It was a small part of our budget (under 10 per cent) and it must continue, I argued. The high focus on individual writers has been maintained but, alas, pressures from Council finally succeeded, in the 1990s, in reducing literary pensions ('emeritus fellowships') to a token gesture.

Board meetings involved people. Our discussions and debates were often fiery and impassioned. But we also lived, most of us, out of suitcases and in motel rooms during those two- and three-day meetings. We rubbed shoulders, as the saying goes, with each other and it is impressive I think, that we all became, and remained, friends.

Thomas Shapcott's most recent book is the novel, Spirit Wresters (Wakefield Press, 2004). He is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide and is currently writing a novel about the 'Battle of Brisbane' in 1942.



www.twofiresfestival.com

Two Fires is a four-day gathering that celebrates and nurtures the relationship between creativity and activism. It is a new kind of festival that aims to extend the legacy of the great Australian poet, conservationist and reconciliation activist Judith Wright.

Who should come? Anyone with an interest in writing, art, music, poetry, film, environmental and social issues, reconciliation and indigenous Australians rights.

When? 18–21 March 2005

Where? Braidwood, south-east of Canberra, where Judith Wright spent the last third of her life.

Two Fires Festival of Arts and Activism is sponsored by the Australian Conservation Foundation, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), and the Globalism Institute at RMIT University. Supported by the Myer Foundation, Australia Council Literature Board, and Australian National University.

REDISCOVERING COMPASSION

The legacy of Judith Wright

HAS OUR SOCIETY become less compassionate over the past decade?

It's not a question that opinion polls could answer because few people would acknowledge or admit a shift towards insularity and selfishness. However, we do know that many people are feeling more fearful about the world and that our politicians have shamelessly engaged in the 'politics of fear'.¹ We see our politicians tripping over each other in competing for the support of self-centred 'aspirational voters'. When people say they would be willing to forgo tax cuts if more money goes into education and health, the politicians put their trust in tax cuts. And let's not blame it all on the politicians for they get rewarded for their efforts. And we feel it in our bones, do we not?, that the insularity of 'fortress Australia' has been rehabilitated (even if it is now too late to use the term 'white Australia'). Greed is travelling better than altruism; neophobia seems stronger than curiosity.

Of course, the very mention of 'white Australia' reminds us that insularity has been a defining characteristic of our nation for a very long time. An interest in redefining our identity to acknowledge the multicultural nature of our society and the resilience and influence of Indigenous Australians, who have survived attempts at physical and cultural genocide, has been a relatively recent phenomenon. When John Howard led the 1980s and nineties backlash against 'political correctness', the real target was probably compassion, because neo-liberal economics prefers a society of competing individuals who are preoccupied with consumption as the measurement of living standards. However, despite their current political

ascendancy, neo-liberal ideologues cannot stuff the debate on identity back in a box. They cannot assuage the fears—especially of young people—that we continue to live dangerously in our ecological ignorance. Strong border protection will do nothing to help us overcome problems of ignorance, arrogance and intolerance.

If these are dark days for compassion it is probably a good time to re-examine the legacy of some outstanding Australians who helped to lead us out of the dark days of white Australia. The two that spring to my mind—because they shared a breadth of vision that was way ahead of its time—were H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs and Judith Wright. And of those two, Judith Wright was the one who bequeathed us a rich set of writings in which she opened her heart and demonstrated how she used it to great effect.

I became much more aware of Judith's extraordinary legacy when she unexpectedly emerged as the star of a book I wrote with my colleague Stuart Hill called *Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action*.² We had completed the manuscript when Judith died in June 2000 and I took great interest in the published tributes and waited to see what might be done to keep her legacy alive. Together with another colleague, Aidan Davison, I even wrote an article³ suggesting that her legacy might best be celebrated in a festival that could bring together people inspired by her work in the fields of creative writing, nature conservation work, and reconciliation work and when that suggestion was welcomed by her daughter, Meredith McKinney, I realised I had to act on it. That festival—called the Two Fires Festival of Arts and Activism—will take place in



Braidwood (where Judith lived for the last thirty years of her life) in March 2005 and it will feature writers such as Rodney Hall, Kate Grenville, Leah Purcell, Arnold Zable, and Larissa Behrendt; musicians such as Shane Howard, David Bridie, Bobby McLeod, and Kavisha Mazzella; environmentalists such as Don Henry, Val Plumwood, and John Seed; and Aboriginal leaders such as Mick Dodson and Richard Frankland. Some of these people have been willing to cancel other engagements to be at the festival because they are inspired by the idea of celebrating and extending the legacy of Judith Wright.

Judith Wright's biographer, Veronica Brady, will be there and, in endorsing the project, she has suggested that Nugget Coombs would be happy to yield the spotlight to the poet. According to Brady:

Nugget Coombs, the public servant who helped to shape Australia in so many ways after the Second World War—as economist, environmentalist and champion of Aboriginal Australians—once called Judith Wright the “wisest of poets”. In these times when wisdom—the ability to know and take one's stand—seems so sadly lacking and yet so necessary, in the world in which we find ourselves, the planned celebration of Judith Wright's life and work offers an opportunity to reflect on our values and purposes as a people and renew the vision which is her legacy.

David Malouf has also endorsed the idea of singling out Judith Wright for such special attention, writing:

Some writers in the period immediately after their death fade a little, only, if they are lucky, to glow again later with a clearer flame. Judith Wright's flame seems brighter

than ever. The poems, the occasional writings, prose works like *The Generations of Men* and the splendid *Preoccupations of Australian Poetry*—still our finest work of criticism—seem more than ever the precious landmarks of our last half-century. A festival would remind us yet again of what we owe to her presence, and do honour to what remains: the books themselves that are the products of so much effort and love, and through which the woman still speaks so commandingly, so challengingly, of her vision and concern.

Thomas Keneally has written of the debt that other writers owe Judith Wright, suggesting that:

At a time when it was every writer's sacred duty to be alienated by Australia—to be a European soul descended into this terrible place—she was unaffected. Instead she made her myths out of this place. The spaciousness of her spirit has always been so grand. Are Australians more selfish than we were a decade or two ago?⁴

But, of course, any celebration of Judith Wright that does justice to the breadth of her legacy cannot focus on writing alone. From the 1960s, when her career as an activist on issues relating to the environment and Aboriginal rights began to expand, Judith found it very difficult to preserve time and energy for her art (writing). She probably never got the competing demands in balance—veering first one way then the other—and near the end of her life, having led Canberra's ‘bridge walk’ for reconciliation, she declared: “Anyone can write poetry, but to be an activist is far more important”.⁵ Over the longer term her art and her activism undoubtedly

strengthened each other and that is why the Two Fires Festival will focus on the creative tension between the two.

For Wright it was not enough to explore empathy as an interested observer, but to act in the interests of the 'other' that one can better understand through a deepening of empathy. It was not enough to acknowledge that "there is, there was, a country, that spoke in the language of the leaves"⁶ or to try to think like a tree,⁷ birds,⁸ or a frog⁹ because once we have seen the world through their eyes we must act to sustain the world they need. It is not enough to acknowledge that our ancestors did terrible things to Aboriginal people¹⁰ or that we keep our distance from Aboriginal people living on the margins, we must act to rebuild a trust that can help us learn how to live in this land.¹¹

Not surprisingly, Judith Wright fluctuated between despair and hope, anger and gratitude, and her poetry helps us give voice to all these emotions. For example, an angry poem published in the year in which Australia celebrated the bicentennial of Captain Cook's 'discovery' of our eastern coast ends with the words:

*I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
The drying creek, the furious animal,
That they oppose us still;
That we are ruined by the thing we kill.¹²*

Yet, on other occasions, she had a Buddhist-like sense of being at one with the non-human, as in the way she ended a 1985 poem called 'Rainforest':

*We with our quick dividing eyes
Measure, distinguish and are gone.
The forest burns, the tree-frog dies,
Yet one is all and all are one.*

Famously, Judith Wright took action on empathy by forming a close friendship with the Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) who brought alive the stories of genocide and survival that she had only previously imagined. As Jennifer Jones wrote in *Overland* 171, their friendship was based on a depth of collaborative inquiry that has rarely, if ever, been matched. Out of this came Judith's famous and powerful poem 'Two Dreamtimes', the last two verses of which probably express better than any other the aims of the Two Fires Festival:

*The knife's between us. I turn it round,
The handle to your side,
The weapon made from your country's bones.
I have no right to take it.*

*But both of us die as our dreamtime dies.
I don't know what to give you
For your gay stories, your sad eyes,
But that, and a poem, sister.*

Perhaps creative expression can help us to 'say' things that cannot be said in any other way. No doubt we can say things better if we know how better to use our imagination and our creativity. We can sustain activism when it is based on a deep form of empathy. But perhaps the most radical thing we can learn from Judith Wright is something she wrote in the poem 'At Cooloolah' way back in 1955. While admiring the sight of a blue crane fishing Cooloolah's lake one evening, Wright said she was suddenly overcome with the feeling that "I am a stranger, come of a conquering people" who is made to feel "unloved by all my eyes delight in, and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake". However, rather than being paralysed by that realisation, she concluded that: "I know we are justified only by love". Has anyone better expressed what it means to act with compassion?

1. *Dark Victory* (Allen & Unwin) by Marion Wilkinson and David Marr demonstrated how John Howard and his cronies manipulated fear to win the 2001 elections and contributions to the book edited by Robert Manne on *The Howard Years* (Black Inc., 2004) suggest that the Howard government has been adept in the use of fear campaigns to pursue a range of political objectives.
2. CUP, Melbourne, 2001.
3. *Ecopolitics: Thought + Action* 1:3, 2002, Pluto Press, Sydney.
4. Cited by Tony Stephens in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 July 2000, on the announcement of Judith's death.
5. Cited by Tim Bonyhady in 'The Fine Art of Activism', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 2000.
6. From the poem 'Falls Country' published in *Alive*, 1973.
7. As in 'The Flame-Tree', 1953, or 'Scribbly Gum', 1955.
8. As in the bird series of poems published in 1962.
9. See 'Rainforest', 1985.
10. See 'Niggers' Leap, New England', 1946, or 'At Cooloolah', 1955.
11. See *We Call for a Treaty*, 1985.
12. From 'Australia 1970', 1970.

Martin Mulligan is a senior research fellow at the Globalism Institute at RMIT University and is convenor of the national organising committee for the Two Fires Festival of Arts and Activism. He is co-author, with Stuart Hill, of *Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action* (CUP, 2001).

ATTACKS THAT STING

The angry poetry of
Judith Wright and Gig Ryan



IN 1993 JUDITH WRIGHT told us in the foreword to her *Collected Poems* that “imagination and feeling are now devalued in favour of the harder values of so-called rationalism”.¹ When Wright made statements like this, she was generally referring to public discourse outside poetry. Towards the end of her life, Wright decided to stop publishing poetry and concentrate on more direct political action and non-fiction writing. Perhaps it was a concession to the times; Wright believing that so-called rational thinking was more effective in achieving political change. Yet, reading Wright’s poetry, it is clear that her politics were deeply informed by passionate feelings of anger and remorse. This essay looks at the role of poetry, especially as the vehicle for expressions of emotion, in public political discussion. It takes up some of the issues Wright’s life and writing raise, asking whether or not political discussion is necessarily reliant on the ‘harder values’ of logic and literalism. While rigid distinctions between rational and emotional utterance are often facile, it is possible to make a distinction between overtly emotional and coldly rational texts. Wright was correct in saying that ‘feeling is devalued’ in the public realm: arguably since 1993 it has become even more devalued. Perhaps because questions of economic and ‘terror’ management are now given such prominence, it is generally accepted that a leader must have extraordinary abilities to remain emotionally detached. This rationalist posturing has been the great deceit of John Howard’s time in office. Whether it’s *Tampa*, MUA or Saddam Hussein, Howard gains political leverage by appealing to fear, anger and frustration in the body politic. His detached language invariably appeals to prejudice and emotion.

In response to such apparently ‘rational’ times, there is a great wealth of non-fiction writing that claims to work at the analytic level. As Wright says, the kind of things that poetry can offer us—imagination and feeling—are so devalued that their impact is rarely felt. Yet poetry, unlike much non-fiction writing, traverses the so-called boundaries between political and personal, emotional and intellectual, literal and rhetorical realms. One notable example of this ability to traverse boundaries and allow anger born out of a political situation to enter into the text in a personal way, is Tony Birch’s beautiful poem, ‘Mahzar’. Named after Mahzar Bakhtiyari who was born into detention in 2003, the poem reads: “beyond the sporting headlines/ the sigh of your breath/ and a flutter of heart beat/ taps a nagging rhythm/ at the backdoor of the nation”.²

What kind of public statements can be made through poetry? Can overtly angry poetry mount a politically sophisticated argument? Two very different poets who foreground emotion and anger in their poetry are Judith Wright and Gig Ryan. Where Wright was a public figure as well as a prolific poet (she was, for example, founder and president of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland), Ryan is rarely seen or heard publicly outside her poetry. Their aesthetic could hardly be more different; Wright is arguably a late Romantic while Ryan’s poetry often seems to epitomise postmodernism. Despite these different attitudes to art and politics, both Wright’s and Ryan’s poetry engages in what are often dry public discussions in a refreshingly emotional way. Their work does, however, also show how difficult it can be to make a poem speak above and beyond subjective experi-

ence. Whereas the non-fiction writer has at her disposal statistics, quotes and the well-trodden paths of rhetorical argument, the poet generally (although not necessarily) works in the apparently more abstract terrain of personal observation.

Judith Wright saw no firm distinction between the ethical and aesthetic worlds. Wright wrote admirably of Charles Harpur, a colonial poet who attacked privileged classes. In quoting his attitude to art, we can see echoes of Wright's own position. Poetry, Harpur said, "has never been a mere art with me, but always the vehicle of earnest purpose, the audible expression of the innermost impulses of my moral being".³ For Wright, that 'earnest purpose' was primarily a desire to see change in social attitudes towards the environment and Aboriginal dispossession. Poetry, Wright tells us, helps the poet in "understanding one's life and its meaning".⁴ "For the reader", she goes on, "it can help in the same way. That is what art is for".⁵ Art is an enlightening tool, a way of discovering more. It is not simply a playground for language. Given that Wright felt assured of her understanding of the world—repeatedly referring to herself as 'stubborn'—one feels it is the reader, more than the poet, who is to be informed by Wright's poems. In this process of enlightenment, emotion had a place. She was proud of the fact that poems evolved from an "emotional climate".⁶

Perhaps no poem better demonstrates the difficulties in combining a personal emotional response with the colonial history of Australia than 'Two Dreamtimes'. Wright wrote 'Two Dreamtimes' for her friend and fellow-poet, Oodgeroo. In it, Wright attempts to align the effects of Aboriginal dispossession with her own distress at environmental devastation. A dualism is established by the title, ('Two Dreamtimes'; two dreams ruined) which is echoed throughout the poem: "if we are sisters,/ it's in this—our grief for a lost country", "I mourn it as you mourn" and "we too have lost our dreaming". Problematically, the suggestion is that Wright's suffering is as considerable as Oodgeroo's. This is not to say that Wright failed to understand the gravity of colonialism. She spent the greater part of her life drawing attention to it.

For Wright, though, environmental devastation was a personally devastating reality. This is no more clearly felt than in poems like 'For New England' where the poet's body becomes the landscape: "All the hills' gathered waters feed my seas/ who am

the swimmer and the mountain river;/ and the long slopes' concurrence in my flesh/ who am the gazer and the land I stare on." Those writers who (as Wright would say) were "born of the conquerors", and dramatise their attachment to Australian landscapes, have tended to legitimise colonial presence, and effect a trivialising of Indigenous connections to the land. When Henry Kendall, Rosa Praed or Murray Bail write of mystic experience (whether gothic, erotic or both) in the Australian outback, they inevitably forge links between the settler and the land. These links are the mainstay of nationalist mythology. While Wright poems like 'Two Dreamtimes' give expression to her sympathy for Indigenous people, they also provide a kind of justification (or, at the very least, a redemptive face) to settler-presence. If those 'born of the conquerors' have developed a relationship with the land, and understand its complexities, then they become—according to nationalist discourse—a native, their presence here no more or less justified than that of Aboriginal people.

In an *Overland* article on the 'politics and poetry of Judith Wright', Gig Ryan characterises such moments as those presented in 'Two Dreamtimes' as a "pathetically noble Christian gesture of atonement for white Australian history".⁷ Christian imagery provides a backdrop to this story of innocence, corruption and salvation, set in the Australian outback: "you were one of the dark children/ I wasn't allowed to play with". The experience of living acts as a kind of corruption, since we all inevitably engage with the sins of those that came before us: "they hadn't told me the land I loved/ was taken out of your hands". There is recognition that life has placed the two women poets differently. Wright makes clear that privilege—and therefore responsibility—travels along ancestral lines ("I stand with all my fathers,/ their guilt and righteousness"), but the qualifying effect of 'fathers' should be noted. Wright's feminism offers white women a kind of absolution which is curious given Wright was also aware of the lineations of power; of how white women participated in colonisation. In *Talking Up to the White Woman*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson suggests that, "for Indigenous women all white feminists benefit from colonisation".⁸ Wright obscures this fact, so that not only does feminism work to further the representation of Wright as a passive subject in the colonial project, it creates a point of

affinity between the 'sisters'. Sexual violence offers a point of connection: "telling sad tales of women/ (black or white at different prices)/ meant much and little to us".

But because there is so often in a Wright poem a search for resolution—or clarity at the very least—Wright's anger is subsumed by something greater; a longing to cure Oodgeroo's 'sad eyes'. The onus is clearly on Wright to do something but, she writes, "I don't know what to give you". This poem becomes an investigation of Wright's guilt at not knowing how to fix the problem. Wright is angry with fathers, perpetrators of sexual violence, environmental vandals and publishers, but she is also angry with herself for feeling helpless. There has been a lot written on white guilt (and a lot said about it) but it is worth remembering that, as Tony Birch says, "a common Indigenous view is that white guilt is useless to Aboriginal people".⁹ And perhaps, in the end, the social usefulness of Wright's poem is tempered by being too substantially an investigation of the poet's own personally felt response. While angry poetry can draw attention to social failure, it can also engage the reader in a highly psychologised version of the problem, one that may do little to further social change.

In Wright's apology to the Koori and Murri people, 'At Cooloolah', she managed to more successfully balance the macro with the micro so that the poem seemed to suggest meaning beyond Wright's own personal experience. In that poem she wrote of being "oppressed by arrogant guilt", but in 'Two Dreamtimes' guilt becomes more oppressive. Wright's own emotional need means the drive of the poem is for reconciliation of both national and psychological proportions. But failing to find anything beyond itself the poem finishes by announcing itself as the gift: poetry itself as absolution.

Bruce Bennett has described Wright as "one of the few poets [who] managed to include the words 'ecological' and 'ecosystem' in a single poem".¹⁰ We might add to that list, the terms 'economics', 'stock-exchangers' and 'a falling market'. In order to articulate the reasons for her anger, Wright necessarily employs such banal terms as 'land on hire-purchase' and a word that few would associate with poetry informed by Romanticism: 'publishers'. But problematically, the verse strains under the weight of such literalism. Perhaps in another poetic oeuvre—perhaps in a more contemporary one like

Gig Ryan's, for instance—such words wouldn't present such a stumbling block. But in the highly rhetorical world of Wright's poems, they stick out all too clearly, interrupting the flow that all other elements of the poem—rhyme, metre, allusion—work to maintain.

In stark contrast, 'Australia 1970' is an angry poem which positively refutes absolution, thereby effecting a 'sting' more pointed than many of Wright's other poems. Acknowledging the limitations of poetry in driving social change, Wright wrote Harpur's poetry: "his attacks could sting, if not damage".¹¹ At this year's Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference in Sydney, Susan Lever told the audience she thought of this poem "almost as if it were a curse". Central to the curse, of course, is the promise of revenge. 'Australia 1970' is strong on this: "die, wild country", she commands in the first line. It is a poem informed by her fierce anger about environmental devastation: "suffer, wild country, like the ironwood". Wright evoked a punitive, gothic tone, which sits comfortably alongside her Romantic aesthetic tendencies: "I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,/ the drying creek, the furious animal,/ that they oppose us still;/ that we are ruined by the thing we kill". While the apocalyptic finale is a kind of resolution Wright's refraining from finding some symbolic solution to the problems she raises means that her anger is more effectively communicated and arguably more contagious than in a poem like 'Two Dreamtimes'.

Where Wright's poetry develops dramatic tension through narrative, resonant symbols and by the poet's critical and stable examination of her emotional response, Ryan's poetry creates tension through postmodern linguistic tools, such as disjunction, an unstable speaking position, and unanticipated associations. Much has been made of the tone of Ryan's poems. Judith Beveridge has stated for example that "this is a poetry which *must* be read mostly in terms of its tone and the persuasions of voice".¹² Beveridge also remarked that "tone, then, is the most accessible aspect of Ryan's poetry".¹³ This lack of 'accessibility' haunts Ryan's poetry, but strangely there are few things more communicative and immediately recognisable than tone. For Beveridge, though, tone without a coherent context is lost on the reader: "it's a problem often of having tone, but not always being able to adequately contextualise it, other than in a rather

Where for Wright writing poetry with a political conscience meant passing on unacknowledged histories of colonial violence, Ryan's poetry seems impatient with facts or notions of truth.

vague social or political arena".¹⁴ Put simply, if the tone of a poem is unmistakably angry but the reader is not sure how exactly that anger might be translated into a broader understanding of the world, it is largely ineffective. In contrast, there is no mistaking the intent and political thrust behind a Wright poem.

In Ryan's essay on Wright, she reflects on the way the older poet's poetry "has conflict and paradox at its core, just as Australia does".¹⁵ This emphasis on conflict and paradox is—interestingly enough—what reviewers of Ryan's own poetry tend to focus on. Kate Lilley writes of the way Ryan "privileg[es] the seam, the division, the razor line, the cliff, the dawn" in her poem 'Excavations'.¹⁶ This line is the meeting point of oppositions; the conflation of paradox and (perhaps) conflict. In the edited anthology *Bridgings*, Rose Lucas and Lyn McCredden posit the wound as a symbol of Ryan's poetics. The wound, they write, "offers entry—legitimate or illegitimate, expected or forced", as well as "offer[ing] a way out: the bad blood of repression is leech[ed] and purged".¹⁷ And while Lucas and McCredden stress that the 'wound' is not necessarily an image of negativity, creating as it does opportunities for the intersection between "self/other, inside/outside [as well as] guilt/victimisation, pleasure/pain", for the most part the wound signifies some kind of bodily experienced pain. A wound is a directly felt attack resulting in an unpredictable, individualistic, perhaps unreasoned response. Unlike the moderated and reasoned poetry of Wright, where violence and pain (while present) remain distant, in Ryan's poetry the threat of future inflictions informs the dynamics of her lines; it gives them an urgency, an impatience with indirectness, politeness or convention. Objects, people, concepts, are not likened or compared. Instead they become one and the same. Ryan's metaphors don't ask, "shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" They are more likely to read "thou art a summer's day". But, of course, it's rarely a summer's day that we are talking about in Ryan's poetry.

Where for Wright writing poetry with a political conscience meant passing on unacknowledged histories of colonial violence, Ryan's poetry seems impatient with facts or notions of truth. While Ryan acknowledges that Wright poems such as 'The Dark Ones' were "historically important in alerting some Australians to unwanted truths",¹⁸ such an appeal to truth is not present in Ryan's own poetry. Perhaps this is because Ryan finds that reason holds no power. Discussing ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal land, Ryan cites the Yorta Yorta land claim. This was the legal judgement that declared "the tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs". In typically pessimistic style, Ryan reflects that a "bizarre lack of reasoning" is what "we have now come to expect from Australian law".¹⁹ This lack, which Ryan finds more generally in the world around her, permeates her poetry and is delineated in her 'Critique of Practical Reason': "our allies profit from our foes" and "birds quack out of season". Like Wright, Ryan is dissatisfied and angry. Unlike Wright, she isn't compelled to articulate the cause of such dissatisfaction and analyse it in a rational way. John Scott suggests that *The Division of Anger* set out to "subvert and sabotage meaning".²⁰ If the world is not logical, then logic has no place in her poetry.

Unafraid of the rawness of anger, Ryan's poetry seems to confirm Sylvia Plath's and Adrienne Rich's notion that bitterness can give verse sharpness and clarity. There is, however, a twist on this. Ryan's poems are often staged in the present tense. Unlike Rich poems such as 'Diving into the Wreck', which search for answers—a narrative of oppression that will reveal meaning—Ryan's poems lack that investigative drive. Ryan's poems display a reluctance to adopt narratives based on past, present and future. Instead they interrogate the now, attempting to capture the present in an assured way. The opening lines of Ryan's poems frequently display this tendency to plunge her reader into an un-

familiar world where action is already taking place. There is no time to get one's bearings: "The nazi in your bed arranges you" ('Small-scale'), "I go and get more smack" ('Excavation, Excavation') and "I'm wearing my mother's honeymoon shirt" ('How I Went').

One notable exception, however, to this tendency to deliver poetry purely in the present tense, is the widely anthologised 'If I Had a Gun'. Perhaps the most overtly 'angry' of Ryan's poems, it is also possibly the most 'logical' and 'explanatory'. This is unmistakably feminist poetry, articulating the ways in which patriarchy infringes on and shapes a woman's life. Perhaps in some ways the equivalent of Wright's 'Australia 1970', it appears at times like a curse; a violent and menacing threat against those who have damaged a woman. 'If I Had a Gun' begins, "I'd shoot the man who pulled up slowly in his hot car this/morning/I'd shoot the man who whistled from his balcony". The poem documents the many moments in a woman's day when she feels humiliated and objectified. Perhaps in response to claims that this poem is a more 'simple' depiction of anger and its outpourings, Lucas and McCredden argue that "the anger and vitriol that burst through . . . need not be interpreted as a simple, and thus unproductive, reversal of a victim/victimiser dichotomy".²¹ Instead, they see this poem as providing a very real upsetting of "stereotypical gender expectations"²² and a challenge to "stereotypical constructions of femininity and of the female artist".²³ Unlike many Ryan poems, where anger is communicated through a kind of restless unease with the world, 'If I Had a Gun' is focused anger. It communicates through shared experience and invites the reader into a recognisable narrative. This allows Ryan to be more than 'tone' and construct a political narrative which identifies a source of oppression and offers a solution (if a somewhat extreme one).

Angry poetry can become all-consumed by the poet's subjective framework, and fail to make those connections between experience and the external world that really vital political discourse relies on. Not long before Wright died, she wrote 'To Younger Poets' (see *Overland* 154). In this poem she stresses the importance of remaining alert to the world beyond oneself: "poets who keep on saying 'I' and 'me'/ are drunk/ on Ego". Perhaps Wright became disillusioned with poetry which foregrounds subjective experience. Admittedly this foregrounding

has made her poetry, like Ryan's, easier to ignore within a world of 'rational' analysis. But Adrienne Rich's assessment that in Sylvia Plath's work, "it is finally the woman's sense of *herself*—embattled, possessed—that gives the poetry its dynamic charge",²⁴ reminds us that poetry can communicate so much more than the merely rational. Poetry can accommodate both rational and impressionistic sequencing and perhaps this is its greatest capacity: to be more than one thing at once. Angry poetry—whether morally or logically coherent, rational or not—can be an effective means of advancing a political position. A foundation of honest emotion enables the expression of more profound truths than politicians, hiding behind the mask of objectivity, can offer. If the frequency with which 'If I Had a Gun' and 'Australia 1970' are quoted and anthologised is anything to go by, overtly angry poetry not only demands attention, but commands respect.

1. Judith Wright, Foreword to *Collected Poems 1942–1985*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1994.
2. Tony Birch, 'Mahzar', *Arena magazine* 68, 2003, p.47.
3. Judith Wright, *Born of the Conquerors*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991, p.133.
4. Wright, Foreword.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Gig Ryan, 'Uncertain Possession: The Politics and Poetry of Judith Wright', *Overland* 154, 1999, p.29.
8. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talking Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism*, UQP, St Lucia, 2000, p.xxv.
9. Tony Birch, 'Black Armbands and White Veils: John Howard's Moral Amnesia', *Melbourne Historical Journal* 25, 1997, p.13.
10. Bruce Bennett, 'An Ecological Vision—Judith Wright', *An Australian Compass*, FACP, South Fremantle, 1991, p.159.
11. Wright, *Born of the Conquerors*, p.129.
12. Judith Beveridge, 'Three Poets', *Island* 88, 2002, p.92.
13. Beveridge, 'Three Poets'.
14. *Ibid.*, p.93.
15. Gig Ryan, 'Uncertain Possession: The Politics and Poetry of Judith Wright', *Overland* 154, 1999, p.33.
16. Kate Lilley, 'Avenging Angel/ Sick City', *Scriptsi* 6:3, 1990, p.209.
17. Rose Lucas & Lyn McCredden, eds, *Bridgings: Readings in Australian Women's Poetry*, OUP, Melbourne, 1996, p.184.
18. Ryan, 'Uncertain Possession', p.29.
19. *Ibid.*, p.27.
20. John A. Scott, 'Ten Statements on Gig Ryan's *The Division of Anger*', *Scriptsi* 2:2, 1983, p.167.
21. Lucas & Lyn McCredden, *Bridgings*, p.188.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p.189.
24. Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible*, Norton, New York, 2001, p.12.

Georgie Arnott is writing her MA on Australian Poetry and teaches at Swinburne University.

Page 35 photograph of Gig Ryan, 1998, by Margie Medlin.

Holy Mary

beads marking the passing of time
rosary from bride of Christ
in a honey-suit for solar eclipse,
cream-cake queen in the wishing-dark

Am I awake?

clicking beads and dream crosscut
light switch out of reach
clock time out of sight beyond
the press of books at bedside
night at its darkest after the moon-fruit
has hunkered down below horizon

beads
I am cocooned in a nest-bed
echo
Reverend Mother's voice

Holy Mary

the click
click
click
of her black rosary beads
as she counts them through her fingers

Mother of God

Am I awake?
I don't know where her rosary is
I lost it
or gave it away

a clicking beetle
somewhere in *the dark*
enunciates each decade
prays for sinners.

BARBARA TEMPERTON

Lucid

L uxuriating in the
U ncommon moments of
C larity beyond the blur
I ntrinsic to the routined
D aze of minds hazed

L arge-eyed and peering
U nder often unturned
C rags of wisdom
I lluminating
D ank and moulding files

L ight after
U ntold episodes of
C ryptic heaviness
I n which we sink
D own out of sight of us

Lucid as . . .

a newborn babe
thrust into an unframed world

LEANNE HILLS

The End

It seemed to go on
hour
after miserable hour
eventually . . .

the butler
walked away with
the silver.

GEOFF GOODFELLOW

The Old Bastard

Your father's in hospital,
and you need to be there,
'to keep the old bastard
at peace with himself'.

The nurses tiptoe around him,
afraid he'll pinch their arses again.
Their starched white dresses remind him
of your mother on their wedding day.

You sit beside him, looking out
through the square box, mumbling
something about the weather only
to anaesthetise what you're feeling.

I call you from work, *How's your father?*
A pause convinces me that he's died,
but then your voice tells me otherwise
and you sound almost disappointed.

At night, while the fans like samurai swords
cut through the silence, I hear you cry—muffled.
Then the phone rings, sending shock waves through
the chambers of my heart.

You answer it, your voice disappearing
into the darkness that covers us.
I am sure this time, he has died—the pause never so tense.

It's my father . . . he's fighting with the doctors.

MARIA VELLA

Places of refuge

1. Up in the Hills

Hidden away up in the hills, off a gravel road through an abandoned orchard,
there is a place alive in my mind, a notional country

of white-skinned wandoos and grasstrees and granite outcrops.

There the bull ants are monstrous, magnified by quiet,
and the stilled kangaroos are hesitant self-portraits.

There, once, with the evening breeze rising up from the valley
stirring the sheoaks, too slight to wake the other trees, I,

like this glade, this breathing-space, this land, became: *untouched*:
psyche.

2. The Serpentine Monastery

Having stood in line and offered my spoonful of rice to each of the monks,
then watched the middle-aged Thai women bow to them,

I recall how, by accident, I'd found my monk-friend's hut on the burnt-out hillside
and had foreseen him telling me that the Buddha had taught Non-Proliferation.

Yet this place, slippery as the ball-bearing gravel,
impersonal as the parrotbush and contorted banksias,

is both a refuge from the new economies and what I will call The Snake.

3. A Satellite City

Between the enormous limestone library and the recently laid-out ghost town
of empty units and cul de sacs dreaming of houses and playing children

the bush thick with grasstrees,

their blackened spears tall as antennae on outback utes,
is decorative though wild enough to help a 21-year-old fugitive

from the new city's courthouse.

JOHN MATEER

In the boot of someone's car

There is a woman
locked in the boot
of someone's car.

The darkness is pressing down on her
so hard she can't breathe
and she can't be sure
whether she's choking on fear
or petrol fumes
or the darkness.

The driver takes the corners too fast
it hurts less if she just goes limp.
She can't remember how she got there
but she will be there forever
her voice hoarse from screaming
because I can't think of a way
to get her out.

I know that somewhere
there's a cable release
or a toolbox with a crowbar
or a wrench.

She could jemmy the lock.
All she has to do is feel around in the dark
but her hands are tied behind her back
and I don't know what to do with her
once she's out.

I don't even know who the driver is.
So I leave her there,
in the boot of someone's car.

I've run out of endings.
I leave women crying on doorsteps.
I leave lonely men
in empty carriages
on last trains to nowhere.

I leave families sleeping
as their houses burn to the ground.
I leave gamblers,
cocaine addicts, failed musicians,
prostitutes, lawyers, fathers,
at the top of buildings,
under bridges,
on freeways, train tracks, rooftops,
on the cracked linoleum floors of
restrooms in fast-food restaurants
somewhere in the outer western suburbs,
or chain-smoking at kitchen tables
watching the smoke curl up to
twenty-five-watt Homebrand light bulbs
that flickflickflicker
as they wait for unfaithful lovers
to return home from work.

And I leave a man
with smoke in his eyes
both hands on the wheel
driving as far away as he can
on ten bucks of fuel
before he breaks down.
He calls me
to ask where we're going from here

And I tell him that I don't know
because I've run out of endings.
I tell him that I'm sorry,
but there's a woman
locked in the boot
of his car.

JOSEPHINE ROWE

A SIN THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

Class and sexuality in Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded* and Anna Kokkinos's *Head On*

CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS'S *Loaded* is a 1995 'grunge' novel of existential angst and rebellion, adapted by Anna Kokkinos for her 1998 film *Head On*.¹ Ari, the novel's narrator-hero, is an unemployed 19-year-old Greek-Australian homosexual. He spends a tempestuous night having casual sex, using drugs, fighting with friends and making diatribes about the various socio-cultural groups of Melbourne. At the end, as he waits for his parents to "kill" him for staying out all night, he is no closer to 'coming out' to them. Indeed, Ari has yet to deal with his own internalised homophobia, which makes him fearful of losing his masculinity if he shows affection or tenderness.

A deeply conflicted character, Ari's sense of dislocation and hopelessness is illustrated in a vague desire to flee Melbourne. He tells his mother, like him born in Australia: "Mum, there's no work here. Maybe I can get work in Greece". And he muses:

I could go back to school, I could try and get some shit job cleaning toilets in a hospital somewhere, or disappear in some office labyrinth in the city somewhere, doing a job that a computer could do faster and better than me anyway.

Ari's technophobia—his fear that a computer could do a better job than him, anyway—is arguably the legacy of his parents' generation, of labourers or industrial workers who have lost jobs to improved machines, or simply seen themselves marginalised in terms of social status or standard of living as a new class of technically trained workers emerged. Tellingly, one of Ari's preferred epithets for the

working-class ethnic Australians of his parents' generation is "peasants".

The hero's apathy and rage seem to have their roots in his class status or background. The reader is, effectively, presented with the portrait of a young man who has inherited, or internalised, an experience of defeat, which properly speaking *belonged* to his parents' generation. This specifically working-class experience unfolds in a distinctly Australian setting, against an implicit background of union struggle, deregulation and economic recession.² The novel is also informed by the 1960s and seventies ideals of international socialism and by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in the late eighties and early nineties. In Australia, the early nineties saw rising unemployment and a decline in prospects in manufacturing, construction and other industrial sectors; they were also years of general cutbacks within the public sector, including the universities. As Brian Martin observed in February 1992:

The Labor government has implemented more policies which have served big business and hurt the average worker than any previous Australian government. Following the ideology of the 'free market', the economy was opened up to the 'winds of competition' . . . Average real wages declined while the rich became richer.³

Although it should not be assumed that Ari desires to follow in his father's footsteps as a blue-collar worker, there is a distinct impression that Ari is not simply a stereotypical slacker, but rather someone who is paralysed by an awareness of a

real decline in prospects. According to statistics from the National Centre for Vocational Research:

The early 1990s recession in the Australian economy had an enormous impact on apprenticeship numbers. They crashed from 161,000 in 1990 to just over 120,000 three years later. Apprenticeships remained at these historically low levels for some years through the mid-1990s. In the early 1990s traineeships also remained low, being fewer than 10,000 in most years in the early- to mid-1990s.⁴

Disillusioned by a sense that there are no desirable avenues for him, some of Ari's most powerful speeches involve his dismissal of the lucky country myth of great opportunity and progress: "There's no jobs, no work, no factories, no wage packet, no half-acre block". Rejecting the ideal, or dream, of bourgeois success and progress, the narrator-hero also despairs of the counter-ideals of the working class. This vision he articulates through an uncompromising language of anger and radicalism:

There is another urban myth. It is about solidarity . . . In the working class suburbs of the West where communal solidarity is meant to flourish, the skip sticks with the skip, the wog with the wog, the gook with the gook, and the abo with the abo. Solidarity, like love, is a crock of shit. The rich don't fear the unionised worker, they don't fear the militant.

Paradoxically, Ari's vehement rejection of solidarity as "a crock of shit" is implicitly founded on a learned respect for the values of class solidarity. In other words, he condemns solidarity not because he does not believe in it as an ideal, but because he believes that it no longer exists. He is someone who has lost faith in the working-class, politically conscious environment in which he was brought up. It is this aspect of Ari's depiction that the film *Head On* glosses over.

Head On focuses on the contrast between Ari, who is 'in the closet', and his friend Johnny, who refuses to conceal his sexuality and even goes out in drag. The film introduces an interesting detail, that Johnny's homosexual identity causes his father to be ostracised by other men, such as Ari's father. As a secondary victim of homophobia, his fate illustrates the workings of male homosocial relations, in which heterosexuality is made normative or compulsory.⁵ But in *Loaded* Mr Petroukis

is also deeply affected by his unemployment. The patriarchal relationship between the middle-aged man and the young narrator is indicated when Ari calls him "*theo*" (uncle), not because he is family, but because he is one of the older men of his family's acquaintance. Mr Petroukis, drunk and depressed, instantly asks Ari about *his* luck looking for work, and then bemoans his own situation, as well as the state of the country. Ari describes the exchange:

No job, no job, Ari, he says in English. His laughter stops and now his voice is sad. Fucked up country, fucked up country. He continues repeating words in English. He is moaning.

A working-class migrant, just like Ari's father, it is apparent that his state of mind reflects an attitude to the world of work, proper to the traditional patriarchal ethics of the working class, whereby being unemployed—as much as his son's sexuality—goes to the heart of his self-image as a man.

Asked in an interview about the challenges or difficulties she faced as a lesbian director approaching the story of a male homosexual character, Anna Kokkinos identified ethnicity as the way in which she worked out how to "go into this young man's head"; her "entrance into the book was [Ari's] Greekness and conflict with it".⁶ In other words, ethnicity and sexuality were clearly the primary axes of the story from the point of view of the director. As a result, the class aspects of the original are played down, while sexual politics are privileged, even when this requires introducing additional scenes. Divorced from their basis in class-consciousness, the film's protagonist seems at times merely an immature teenage cynic. His only growth is in terms of his sexuality, as he ultimately accepts the wisdom and dignity of 'coming out', in what becomes a gay cinematic *bildungsroman*.

Perhaps the most significant transformation in the film is the closing scene, in which Ari, having been tongue-lashed by Johnny, in the transvestite guise of "Toula", for being willing to remain 'in the closet', to live "on his knees", then *chooses* to go down on his knees, literally, for another man, a visual cue that he has come to terms with his own identity and is no longer concerned to wrestle other men into a submissive position. The scene incorporates a voice-over speech in which Ari implies

that he has ‘come out’ to his parents: “I’m a whore, a dog, a cunt. My father’s insults make me strong. I accept them. I’m sliding towards the sewer. I’m not struggling. I can smell the shit, but I’m still breathing.”

The speech is, curiously, an abridged version of the one in the novel in which Ari complains that “There’s no jobs, no work, no factories, no wage packet, no half-acre block”. In the novel, Ari’s complaint is framed as a refutation of the “very cherished urban myth . . . [t]hat every generation has it better than the one that came before it”. Ari’s cynicism is informed here by his sense of class conditions, and possibly by an awareness of the unemployment and economic decline of the early nineties: “I am surfing on the down-curve of capital,” he says.

Stephen and Ariadne, two fellow young Greek-Australians, whom Ari meets during his night out, espouse two distinct ideals of left-wing politics, and make an important contribution to the political context of *Loaded*. Stephen, a young militant who maintains that “Marxism . . . is not dead,” does not appear in the film at all. Ariadne, a radical leftist, rejects “so-called left-wing Greeks . . . married, bourgeois, living in the suburbs”; and calls instead “for a new left, of young people, artists, deviants, troublemakers from all communities to get together”. But in the film she becomes simply an upholder of a rather liberal ideal of racial tolerance and multiculturalism, if a passionate, forceful one. Thus Ari’s assertion that there is no solidarity, as people become ethnically divided, leaving “the rich” with no “fear” of the “unionised worker”, becomes a basic anti-racist message: “That’s what’s wrong with this country,” she says. “Everyone hates everyone. The skips hate the wogs, the wogs hate the Asians . . .”—“And everyone hates the blacks,” concludes Ari to the as-
sent of all present. Gone is the sense in the novel that ethnic divisions effectively spell the fragmentation of the working class. While Deborah Hunn argues that “Ari’s use of racist terminology” in the novel “is blown to such a point of excess that it is presumably meant . . . to function as a critique of his residual immaturity”,⁷ I would stress differences between the novel and the film—where the hero’s immaturity is accentuated, largely as a result of its reduction of the novel’s class context.

Ari’s rejection of marriage and suburban life is

manifested in his fiercely negative attitude towards his friend Joe’s approaching marriage. Early in the novel Ari states: “there are two things in this world guaranteed to make you old and flabby. Work and marriage”. Ari’s uncompromising attitude involves the issue of sexual identity, as marriage will spell the end of the shared community—the *homosocial* bond—between the two unmarried men. Joe’s full entrance as an adult into the middle-class Greek community will be sweetened by the material incentive of “a house, or at least a hefty deposit”, to be given to the couple following “negotiat(ion) between their parents”. Ari cynically foresees this arrangement transforming his friend into “just another wog on a mortgage”. In the film, Ari’s thoughts about the mercenary aspects of such a marriage and his vision of middle-class married life as a world of restrictions and bowing and scraping becomes the substance of an actual verbal attack on Joe. Kokkinos adds a line, with Ari parodying Joe’s pleading with his boss for a raise because his “wife is expecting a baby”. Joe slaps him, tells him to get a job, and that he is ashamed to own him as a friend. The conclusion to the argument was the same in the novel. But what triggers Joe’s anger in *Loaded* is not being taunted as some sort of foolish *breeder*. Rather, it is Ari’s self-display as a *slacker*, when he flippantly rejects the acceptable avenues of work and study in front of some of Joe’s other friends: “No, mate . . . I don’t want to study and no, I don’t want to work”. After calling Ari “a dickhead”, Joe says: “Grow up, fucking hell Ari, grow up. Get a job, I’m embarrassed to be seen with you”. In other words, Joe is particularly offended by Ari’s attitude to conventional material values—the two fall out over this. Although the film may provide a rather more convincing catalyst for Joe’s anger, the anger is no longer about issues of labour and class. This is very much part of the pattern of the film, which foregrounds the issues of sexuality, ethnicity and the politics of gay pride.



In the novel, Ari expresses his impatience with first-generation Australians whom he says: “hold onto old ways, old cultures, old rituals which no longer can or should mean anything”:

I want to scream to the fucking peasants on the sidewalk, Hey you, you aren't in Europe, aren't in Asia, aren't in Africa any more . . . Face it motherfuckers, I want to scream, there isn't a home anymore. This is the big city, the bright lights of the West, this is a wannabe-America and all the prayers to God or Allah or the Buddha can't save your children now.

But his attitude toward his traditional culture is more complex than simple rejection. He is clearly distressed by the defeat of those traditional cultures. That is to say, Ari is consumed by his existential—or, at least, Juvenalian—vision, enraged, as much by corruption, or decline, as by idealism, or faith, because he himself has lost hope.

The possibility of a genuine Australian culture is denied; Australian culture—even some exclusively ‘anglo-celtic’ form—is a blank. The choice, in Ari’s dualistic formulation, is between being an isolated ‘wog’, culturally trapped in another time and place, or of embracing the culture and values of an undifferentiated West, in which Australia figures, exclusively, as “a wannabe-America”, a place, like the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, of “Seven Elevens, shopping malls, gigantic parking lots, made in the image of America”.

The film transforms Ari’s interior diatribe about old-fashioned ethnics into an actual outburst, in which he sticks his head out of a car window and curses people standing on the footpaths. This deprives the novel’s Ari, vehement as he might seem, of political insight, and by extension of credibility. He simply provides the paradoxical spectacle of a self-hating ‘wog’, at war with his own ethnic group and others. The profanity is still there, but the references to “the bright lights of the West” and America are omitted.

Ari’s nihilistic attitude to political ideals and causes is highlighted when he rants in interior monologue that “The [Athens] Polytechnic”—the site of Greek student resistance to the fascist regime of 1967–74—“is history”. Nevertheless, Ari’s resort to anti-American language is arguably the implicit legacy of where he—or, at least his parents—came from, geographically and politically.

In these terms, Ari’s list of things that are “history” also includes: “Vietnam . . . Auschwitz . . . Hippies . . . Punks . . . God . . . Hollywood”, and—last, but not least—“The Soviet Union”.

Although neither the novel nor the film make more than minor allusions to the political background of Ari’s parents, both identify Greeks of that generation with the left-wing protest and militancy of the late sixties and early seventies, dark years when Greece was in the hands of a military junta, following a coup in which the United States is widely believed to have been implicated. In the film, this is in fact the subject of a brief but poignant flashback, a montage of vivid images in grainy footage of one or more left-wing demonstrations. We see the child Ari riding happily on his father’s shoulders and Ari’s mother with her fist in the air, amid a background of placards with the faces of Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Min, clamouring people, police horses, and one specific slogan to ‘Crush Greek Fascists’. Appearing between images of Ari wandering the streets in drug-fuelled agitation, and an image of Ari’s father, dejected and bound to the earth of his backyard vegetable plot, it is unclear whether the vision of this background of political struggle, and its implications for the present rift between two generations of ethnic Australians, belongs to the father, the son, or the director.

Except for this brief visual reference, the film largely ignores the novel’s theme of class politics. This change, this playing down of the importance of class, occurs while the story is simultaneously made a more coherent statement of sexual politics. I can only suggest, by way of a conclusion, that perhaps the cultural and political climate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—even in the medium of *alternative* cinema—makes *class*, rather than sexuality, a new sin “that dares not speak its name”.

In his 1996 article, ‘Smells Like Market Spirit’, Ian Syson discussed the “growing economic rationalist spirit” of the Australian publishing industry over the previous decade, and the effects on that industry of “predatory international competition”.⁸ He concluded by emphasising that “only a healthy and diverse alternative publishing network will nourish and keep alive the spirit that Grunge names but does not define”.⁹ A decade on, the urgency of protecting and promoting alternative avenues for the expression of local cul-

ture and socially diverse perspectives is perhaps greater still. Moreover, Syson's concerns about the dangers and crises faced in the publishing world are if anything more serious in the area of film production, where production costs are notoriously high. Recent statistics show that US films *already* represent "89 per cent of ticket sales in Australian cinemas", a situation likely to be made worse by the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement.¹⁰

1. Christos Tsiolkas, *Loaded*, Vintage, Sydney, 1995. Subsequent references are to this edition. A version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 'World and Text: Ethics, Aesthetics and Emotions', Women's College, University of Sydney, 5-7 July 2004. My warm thanks to those present for their comments and generous advice. I would also like to acknowledge the support of Hallym University in giving me a travel grant which allowed me to participate in that conference.
2. As Gary SauerThompson observes: Keating's infamous remark about the recession 'we had to have'—in the context of rising unemployment and home interest rates which soared to 20 per cent—"highlighted the callousness and coldness of neo-liberal economic theory", which "was utterly indifferent to the well-being of human beings". 'Crucifying the Economy', in: weblog 'philosophy.com', <www.sauer-thompson/archives/philosophy/001529.html>.
3. Brian Martin, 'Australian Political Antics', *Freedom* 53:4 (February 1992); available online: <www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/92freedom.html>.
4. National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 'Australian apprenticeships: Research at a glance', 2000. Online: <www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj2/mk0008/growth.htm>.
5. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, especially pp.20-25.
6. Aaron Krach, interview: 'Head On with Anna Kokkinos: On Greeks, Queers, and Aussies', *Indiewire*, 12 August 1999. <www.indiewire.com/people/int_Kokkinos_Anna_990812.html>.
7. Deborah Hunn, "'It's not that I can't decide; I don't like definitions": Queer in Australia in Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded* and Anna Kokkinos's *Head On*', *Territories of desire in queer culture: refiguring contemporary boundaries*, David Anderson & Linda Anderson (eds), Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2000, p.118.
8. Ian Syson, 'Smells Like Market Spirit: Grunge, Literature, Australia', *Overland* 142, 1996, p.23.
9. Syson, 'Smells Like Market Spirit', p.26.
10. 'FreeTrade Agreement: Australia's Cultural Industries Lose Out?', Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance <www.alliance.org.au/leadstory/2004/f2boz.htm>.

Ivan Cañadas is an Assistant Professor of English at Hallym University, South Korea. He is currently researching contemporary first-person narratives of marginality in Australia and elsewhere.

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THE POOFER'S DOG

PUP HAD RUN AWAY, left home and hopped the train to the city when he was 16, because, despite what the state schools in Western Sydney tried to tell him, he didn't fit. He wasn't going to go from voc. ed. to dole queue and a stolen Commodore. He had the smarts to make himself a softer piece of rough trade.

But five years later he was getting older and had to do a lot more to earn a dollar than when he was fresh in the city.

Which was why, that Sunday, he was at Newtown Police Station with its usual 24-hour-a-day bedlam.

The chaos almost concealed Pup just inside the doors of the station, deliberating the quickest path through the comings and goings of the noisy crowd in front of him.

It took no more than ten seconds. Then he was on his way, weaving with suppleness around bigger bodies, curling through groups, seeping past large tattooed bodies with mean faces. In thirty seconds he reached the grey counter behind which a constable, face marked with the eruptions and rashes of a hormonally imbalanced adolescence, was trying to ignore the milling crowd in the foyer.

Pup squeezed his way between sweat-rich bodies, attempting to attract the constable's attention. Beside him, a woman at the counter screamed at the constable for the release of her son.

"He done nuffin, you dumb copper." The brown rolls of her Samoan chin trembled and her vast body

shook under the floral garishness of her smock. "You pigs always picking on us islanders. The other guy picked on him. Let him go!"

"We are simply questioning him," the constable told her out of one corner of his tight mouth.

"You got no right to. He done nuffin, I told ya, ya racist scum."

The constable shrugged at her and turned to Pup.

"Yes?" asked the constable, more to ignore the Samoan than because he was interested.

"I want to see Detective Sergeant Bradley."

"About?"

"It's between me and him."

"Name?"

"Just say it's Pup."

"Pup?"

"Yep."

The constable's eyes moved up and down Pup. He saw a young man in his early twenties wearing a pair of black leather jeans and sneakers. His shirt was blue denim, with cut-off sleeves that revealed trim, muscular arms. No track marks. A relief. The constable hated junkies. The young man's build was wiry rather than solid, and he looked as if he could move fast and adeptly, though there was a faint effeminacy to his face.

"It's the full lips," Pup had not so long ago complained to one older john with a kind smile, who'd just told Pup he was such a pretty boy. "I can watch

the way it happens. Just like you're doing. Someone takes a gander, assesses me. Body okay. They like me bum. Everybody likes me bum. You like me bum, don't ya, dad?" And the old John nodded happily at his rough trade, an elfin grin on his face. "But it's not until they get to the lips that you can see them go 'bingo'. In their minds, they got me face down and bum up straight away, a femmy boy who likes to take it. Just because of the lips. It's a bastard, but they're right." By which time the old John had his hands all over Pup's bum, readying to up-end him.

The constable assessed Pup for two more seconds, then reached over to push the call-screen on and advise the detective's room that Bradley had a visitor.

"Wait on the chairs," he told Pup as he deactivated the digicam link. He turned to the next customer, ignoring the Samoan woman's ranting. Behind him, the Venetian blinds in the detective's room moved very slightly.

Pup sat himself at the end of one of the rows of orange plastic chairs, leaving at least two chairs between himself and anyone else in the waiting area. He stared straight ahead. Five minutes passed. The Samoan woman continued her abuse of the constable, who was now loudly asking a drunk if he knew where he was. The drunk couldn't answer in any language the constable understood.

"Ah, fuck you," the constable muttered at the inebriated man, who was well dressed and relatively clean. A tourist, he'd been micky-finned, king-hit and had his wallet and passport stolen, which was what he was trying to explain, gesturing as dramatically as possible given the pounding in his head and the stiff mannerisms of his culture.

"You bloody foreigners oughtn't to be let in anywhere. Trouble, the lot of you," the constable said to the tourist's baffled face. A second policeman took hold of the drunk and dragged him towards a door Pup knew too well led to the cells.

Then the constable finally turned to the big brown woman and told her: "Get your fat arse out of here and go get drunk again, you loopy bitch. You ought

to be back on your island making your grass skirts and having babies, not stuffing us up here." She was silent at the outburst, then ready to respond. But he continued before she could utter a word.

"Go on, get, you crazy slag. You're absolutely right, we do pick on you islanders, because you're worth nothing and a pack of trouble. So go out, find a lawyer and file a complaint about me. Here's my number." He pointed at the silver identification on his chest. "My name's O'Reilly. There'll be nobody ready to pick up a brief from you, because you people haven't got two cents to rub together. So get moving out of here. Go get pregnant and have more useless babies so we can lock them up when they get old enough. You're a bunch of lazy thieves. We should never have let you set foot in this country."

The big, brown woman turned and wobbled through the crowd and out the door. The Constable offered a nail-bitten finger to her departing jiggles.

Ten noisy minutes passed. Pup sat straight and silent, not a muscle moving. He'd sat in these seats many times before, and the pose he'd assumed was nothing new. He knew this waiting game. From where he'd positioned himself he couldn't see the door to the innards of the Station, but the short hairs on the back of his neck told him Bradley had pushed the door of his sanctuary open and was easing his bulk into the foyer. Neck, ears, wrists, nipples, scrotum: Pup's body sensed each of Bradley's soft, slow steps across the scuffed lino, so much so that he turned and looked up into the detective's face just as the big man reached him at the end of the row of orange chairs.

"Good morning, sir," Pup said.

"What do you want?" Bradley's breath flooded over Pup, warm and faintly fishy, he was so close. "It had better be worth it, let me tell you. You've given me nothing of value lately. I'm getting worried about your pulling power, kid."

The detective wanted to spit, something that came on whenever he came out into this awful public area where the world and all its diseases lined up to make a policeman's life misery. Bradley, described

in his last encounter with the Rectitude Tribunal as “a gentle man, with clumsy habits”, had nothing against Pup as an individual in a democratic society, but if the rules had been different he would have preferred to put the young man, and more like him, in a place where he could exact his own special punishments.

At least, right at this moment he thought so.

Fifteen minutes ago he'd been enjoying his smoked salmon and brown bread. A lunch he'd deserved. And his coffee, his treat for himself—caffeine-rich Colombian coffee, black and sweet with four teaspoons of sugar. A small reward from a raid on a tax cheat. The unopened packet had been sitting on the kitchen bench and he quickly palmed it into his jacket pocket. Good coffee was almost impossible to come by these days, with the import restrictions. You had to have a licence from the Premier's Office even to pick up your books from Amazon. That coffee had been singing his name for the best part of the morning. He'd planned to sip it carefully and slowly. Instead he'd had to choke it down so that he could come out here and footsy with this irritating bit of flotsam. Bradley's every exasperated gesture told Pup that Bradley had already had enough of him. He jumped in the deep end, so far nothing lost.

“My apologies, sir. I require nothing right now. It's just that I'm worried about my neighbour.” Pup turned to face Bradley to say this, his face full of the sincerity he'd practised with his johns, anything to have them believe he really liked them and deserved a bigger fee or a tip.

But though Bradley understood the rudiments of this language, he wasn't one of these johns. He'd heard Pup's story from beginning to end and back again. He was a keen observer of the market forces at work in a service economy, where he saw his role as that of a regulator. Right now, he saw the boy's sinewed body twisted slightly, the left elbow bending to place itself on a knee as the chin rested on the fist, the murky green eyes focusing on nothing else but Bradley's.

Pup was trying to impress, but he had nothing to do with except his body and the price he could obtain for it. And Bradley was not the sort to pay for a boy. Catch them in the act, twist their arms near breaking point, and get the dirty rentboys to rat—that was his method. Their clients were much better pickings. This was how he'd first met Pup.

“I don't give a fuck about your neighbour,” Bradley said. “Unless there's a few grand in it.”

“This is a different matter, sir. Nothing to do with those difficult matters that have involved us before.” Pup's accent had been modified by listening to the voices of those that paid for his body. He could be rough, or he could be smooth just like them.

The detective heard Pup's words and pined for his coffee. He was ready to stop listening.

“Uh huh.” But Bradley did notice that Pup's eyes, usually deep pools of impiety, were deltas of angry red veins, interesting in one who didn't drink and was very particular with regard to the when and where of drug-taking. Overall he was a good kid and his mother and father should have been proud of him. If he'd been Bradley's son, he wouldn't have been allowed to run off alone. But Bradley had been denied a son.

Bradley slumped his big frame into an orange chair. His hand remembered he was in public and a non-smoking area. His hand dropped near his crotch, and twitched.

“Why're you worried about your neighbour?” he finally asked.

“I haven't seen him for two or three days. And his dog keeps barking.”

“Well, kick the dog.”

“It's shut inside the house. I'm worried something's happened to him in there. But I can't see in. The walls are too high, and he's got glass bricks in the external walls.”

“Why don't you talk to the uniformed blokes? I don't do missing persons.”

“Have I told you who my neighbour is?”

“Should I care?”

“Julian Costello.”

The detective said nothing. At first it appeared as if Pup's words had passed his ears without stopping. His face first drooped with its usual lugubriousness.

Then suddenly every part of him was in sharp relief, tensed and dangerous. He said, mouth so close to Pup's face his breath puffed against Pup's skin, making the boy blink: "What's Julian Costello doing living next to a filthy little poofer like you?"

"You know the area, sir. It's full of people like me."

"Exactly."

The detective shifted slightly. A little tic in his neck pulsed. This was the sordid type of rumour he'd made his career, such as it was, with. Yet he'd never heard the quietest whisper about the Costello kid.

"Does the old man know?" he asked Pup, though he didn't expect the boy to answer.

"You know what it's like with parents, sir," Pup said. "What they don't want to know, they can't see."

"I don't know. I'm not a parent. So what would I see if I wanted to know?"

"You remember Gerry Francis?"

How could he forget. When Pup had made the introductions, a 17-year-old boy was sitting on the radio announcer's lap, and both the boy and Francis were naked.

"I think you owe the force a few apologies," Bradley had said.

Francis was the city's voice of the underdog, a morning radio announcer with ego out of all proportion to his natural attractiveness who'd manipulated his fingers and toes into every tasty pie about. Seven months ago, his Audi TT had been etched with acid in the radio-station carpark. No-one was immediately available to be thrown into gaol, so he'd decided the boys in blue were due for some stick from his pompous voice, bubbling like a fart in water and stirring up his purple-haired listeners. Since

Pup had introduced him to Bradley, he'd had a change of heart.

And there was Justice Mitchell, fond of quoting the Bible in court and handing down sentences beloved by Gerry Francis, but which even Bradley felt too severe. He was on his knees with Pup in his mouth when Bradley banged open the door of the toilet cubicle.

"There's a few cases I'd like you to try," Bradley had told the judge, whose judgements suddenly became merciful.

"So, you're sure it's Julian Costello you live next door to?" Bradley asked Pup.

"I'm sure, sir," the boy answered.

"The son of the man who owns just about every bit of this town?"

"That's the one, sir."

"What's the fucking little rich boy into then," Bradley breathed at Pup, "that's slimy enough for you to come to me?"

"Julian likes it rough. Very rough. That's why I'm worried something might have happened to him."

"No doubt." Bradley gripped the boy's shirt and the collar and dragged him upright as he stood up himself. He dropped his hands from Pup and started towards the doors and his car. The sudden reflux made him wish he'd drunk his coffee more slowly. His sandwich and the first three slow sips, before his call-screen filled with the poxy features of the constable on the desk, had been the only chance he'd had to sit and take a break for seven hours. He coughed back the bile in his throat.

"Come on, kid," he called. Pup came close and Bradley put an avuncular arm over the boy's shoulder. "Let's go see why your neighbour's dog is barking."

This story is an extract from the novel 'The Poofer's Dog'.

TROLLS

To the Somalian Princess, with the dreadlock extensions.

SHUNNED BY CIVILISATION, a family of trolls lived under a bridge at the End of the World. The troll's wife carved up the roasted dog as her husband and the baby troll licked their lips. After the feast, the wife cleaned the table while her husband carried his young son to the cot. His wife threw the scraps into the river. Her husband told a bedtime story to his son: "There was a young human who became governor of a large state. He was aware there was much crime and he made it his duty to uphold the death penalty. Whether they were innocent or guilty didn't concern the governor and many men were executed. He soon became popular and was elected President. He knew that his people, the voters, liked strong leaders so he attacked a small nation and became a hero. He had many mistresses and though there were great scandals, his popularity soared. His people liked their presidents to be virile. The economy began to weaken and the president knew that only a war could bring prosperity to his nation. He told his people that he was declaring war on the moon and the stock

markets acted favourably to such strong leadership. The President blew the moon out of the sky and there was much rejoicing, but the people forgot that the moon reflected light from the sun and the nights became pitch black. No artificial light could restore the peace the people felt existed when the moon was in the sky. The President was impeached and exiled to a tropical island with his three mistresses and wrote a best-selling autobiography." The troll finished his story and his son said, "Humans are so stupid daddy." The troll sighed and said, "Not only are they stupid son, they are ugly too. They aren't beautiful like us trolls." And then he kissed his child's head and turned out the light.

*From the denim-clad stranger
patting a black poodle
as it licks his hands.*

From: 'Postcards from the End of the World'

A GRANDFATHER'S REMINDER

THANKS FOR carrying me coffin. You were sweating on the day, there was a drip that went from your eyebrow onto your shirt. Can't have been that much trouble, I was never a heavy bugger. And there wasn't much left of me at all in the finish. I was a bag of bones.

Thanks for doing the Bible reading too. I thought you spoke well. Can't have been easy looking out into that mob of dickheads. Everyone could smell the beer on Graeme. And Bruce. And Stewie as well. My sons. Bloody lot of pisspots. Yeah, I know you'll think that's pretty rich coming from me. But how were they? Suits smelling like mothballs and wriggling and coughing up their guts in the pews.

You did a good job. And you weren't second fiddle. Even if Tony had been alive Nance and your mother would have chosen you because you were the only one with religion. Plus you didn't put on the waterworks. How was Stewie? I'd never have picked that. Blubbering like a girl. But tears were coming up at the back of your eyes when you joined in on 'How Great Thou Art'.

What was *that* about? For your old mate in the sky or me?

Listen, I know you were scared of me when you were a tacker. Not all the time, but sometimes. You remember that time in Rosebud? Course you do. You're never gunna forget it are ya? Never gunna let me forget it, either.

I can't believe your grandmother and me ever lived in that flat. You remember it? Brown fibro and

one bloody bedroom. You and your brothers slept on the floor in sleeping bags when you came for your holidays. I remember that cos I used to have to whinge at you to lie down so I could still see the telly.

Shit of a joint. And Rosebud itself is the arsehole of the world, if you ask me. I think we were there because Nance wanted to keep an eye on Bruce or some bloody bullshit because he was living with a new girlfriend. She didn't think the new bird was any good for him. Probably the other way round. Anyway, it doesn't matter now.

Your mum and dad came to visit that afternoon, a few days after they'd dropped you lot off for the school holidays. You remember they were there? You bloody should, as far as I'm concerned.

You don't remember everything, you know. Betcha you don't remember that I never went to the beach. Your grandmother used to always take you, and you lot used to come back half blue and wrapped in towels, left water and sand all over the lino. But I never went to the beach after the war. Wasn't because I was always too pissed, if you're thinking it. It was because I fought on the beaches at bloody Tripoli. Couldn't ever go near a beach again after that. Didn't know that, did you?

You said something smart to your mother. I don't remember what it was. Do you? I know you remember what happened next. Probably don't need me to remind you. But I'm going to.

I dragged you outside by the ear. Then I told you to say to me what you'd said to her. I shaped up to

you and told you to put your dukes up. I remember I had a smoke in my mouth and it was puffing into my eyes. You looked up at me. And I know that's all you remember. That's it, isn't it?

I didn't hit you. I just dragged you back inside again and told you to apologise to your mother quick smart. You didn't. You just burst into tears and she pulled you up onto her knee. The whole bloody thing only took a minute or two and about as long for me to forget it.

I was pissed. You know I was pissed. They say I was pissed every day from midday onwards. I know you've heard that. But I don't think that's quite right. Anyway, it's beside the point. I didn't hit you.

There were other times when I did though. Not in the face or anything. You'd be playing up and I'd just give you a belting to sort you out. Quite a few times, actually. When we were babysitting you lot or you were all at our place for the holidays. You can't remember that, can you? I betcha can't. But I did. Caught my belt on your leg once and opened up a nasty little cut. Have a look at your leg. Gotta scar?

So, look, it's hard for me to say sorry for *not* hitting you. Much easier to say sorry for giving you a bloody decent whack. No-one likes to belt kids these days so I could say, *Sorry, it's just how things were then*. A lot of things happened in the '70s that don't happen now. And there's no-one better than D.K. Lillee these days, either. But he wasn't a patch on Keith Miller.

You can't forget it though, can you? Me standing over you with me dukes up. The thing is though I know what your trouble is. Probably surprises you that I know. You don't think I was clued in, do you? But remember how I was the only one who knew you were gunna be a singer? You had a good voice as a young kid and I said it would only take a bit of practise and keeping off the smokes. And I was right, wasn't I?

Being clued in's not a matter of going to bloody uni, fella.

But anyway. You don't need a 'sorry' from me. I could give you one though, I suppose. Here you

are: Sorry for dragging you out onto the lawn and scaring the shit out of you. You were only seven and when you're an adult, as you know, you forget how big you look to a kid. I had no idea, mate, you were going to remember the whole thing for the rest of your life. *Shit*, no idea at all.

I'm telling you, though, you remember it not just because you feel like it somehow ripped the guts out of you and you couldn't get it back into yourself. I was only doing what was right, in one way. I was the head of the house (yeah, okay, the flat). It was up to me to make a move about showing you who was boss. That you couldn't talk to your mother that way. So I'm sorry that it all upset you so much, but my apology's not worth shit. Because you really want one from your dad.

I might have been doing the right thing, but he had some jurisdiction didn't he? He could have stood up and said, *Hang on, I'll handle this*. I'd have let him, too. It might have been my house, but you were his kid. He could have dragged you out and given you a belt on the arse or whatever.

But he sat there and let it happen. He left ya.

I might have been pissed and cranky and a scary bastard, but I was making sure there was respect for elders in my house.

You know I love you, mate. You know it. I told you. You remember? I was lying on my bed at home, breathing through the gas mask by that stage. I told you, too, not to treat your wife and your kids like I'd treated mine. Swearing and hitting them. Throwing things at them. Wasn't easy to say that to you. Shit, you even heard me make peace with *your* mate upstairs. You saw my eyes. You know old Hughie was in there.

Listen, I've gotta go. But for Chrissake next time you remember yourself outside that flat, looking up at me and my fists, look up and see my eyes gone soft. Me smiling at you like I did through the mask, with me head resting back on all those pillows. Then leave me standing there, walk over to the flywire door of that shitty old flat and pull the bloody thing back. Then say, *What are you doing, Dad? Where are you?*

JUST LIKE AL CAPONE

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, as per usual, we're in Joe's kitchen, back of his grocery shop. The proprietor, manning the telephone, dressed in creams, long trousers, short-sleeved shirt, a bulky, moon-faced fellow, with grey crew-cut hair.

I'm Mack, short, slim, balding, boasting several gold fillings in my dentures, at fifty, twenty years Joe's junior. In our entire lives neither of us has ever been booked for a misdemeanour—not even a parking ticket . . .

At the moment Joe's taking a call, repeating it as he writes it down, "Ten dollars a win—race two—horse three—Sydney—gotcha, Mick," he concludes, cradling the telephone.

"I'll have ten on the nose of that one, too, Joe." I'm handing him the money when the door bursts open. Four guys, one after the other, pour into the room. They're in plain clothes—but they're police, alright—special branch, I reckon. The guy in front takes my eye straight off. He's young, lean, aggressive, and he's going to bust us—it's in his eyes.

"I'll take that," he says, commandeering my ten dollars. "Evidence," he adds, handing it to one of his subordinates. Then he gestures Joe to move along, positions himself behind the phone, switches off the wireless. The other three plonk themselves down in chairs. We sit there staring at each other. Joe and myself sulky, morose. The cops grinning with anticipation. We don't have long to wait; the phone rings. The head guy picks it up,

listens, speaks into the instrument, "Joe's slipped over for a beer, an' he's asked me to fill in for him". There's a pause, then the cop, reciting, writes, "Fifty dollars a win—race four—horse five—Melbourne—for Bert". Then he's talking into the mouthpiece again, "Look, Bert, Joe's asked me to make sure 'n' get the surnames, so's there won't be any mix-ups". Then he's listening again, adding, "Right, Bert Redford, it is—thanks, mate". He hangs up, he's really grinning now . . .

So we sit there. Me, I'm getting nervy, because I'm used to slipping next-door between races, indulging in a quick beer. Telephone, at intervals, keeps ringing. Some guys, knowing Joe doesn't drink, hang up immediately, others don't. By the end of an hour the cop's compiled a pretty good list of names . . .

Enter Bruno, dressed in shorts and white singlet, wearing thongs. Bruno's 22, dark, good looking, educated, knows his rights. You can feel the tension as he and the young cop size each other up. Bruno takes the fish he's carrying over to the fridge. Tell 'em nothing, Dad, Mack," he says, with a smirk.

The young cop's no smirker, merely looks amused, knows he's got us by the short hairs.

Bruno slams the door as he exits. I know he's heading for the hotel to alert all the boys—but he can't do anything about the telephone.

We continue to sit there, the cops grinning every time they get a new name. "Maybe we should turn

the wireless back on?" The suggestion comes from the bloke with my ten dollars in his pocket. "Make things sound normal."

His superior nods at Joe, who switches on just in time to catch the results of race two in Sydney and, sure enough, number three won it—it would have been the first winner I'd backed in months—this doesn't make me feel any kindlier to these servants of the law. "Why don't you stop pickin' on the little guys?" I taunt, "Go after Markhem? And Roberts?" Everybody knows these two starting-price bookies who, to operate so blatantly, must be bribing some high-ranking officials. "Your superiors won't let you—will they?"

I can see I've hit a raw spot. The young guy glares at me. "Don't get smart, Mister. You an' Joe an'," he indicates his list, "all these other jokers are gonna go along . . ."

The afternoon wears on. Me, I'm getting jumpier—can't wait for the last race—to get out of here.

Between phone calls the head guy's conducting an interrogation—

"You frontin' for someone, Joe?"

"Frontin'?"

"You gotta boss?"

Joe's indignant. "Twenty years now—Joe Cantoni don't work for no-one else . . ."

Cop looks sceptical.

Joe gets a cunning look in his eyes. "You gonna take Joe's picture? Put story on front page of newspaper?"

"You got a good story, Joe?"

Joe's eyes gleam as he launches off, "Joe Cantoni 15-year-old boy when he first come to Australia—youngest cane-cutter in gang."

The phone rings. The cop, looking relieved, answers it, waves Joe to silence, listens for a few seconds, goes into his spiel, listens again, adds another name to the list.

"Why you keep tellin' that lie?" complains Joe, when the phone's cradled. "Joe Cantoni ain't never took a drink in his life . . ."

"Apparently," replies the cop, "a lot of people don't know that."

The next half hour, especially for Joe, is very frustrating. He keeps trying to launch back into his cane-cutting days—but the cop keeps putting him off. "Some other time, Joe . . ."

Finally, the last race run. The cops getting ready to exit. Their leader looks at me, "Come on," he says, "let's go."

"What?" I exclaim.

"You heard me. I'm taking you and Joe in for starters."

There's two squad cars parked out front of the shop. The head guy gives the keys to one of the others. "You and Ed, go and start on the roundup, Pete," he says. He waits until they drive off. Then he and the remaining guy start bundling us into the back seat of the second car. All the while the local lads are hanging out the doors and windows of the pub skylarking us and, to make things worse, ol' Joe's grinning like a schoolboy at a picnic. Then Bruno's walking towards us, but the young guy tells his pal to drive off . . .

An hour on Joe an' I are sitting in the police station twiddling our thumbs. I hear a noise in the corridor, an' see 'em herding Bert Redford and some other guys into another room. Remembering the length of the list I reckon they've got a few more trips to make yet.

We sit there another ten minutes before Joe, bubbling with excitement, digs me in the ribs gesturing at a little skinhead joker sitting at a desk across the room. The skinhead, looking very nervous, has an assortment of gear placed on the desk in front of him. I observe a carton of cigarettes, set of binoculars, and big modern-looking camera. The little guy, already jittery, looking fit to be tied, 'cause Joe's coming on to him waving, beaming, winking. The skinhead averts his eyes, stares at the ceiling. Joe digs me in the ribs again, hissing, "Police photographer."

"He's on the wrong side of the desk," I hiss back.

Presently an officer comes in, seating himself opposite the skinhead. "Now where were we? You claim you went into the cane paddock to relieve yourself and just happened to stumble on this merchandise—right?"

The little guy's head's bobbing.

"Pull the other one," snaps the officer.

"I found these items in the sugarcane field," persists the skinhead.

"Sugarcane!" blurts Joe. "You wanta know about sugarcane? You talk to me—Joe Cantoni cut and load twelve tonne of cane a day! Six days a week!" He expands and thumps his chest, beams at the skinhead, concluding, "Now—you wanta take Joe's picture—you take . . ."

Stunned silence, with the skinhead sitting there open-mouthed. The officer glaring at a confused Joe, when the young cop who initiated our arrest comes back into the room. "How's Perce Galea going?" he ribs me with that famous punter's name.

I bounce right back at him, "Come next Saturday Markhem and Roberts will still be laying the odds."

His eyes cloud with bitterness, and I regret having said it. The guy's burning with ambition, he'd give a lot to reel in this pair of grafters . . .

My repentance is short-lived, because, Christ! I can't believe it—he's setting up finger-printing equipment on the desk. They do ol' Joe first, him grinning all the way through it.

While they're printing Joe there's another disturbance in the corridor. I hear Bruno's voice, raised in anger, demanding Joe's, no mention of Mack's, release. By this time I'm feeling pretty pissed off, and as they're leading me over to the desk I'm objecting, resentfully, "You can't finger-print a man over a ten-dollar bet—for Christsake!"

The young cop grins at me, taunting, "Can't I?"

I'm at my wits' end, my protests falling on deaf ears, when ol' Joe lays a hand on my shoulder. "Mack, Mack," he's shaking his head, disapproving of my conduct. He juts his jaw out, touching it with a finger of his idle hand. "Take it on the chin, mate," he tells me, "we're in the big time now—just like Al Capone . . ."

In the ruins

Fossicking through the rubble of my mother's house after the fire,
through the black wisps of aerogrammes, the fine white ash, the grey lumps of stuff,
I am marvelling at how everything can be equalised by fire
and that we would be too.

Through the framework of the roof beams gnawed by the invisible fire
I stare up into the clear Australian sky,
that blue silence from which a smoky SORRY
has drifted away.

JOHN MATEER

FLIGHT OF FANCY

LISTEN A MINUTE and decide for yourself.

I was camped at Macalister Springs. Victoria's high country—in with the snow gums. Wayward buggers—you could never tame these trees into a plantation. They lean to the left, to the right, some of them grow nearly horizontal along the ground, but in the end they all poke a few scrappy bunches of leaves high enough to collect the light that keeps them alive. They accommodate each other. They have to—hard winds are never far away.

I sat on a rock and watched the sun set across the valley, then started back for camp. Snow gums crisscrossed in front of me, blue wrens squeaked in the undergrowth and John Howard, our Prime Minister, appeared next to a massive old tree about twenty feet away. He was in his walking clothes; white T-shirt, socks and running shoes, and black shorts. In daylight the trunks of the gums are all colours of stripes and patches and splotches in pink, green, cream and sienna. But now, just on dusk, the forest was blanket grey, and Mr Howard only stood out because he was unbending among all those angles.

He wasn't dressed for the mountain air. It wraps around you up here, as if you're walking in cold beer. I was wearing a thick jacket and beanie. Should I go over and see if he was alright, or would his people jump out and throw me to the ground? Was he lost, or on a secret anti-terrorist mission? While I was thinking through the situation, the mist drifted in and he faded away.

Expect anything in the bush. I've learnt that over the years.

Brilliant sun next day, so I walked to Mount Howitt and back. Evening, and I sat next to the fire, stirred the stew and pictured Mr Howard eating dinner at Kirribilli House, telling Janette about his trip. I remembered Mars was close, looked to the navy-blue sky to see it, and there he was, fire glinting off his glasses, our leader, on the other side of the tent.

He was still in his sports gear, arms wrapped around himself, feet stamping on fallen leaves, wind whipping his shorts like flags. It was stupid to pretend he wasn't there because he was looking right at me. He licked his lips. Maybe he was hungry, hoping for some tea. No good offering though. Mr Howard's against hand-outs. He's made that very clear.

I took a few steps around the fire intending to shake his hand for a job well done, but he moved backwards. I heard a stick crack under his feet, and he was gone.

Gum trees go their own way, the same with people, that's what I told myself.

Next day I wandered over to the Crosscut Saw, the jagged wall of rock that rises above the Terrible Hollow.

Sitting on top of Australia there, it was as if I'd won Tatts. I ate my sandwiches in warm autumn sun, long waves of mountains in front of me, and if I turned around, more lines of dark blue stretching

off down the Howqua. The clouds floated in layers of dirty pink, never one the same shape and colour as another. Their shadows rolled into the mountain clefts and over the crests, covering and uncovering plants and animals. Anything could hide in that wilderness.

Families, couples, lone hikers; they were up here on the ridge with me. We were all mates in this wonderful country, and they strolled past, charged past, admired the view, marvelled at the sunshine or laughed at their own slow pace. Macca, Sunday morning with Macca on ABC radio, would've loved a phone call, no doubt about that.

"G'day Macca, it's Jim from Crosscut Saw," I'd say, but I don't believe in mobile phones.

Right at the northern end of the Saw, almost at Mount Buggery, I could see a bicycle wheel shining in the sun, the spokes dividing the sky into little pieces of pie. Three bronzed and lycra'd young men had bumped along the track earlier, heads fixed to the front, no breath wasted on small talk. Now they were carrying their bikes up the side of a peak.

SAS, of course. Had to be, the cream of this country's soldiers, here to protect the PM.

"You have to wonder why." A passing walker shook his head.

"Something different," was all I said. Best not give the game away; he looked a bit dark to be Australian.

I was alert by now, in the middle of something big. I swivelled round to take in the full three-sixty again and there he was, our PM, way back across the ridge waving his arm like a tiny battery toy. With so much sky, everything's in silhouette. You couldn't miss him.

This is the bit you'll find hard to believe, but don't give up at the good part . . .

A low rumble. Jet, I thought and squinted in the clouds for a Sydney-to-Melbourne commuter. But it

was roaring right below me, a charcoal-grey triangle, zipping along the Wonnangatta. It got to the Crosscut Saw, tipped over on its side and seemed to hang for a second above the PM, a huge arrowhead. Then it thundered over the edge and disappeared towards the east.

And Mr John Howard was gone.

Leaderless, in a matter of seconds.

Stretching you, aren't I?

I like to think that the F111 hooked him with a grappling iron, swung him inside and zoomed him back to the nation's capital through the drifting clouds. Our fighting forces are equal to that, highly trained as they are. They've got to be ready to defend our borders, eliminate tyrants, support the USA at the drop of a hat. It'd be nothing for our military forces to give a lift to the Prime Minister.

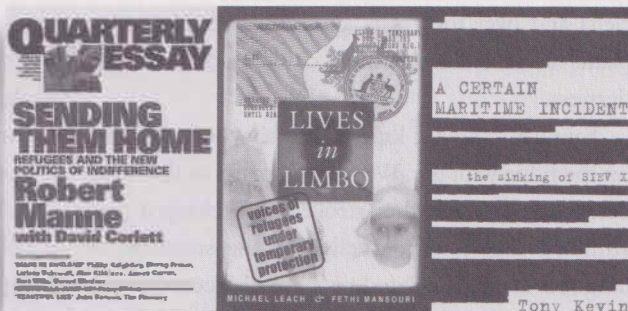
But money's important to Mr Howard, it's why he runs the country, and he wouldn't waste hard-earned taxpayer dollars getting himself a quick trip back to Sydney. No, common sense says he gave the crew a thumbs-up, scrambled down the ridge, trotted through that snow-gum rabble to the car park and hopped into his chauffeured four-wheel drive.

I didn't mention it to anyone at the time—national security and all that. I've been thinking about it since though and I reckon he was there to keep in touch with us mainstream Australians, the ones who love the bush, the ones who came here and used what the land had to offer, decent people who made this country what it is today. Get away from those elite buggers in the city, stay in touch with his voting public, then he knows what's best for all the nation. Leadership, it's called.

Well, now you've heard my story. Hard to swallow, I realise that, but you'll believe what suits you. We all do.

Wish he'd shaken my hand.

OUR GREATEST SHAME



Robert Manne with David Corlett: *Sending Them Home: Refugees and the New Politics of Indifference*, Quarterly Essay 13 (Black Inc., \$12.95)

Michael Leach and Fethi Mansouri: *Lives in Limbo: Voices of Refugees Under Temporary Protection* (UNSW Press, \$29.95)

Tony Kevin: *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of SIEV X* (Scribe, \$32.95)

We are a humanitarian country. We don't turn people back into the sea . . .

—John Howard, August 2001

We don't, in this nation, sink boats.

—John Howard, September 2001

“QUITE FRANKLY . . . I don't want in this country people who are prepared, if those reports are true, to throw their own children overboard.” John Howard's now infamous threat epitomises the deliberate slandering of asylum seekers that has been a crucial aspect of Australia's border-control regime. Recently, terms like queue-jumper, illegal and economic migrant have become commonplace, alongside attempts to paint asylum seekers as child-abusing, blackmailing and ungrateful. In this context it is unsurprising that many opponents of the government's policies have attempted to create their own image of ‘the refugee’: In place of the queue-jumping, rioting, ungrateful illegal, this counter-discourse evokes great suffering and demonstrates an almost pathological commitment to the Refugee Convention in order to produce an image of the law-abiding and ‘genuine’ refugee. In this discourse, the protests of asylum seekers themselves, both inside and out-

side the camps, are erased, to enable the presentation of the sanitised victim, who would be a good productive Australian citizen if only given the chance.

Reading Manne and Corlett's *Quarterly Essay: Sending Them Home* is like a condensed trip through the period in which both these discourses were perfected. They trace the progression from the introduction by the ALP of mandatory-detention legislation in 1992, to the invention of the temporary protection visa (TPV), the euphemistically named ‘Pacific Solution’ and finally forcible deportations. While mapping the increasing harshness of Australia's border-control regime however, Manne and Corlett avoid nostalgia for Australia's past, pointing instead to the geopolitics of refugee-determination systems. They trace the response to the ‘first wave’ of asylum seekers from Vietnam, who, having arrived in the midst of the Cold War, were treated as ideological trophies. “If the Vietnamese had been locked up,” say Manne and Corlett, “there would have been a conservative revolt.” Those who flee today have no similarly powerful friends. Their flight cannot be used for ideological gain by the leaders of Western nations, who are complicit in creating the circumstances that forced them from their homes, from supporting Saddam Hussein and then imposing murderous sanctions on Iraq, to the violent imposition of neo-liberalism on a global basis. If the Cold War arrivals highlighted the failure of the so-called communist regimes, then today's highlight the failures of the West and of globalising neo-liberal capitalism. This however is a conclusion that Manne and Corlett do not draw. Instead they maintain a strong commitment to the Refugee Convention

(1951), referring to it as “one of the great achievements of the generation which lived through the terrible breakdown of European civilisation in the period between the beginning of the First and the end of the Second World War”. Crucial to this convention was *limiting* the grounds for movement, and ensuring the state maintained the ability to dictate its terms. Primarily, the Convention was tailored to maintain what Manne and Corlett refer to as “the vital distinction between those who claim asylum to improve their material lot and those who have fled from savage tyrannies”. The commitment to this distinction leads Manne and Corlett to concede that “very large numbers of people” have sought residence in the West through the “exploitation of existing law, that is by claims of persecution which are either exaggerated or invented”. This may be true, but if so, it is merely a product of the reality that there are no other options for movement for those whose reasons for flight do not fit into the exceptionally narrow Convention grounds. War in the region, the enclosure of lands under structural adjustment programs, mass global inequality and hyper-exploitation, economic sanctions; none of these is considered a legitimate reason for human movement. Hence while Manne and Corlett provide an important critique of contemporary border-control regimes, they are unable to explain how the distinction they wish to uphold between the economic migrant and the ‘genuine refugee’ can be policed without recourse to such brutal exclusionary measures.

LEACH AND MANSOURI’S *Lives in Limbo* is unusual among books and studies on asylum-seeker issues in Australia in that it allows refugees on temporary protection visas to speak for themselves. As the authors point out, the silencing of refugees and asylum seekers has been “one of the more disturbing elements of the debate as a whole”. The people whose voices appear throughout the book paint a disturbing picture of life in a “second prison”, characterised by permanent insecurity, inability to travel, denial of crucial settlement services and, most upsetting for many interviewees, the denial of family reunion. As Salim, an Iraqi refugee on a TPV, describes it:

In every aspect of our lives, in every step we make to improve our lives, we hit this solid wall, the wall that the Immigration Department has built to remind us that we’re punished.

The punitive nature of the TPV is highlighted by many of those interviewed. “Was this protection visa given to me to protect me or to punish me?” asks Mohammed, who fears for the safety of the wife and family he was forced to leave in Syria. Leach and Mansouri’s book is an important study of the morphing of protection and punishment inherent in the TPV, and provides both political analysis and a demonstration of the huge personal costs of this system.

Unfortunately, one of the political costs of the TPV system has been a renewed focus by refugee advocates on policing the ‘genuine/non-genuine’ distinction in such a way that it risks becoming a moral judgement. Leach and Mansouri argue that while there will always be a “minority of cases in which an asylum claim has been made fraudulently the processes of refugee determination in Australia are rigorous and lengthy”. This is a dangerous claim. The determination process is certainly lengthy, yet far from being rigorous it is arbitrary and open to political manipulation. Certainly, this rarely benefits asylum seekers, but it does raise questions about the legitimacy of categories like the ‘genuine’, or ‘convention’ refugee, even in terms of the narrow constraints of the Refugee Convention. While the necessity to regain refugee status every three years encourages the mobilisation of a discourse of ‘genuineness’, this risks endorsing Australia’s determination system and its treatment of those who are deemed not, or no longer, to be genuine refugees.

THE DENIAL OF FAMILY REUNION, painted by the government as a deterrent measure, has had the opposite result, as demonstrated by Leach and Mansouri, and by Tony Kevin in his recent book *A Certain Maritime Incident*. When the *SIEV X* sank on its way to Australia, amongst the 353 killed were 142 women and 146 children. Only nine women and two children survived. One of those women was Sondos Ismael, who with her three daughters was determined to meet up with her TPV-holder husband Ahmed in Australia. On 16 October, Sondos phoned her husband, who she hadn’t seen for two years. As Kevin recounts, Ahmed begged his wife not to risk the journey, but the family was determined. Ahmed’s young daughter Eman told him, “I want to be with you again father, I want to see you.” Ahmed would never see his three daughters again. All three were drowned when the *SIEV X* broke down and sank. Far from deterring people, the TPV

forced families into boats like the *SIEV X*. “Husbands and fathers in Australia could not say ‘wait,’” says Kevin, “because there was nothing to wait for.”

Far from calling these policies into question, however, the sinking was quickly exploited in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election. The cynicism of the use of a mass death to enforce the very policies from which it stemmed has been well noted. Yet the government’s ability to paint itself as opposing the people smugglers responsible for the tragedy has been largely unchallenged. In *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of SIEV X*, Tony Kevin paints a far darker picture of complicity between the Australian Government and the people smugglers, arguing that the *SIEV X* tragedy was not merely exploited but *created* by the Australian Government. While *Sending Them Home* and *Lives in Limbo* both point to the failure of detention and of TPVs as deterrents, Kevin argues that the *SIEV X* finally provided the government with what it needed, both to deter further arrivals, and to coerce Indonesia into accepting the pushing back of boats. “The sinking of *SIEV X* finally turned the tide,” Kevin writes. “The people smuggling industry was closed down; at one stroke, the demand for such voyages was destroyed.” If Kevin is correct, such results fulfilled the aims of the people-smuggling taskforce, which just prior to the sinking had written a brief that told of the “potentially disastrous” consequences of another boat reaching Australia, and warned, “this should be avoided at all costs”. Kevin interrogates the role of this people-smuggling taskforce, asking what they knew about the *SIEV X*, and when. Their claims to have been unaware of the boat’s existence are challenged by minutes which, referring to *SIEV X* as *SIEV 8*, report “22 October: Not spotted yet, missing, grossly overloaded, no jetsam spotted, no reports from relatives.”

If *SIEV X* was expected, and known to be overloaded, why was it not looked for? Kevin believes there is more to the answer than chilling indifference. Tracing flight paths, he alleges that Operation Relex surveillance flights flew over the *SIEV X* three times as people were in the water. Kevin recounts survivors’ stories of three military-type boats that came in the night, shone lights on survivors who were gripping bits of wood and dead bodies to stay afloat, then disappeared. He asks how the Australian Embassy in Indonesia and the International Or-

ganisation for Migration were able to release exact dimensions of the boat, the amount of fuel it was carrying and a full breakdown of the numbers and nationalities of passengers, immediately following the sinking of a boat it supposedly had no prior knowledge of. Finally Kevin asks important questions about the role of Australia’s people-smuggling disruption program. What was involved in the week-long intensive training in ‘disruption activities’ that the Australian Federal Police provided to Indonesian police in 2000? What was meant by the PST minute, just prior to *SIEV X*, that disruption activities should be ‘beefed up’? Did disruption agents sabotage boats, as claimed by Australian agent and people smuggler Kevin Eniss? Was the notorious people smuggler Abu Quassey, who arranged the *SIEV X* and received high-level protection from Indonesia and Australia, a disruption agent? Ultimately all these questions foreshadow the primary question of Kevin’s book: Was the Australian Government involved in the deliberate sinking of the *SIEV X* and the deaths of 353 people?

Kevin, by his own admission, raises more questions than he can answer. Reading *A Certain Maritime Incident*, however, it becomes difficult to believe that the answer to this final, crucial question could be ‘No’. Like the children overboard affair however, the truth may take a long time to be revealed, hidden as it is behind blacked-out chunks of minutes, bad memories and gag orders. The *SIEV X* represents the most tragic event in the history of Australia’s border-protection regime. Importantly, the *SIEV X* is not an aberration. It is intrinsically tied to mandatory detention, to the TPV and its bans on family reunion, to the creation of a climate in which such a disaster could be used to justify more suffering and ultimately to the project of border control itself. These books and essay are tools which help us to understand these connections and to act. Hopefully that action can go beyond opposing the most brutal manifestations of Australia’s border-control system, to challenging the very necessity for border policing.

Jess Whyte has been active in a variety of campaigns and movements against Australia’s border-control regime for the past five years, including the no-borders group No One Is Illegal. She is currently working on a PhD, at Monash University, on trends in global immigration control.

COMING UP FOR AIR

Orwell and the Left



LAST YEAR WAS the centenary of the birth of Eric Blair, that is, ‘George Orwell’, and the occasion for much predictable commentary as to his relevance. Most of this was British, some American, some Eastern European, nearly all concerned with what Orwell had argued about Britain and Spain, about the Left and the Right, about totalitarianism and the intellectuals. Dennis Glover¹ has set himself a less predictable task, however, to see what reading Orwell “can tell us about modern Australia” (2). This is a good idea; it was a good idea when I used it in 1984 to write *The Road to St Kilda Pier*, and it is still a good idea today. I confess to a certain umbrage that Glover should nowhere mention my little book, especially since he devotes a fair amount of space to other, older and often more right-wing Australian commentaries. But, umbrage and bias duly registered, there is still quite a bit to like in Glover’s own little book.

It does sterling service in demonstrating, once again, that Orwell was indeed a “true man of the left” (86) and not a closet conservative, as pro-Russian Leftists and pro-American Rightists alike tended to argue. More interestingly, it does a good job of exposing how Orwell’s admirers in the right-wing press, such as Andrew Bolt, Christopher Pearson and Gerard Henderson, in fact connived at the Howard Government’s ‘Orwellian’ misuses of language over such matters as the *Tampa*. Its two central arguments are important, instructive and faithful to Orwell: that we should resist the systematic ‘manufacture of lies’, whether by the New Right in contemporary Australia or by sections of the supposed Left in Orwell’s Britain; and that the “irrelevance of

left-wing politics to ordinary people” is a problem for the politics rather than the people, to be overcome only by a genuinely democratic effort at relevance (5). It’s right, too, to detect parallels between the situation Orwell found in the 1930s and that in Australia today, where the inner-city left-wing intelligentsia and suburban working classes “read different newspapers, listen to different radio stations, holiday in separate places and . . . are obsessed by different political issues” (118).

Glover’s diagnosis is interesting and occasionally important, but the cure much less so. For he is an ALP staffer, who has worked for Kim Beazley, John Brumby and Simon Crean, and his conclusions amount to little more than a call to rally to his party. “Orwell believed that the intellectual left had a moral obligation to try to connect with ordinary people and with the political system . . .”, Glover writes:

When people in places like Wigan were living in destitution, and fascism was on the march, the left needed to channel its energies into gaining power. In his day, that meant getting behind a Labour party with reforming policies (117–118).

And a few pages later:

It’s the reality that, Orwell was fond of saying, is right in front of our noses if we want to see it. Everyone opposed to the direction which the coalition and its neo-conservative backers are taking the country has to consider a viable political and electoral strategy for tipping them out. This means . . . reassessing their attitude to Labor (123–124).

Well, maybe. But then again, maybe not. There are two issues here: Orwell's political position vis-à-vis the British Labour Party; and its applicability (or otherwise) to our situation in Australia today.

ORWELL'S BRITAIN: THE ILP

When Glover refers to Wigan and fascism, he must have in mind the mid-to-late 1930s, when Orwell travelled the north of England and wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, fought for the Spanish Republic and wrote *Homage to Catalonia*. But it is clear from Orwell's own accounts that, at this time, he wasn't terribly interested in "a Labour Party with reforming policies". In *The Road to Wigan Pier* he famously described "the type who becomes a Labour MP" as:

one of the most desolating spectacles the world contains. He has been picked out to fight for his mates, and all it means to him is a soft job and the chance of 'bettering' himself. Not merely while but *by* fighting the bourgeoisie he becomes a bourgeois himself.²

Later in the argument, Orwell includes "Labour Party backstairs-crawlers" among his list of unsavoury socialist types³ and worries about the "real danger of watering the whole Socialist movement down to some kind of pale-pink humbug even more ineffectual than the parliamentary Labour Party".⁴ In the concluding chapter, he insists on the urgent necessity to:

bring an effective Socialist party into existence. It will have to be a party with genuinely revolutionary intentions, and it will have to be numerically strong enough to act.⁵

This couldn't possibly refer to the British Labour Party in the 1930s, nor, with all due respect to Messrs Glover, Beazley, Crean and Latham, to the ALP today. If not the Labour Party, then what exactly did Orwell have in mind? The answer is almost certainly an expanded version of the political party he actually joined in June 1938, the only party of which he was ever a member, the 'Independent Labour Party' or ILP. Strictly speaking, the ILP might count as *a* Labour Party, but it certainly wasn't *the* Labour Party and nor was it committed to reforming policies. Rather, it managed to combine significant parliamentary representation (five seats in the 1931 general election, four in the 1935), a national organisation and membership (11,000 in 1932, 4400 in 1935) and a policy of full-blooded 'revolutionary' Socialism, which was suspicious of and increasingly hostile

to the USSR and the local Communist Party.

As is well known, Orwell fought in the Spanish Civil War for the POUM, the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, or United Marxist Workers' Party, rather than the Communist-led International Brigades.⁶ Glover comes close to suggesting that this was some kind of accident: "Orwell had hoped to join one of the fashionable communist-aligned international brigades," he writes, "but his application was vetoed by the secretary of the British Communist Party. Instead, he joined the little-known anarchist militia, the POUM" (35). It is true that Orwell approached Harry Pollit, the Communist Party's General Secretary, about volunteering for Spain, but there is no reason to suppose he had some specific intention to join the International Brigades. Nor was there anything especially 'fashionable' about the Brigades, a disgracefully dismissive word to use in this particular context. Even when Orwell had fled Spain, after the Communists suppressed the POUM, he would still describe the International Brigade as "a thin line of suffering and ill-armed human beings standing between barbarism and at least comparative decency".⁷ Writing from the relative comfort and security of early twenty-first-century Australia, Glover would do well to accord it a similar respect.

As for the POUM, it is indeed 'little-known' in Australia today, but then I doubt many Catalans have heard of the ALP. The POUM was the largest working-class political party in Catalonia during 1936–37, with nearly 40,000 members,⁸ some 10,000 of whom fought in its militia, and its leader, Andrés Nin—later murdered by the Communists—was elected Councillor for Justice in the *Generalidad*,⁹ the multi-party Catalan government. As its name suggests, it was an independent—that is, non-Communist—Marxist party, but not in any sense an anarchist organisation. It was also the ILP's sister party in Spain. And that, finally, is why Orwell fought for the POUM: because he had "slight connections, mainly personal"¹⁰ with the ILP and was already broadly sympathetic to its policies, if not to its members' dress sense.¹¹ Orwell's broad sympathy later grew into close agreement.

Glover's argument is thus based on a fundamental misconception that Orwell's political sympathies were with the Labour Party and the so-called 'centre-left'. They weren't. Orwell was actually what Glover and his ALP friends at university would no doubt have termed a 'Trot'. Indeed, that's exactly

how H.G. Wells described Orwell, as a “Trotskyist with big feet”.¹² And Orwell himself would have had little difficulty in recognising ‘centre-left’ as one of those ‘meaningless words’, which are “often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different”.¹³ So for those on the left it means left, for those in the centre it means centre and for the right of the ALP it means themselves. Orwell’s ‘democratic Socialism’, by contrast, was meant to convey a quite specific political meaning: distinguished from undemocratic Socialism, or Communism, on the one hand, and from democratic unSocialism, or Labourism, on the other. If you don’t understand that, then you don’t understand Orwell.

ORWELL’S BRITAIN: THE LABOUR PARTY

I’ve been discussing Orwell’s writings from the 1930s, partly because these figure prominently in Glover’s account, partly because Orwell himself insisted on the continuity of his political opinions and beliefs: “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936”, he wrote in 1946, “has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism”.¹⁴ Glover quotes these words—though not the capital ‘s’ in Socialism, which Orwell insisted upon—concluding that they ‘easily’ deal with rightist interpretations (86). And so they do. But he also interprets them as implying a continuing loyalty to the Labour Party, which they don’t. It’s true, of course, that in 1940 Orwell began to write for the Labour Left weekly, *Tribune*, and that he was employed part-time on the paper’s staff from November 1943 until February 1944. It’s also true that, about six months before his death, he wrote to the American United Auto Workers Union explaining that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have been partly realised in Communism and Fascism.¹⁵

Glover contrives to read this letter as suggesting that “Orwell’s message” was in the “need to craft a reforming platform that could appeal to a numerical majority” (106). But it doesn’t add up to anything like that. Both the Labour Party and the wider British electorate had moved markedly to the Left dur-

ing the Second World War. As Glover rightly observes: “What seemed revolutionary in 1940 was called reform by 1945” (116). Labour won a landslide victory at the 1945 general election and proceeded to implement an extraordinarily radical political program: the socialisation of the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy (coal, rail, road haulage, electricity, gas, water, the airlines); decolonisation of the Indian Empire; a universal and free national health service; full implementation of the wartime Coalition Government’s plan for universal and free compulsory secondary education; and a system of progressive taxation and welfare that really did redistribute income and capital from the wealthy to the working classes. My own parents—my father fresh from eighteen months in a German prison camp, my mother from the production line in a munitions factory—cast their first votes for this Government and remained loyal to its political memory for the whole of their lives. And rightly so, given the scale of its achievements: our free orange juice and free school milk, our heavily subsidised school lunches, our free dental and optical care, my own free scholarship to a selective state high school and then to a university, we owed it all ultimately to the Attlee Government. Little wonder, then, that the ILP was swept aside by the Labour landslide.

In 1945 the British Labour Party had nearly half a million individual members, by 1950 well over 900,000, by 1952 over a million.¹⁶ The truly odd thing, then, is that Orwell himself never joined. He was a Labour supporter, certainly, but then who on the Left wasn’t? Even the British Communists supported the Labour Party, “as the rope supports a hanged man”, in Lenin’s phrase.¹⁷ Orwell had been a Labour supporter even when he joined the ILP. “My most earnest hope is that the Labour Party will win a clear majority in the next General Election”, he had written, adding: “But we know what the history of the Labour Party has been, and we know the terrible temptation of the present moment—the temptation to fling every principle overboard”.¹⁸ In this context, to announce oneself a Labour supporter means rather less than Glover intimates. It’s not nearly enough on which to base the very strong claim that:

Orwell would not have been a supporter of single-issue parties, and . . . the politics of ‘rainbow coalitions’ . . . his allegiance was clear: he was a supporter of

the Attlee Labour government . . . this is his direct political legacy for the Australian centre-left . . . (105)

GLOVER'S AUSTRALIA

It's a bit rash for Glover or anyone else to claim such close familiarity with Orwell's "direct political legacy" to Australia. My own aim in *The Road to St Kilda Pier* was slightly less ambitious: to "conjure up . . . the shade of Eric Blair in order to ask of him what he would have made of us had he happened to live here, now".¹⁹ And my conclusion, that he would have hankered after a socialism which smells "of revolution and the overthrow of tyrants", at least had the merit of quoting Orwell word for word.²⁰ Glover is less free to do this, I suspect, because his politics are further from Orwell than he realises.

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell contrasts the type of socialist for whom revolution means "a movement of the masses with which they hope to associate themselves" and those for whom "it means a set of reforms which 'we', the clever ones, are going to impose upon 'them', the Lower Orders". The distinction reappears in his 1946 essay on Burnham, where it is used to critique the English Communist intelligentsia.²¹ But in the book itself such criticism had been directed quite specifically at Fabian socialists, that is, at supporters of the Labour Party, like George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice Webb (whose husband Sidney had been a minister in Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Government). Orwell's attacks on 'utopianism', which Glover misreads as directed at the far Left, are also clearly aimed at the Fabians, here present in the person of H.G. Wells.²² Orwell was right: in their dominant political forms, Communism and Labourism are both 'managerialist'. His own socialism, by contrast, was of a very different variety, which he shared with the POUM and the ILP. Indeed, there is a whole alternative tradition of socialism 'from below', neither Labourist nor Communist, which has included, but is by no means confined to, Dutch council communism, Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, Italian autonomism, the more seriously democratic versions of Trotskyism, what used to be called 'the New Left' and, more recently, the 'anti-globalisation' movement. This is where Orwell belongs, not with the backstairs crawlers and pale-pink humbug of the 'centre-left', but with the ratbags and radicals in what we might call the 'independent Left'.

No-one can say with certainty what Orwell would

have done had he been an early twenty-first century Australian. But it strikes me as unlikely he would have joined the ALP: not simply because he refused to join the British Labour Party even in the glory years of the Attlee Government; but also because neither party now bears much resemblance to British Labour in the 1940s. The whole point about the Attlee Government, surely, is just how untypical it turned out to be. It was the only government in the entire history of the British Labour Party ever to carry out seriously radical social reforms. Which is one more than in the entire history of the Australian Labor Party. As Vere Gordon Childe observed of his time as private secretary to one of the early ALP state premiers: "the Labour Party, starting with a band of inspired Socialists, degenerated into a vast machine for capturing political power, but did not know how to use that power . . . except for the profit of individuals".²³ Nonetheless, these early Labor parties were at least socialist in inspiration and aspiration, no matter how ineffectual in their practice. It must be obvious, however, to 'Blind Freddy' and his dog that this is no longer the case.

Where, then, is the independent Left in Australia today? It's in all of the usual places, of course: there are devotees of everything from anarcho-syndicalism to democratic Trotskyism somewhere in the inner city. But, to 'get real', as Glover insists we should (121), I'd guess that its hopes and aspirations are best represented in the most immediately practical of political terms, by the Greens. They aren't the 'revolutionary' Socialists Orwell preferred, but they're much more hostile to market liberalism than is the ALP. Indeed, Bob Brown has been a virtual one-man opposition to the globalising consensus, a role Orwell might have relished. The point, of course, is that environmentalism, like socialism and conservatism before it, is predicated on an inherently anti-liberal argument: that the free market, if left to itself, will tend to destroy the natural environment. Logically, environmentalism is compatible with either conservatism or socialism, but in practice—and in part, no doubt, thanks to Jack Mundey and the legacy of the NSW BLF—Australian Greens have tended decisively to the Left. Which is why they seem to come the closest to Orwell's sense of the ILP as "the only . . . party—at any rate the only one large enough to be worth considering—which aims at anything I should regard as Socialism".²⁴

In the unlikely event that an unreconstructed Eric

Orwell explained his purposes in The Road to Wigan Pier: "in order to defend Socialism it is necessary to start by attacking it".

Blair were resurrected into early twenty-first-century Australia, his homophobia would no doubt prove a serious obstacle to collaboration with Mr Brown, his anti-feminism to collaboration with Ms Nettle. Orwell's ranting aversion to crankishness—"every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist, and feminist in England"²⁵ etc., etc.—makes it difficult to imagine him marching with the Greens. But you never know: there is a decidedly Green subtext to *Coming up For Air*, for example.²⁶ Glover has a two-way bet on Orwell's ranting, concluding that it keeps him safe from single-issue parties and rainbow coalitions, as we have seen, but also that it shows him to be "a man of another age" (86). What most strikes me, however, is that it figures in a distinctly unflattering discussion, not simply of the Left in general, but of the ILP in particular, that is, of the political party he was increasingly drawn toward and would eventually join. Orwell explained his purposes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*: "in order to defend Socialism it is necessary to start by attacking it"²⁷ Maybe it follows reasonably enough that the Socialism which most attracted him—the non-Communist, non-Labourist, crank variety—would come in for the severest criticism.

GLOVER'S ORWELL

It might seem surprising that Glover should still need to cover the old ground of Orwell's supposed conservatism: that insistence on 'democratic Socialism' was pretty explicit, after all. But Orwell is so often misrepresented it was probably right to take up the challenge. What Glover doesn't quite explain, however, is why conservative interpretations persist, even in the face of such obvious evidence to the contrary. It is partly a deliberately 'Orwellian' device, he suggests, a "misinterpretation, based on a highly selective reading of Orwell" (76). But there is more to it than that. For, as Glover also notes, those New Right journalists really do find something admirable in Orwell's "style but not his content" (78). Style is by no means a trivial matter, however, in hands as ex-

pert as Orwell's. Shortly after defining his commitment to democratic Socialism, Orwell adds that: "What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art"²⁸ But the whole point of political writing is to be persuasive, to sway readers around to the writer's views. Orwell is very, very good at this. His basic technique is quite simple: to write as if the reader's political and moral sympathies can already be counted upon to agree with his own. The more likely it is that readers will actually disagree, the more powerfully he tends to assert their agreement. In short, the assumed prior consensus between writer and reader is a rhetorical device, designed to undermine resistance to Orwell's arguments. This is a trick, then, as much a literary artifice as the pseudonym, 'George Orwell', at once so manly, English and ordinary, unlike the almost effete, almost French, 'Eric Blair'.

Writing is never a simple or unvarnished reflection of anything. Effective writing is a performance, which always represents reality differently from the way it actually 'is'. The writer who invented Newspeak—as an awful warning, yes, but who invented it nonetheless—clearly knew this. Eric Blair was thus a more interesting, but also less rhetorically persuasive, character than 'George Orwell'. Try summarising Blair's extra-literary biography for his ASIO file and you get the point:

Eric Blair, alias George Orwell, was born in Bengal of part-English, part-French extraction. He speaks a number of European and Asian languages and is clearly obsessed with foreign literary and political ideas. He admits to having admired Yevgeny Zamyatin, Karel Capek, Leon Trotsky, Salvador Dali and Mahatma Gandhi. He claims to have read Zamyatin's *We*—a source of inspiration for his own book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—in its French translation as *Nous Autres*. He resigned his commission in the Indian Imperial Police for reasons of anti-imperialist principle. He then 'dropped out' for a couple of years in Paris and London. He fought for an anarcho-Trotskyist militia unit

on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, joined a small semi-Trotskyist party on his return to Britain and later worked as a journalist on the extreme-leftist newspaper *Tribune*. He chain smokes, affects a moustache and unruly long hair, wears corduroy and tweed jackets and often also dark shirts. He is suspicious of American political influence in Europe, but admires the American pornographer, Henry Miller.

And what would ASIO make of that? A pinko bohemian ratbag, if ever there was one. Yet, Blair could write so well as to create and maintain—and project into the future for more than half a century—the illusion of the plain-speaking, ordinary, down-to-earth, middle-class Englishman. Which is the idea, of course. But it may also be why Glover wants Orwell to be a good social democrat. I would rather try to grasp both sides of what is actually a quite complex performance: to see how Orwell projected the sense of his own normality; but also to keep peeling away at this Orwell character so as to get through to Blair, searching for the ghost in his machine, the ratbag in the woodpile. So yes, the Left should try to speak as democratically as it can to suburban Australia, just as Glover recommends; but it should go on being Left, nonetheless, in ways the ALP simply isn't. As to electoral politics, I intend to follow Orwell's example. My most earnest hope was that the Labor Party would win a majority in the 2004 federal election. But we know what the history of the Labor Party has been . . . and so should surely have cast our first preferences for the Greens insofar as that was possible.

1. Dennis Glover, *Orwell's Australia: From Cold War to Culture Wars*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2003, \$19.95. Page references are given in brackets within the text.
2. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962, p.155.
3. *Ibid.*, p.190.
4. *Ibid.*, p.194.
5. *Ibid.*, p.202.
6. Cf. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962; Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* Secker and Warburg, London, 1980, pp. 207–236.
7. George Orwell, 'Review of *The Spanish Cockpit* by Franz Borkenau and *Volunteer in Spain* by John Sommerfield' in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol. 1 An Age Like This*, eds S. Orwell and I. Angus, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, p.311.
8. Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936–1939*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p.340.

9. Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p.367.
10. Orwell, 'Notes on the Spanish Militias', in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol. 1*, p.352.
11. Glover cheerfully quotes Orwell's rude remarks about "pistachio coloured shirts and khaki shorts", right down to the casual aside about the ILP holding its 1936 summer school at Letchworth (Glover, pp.85–86; Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, pp.152–153). But it never occurs to him to ask why Orwell was so well-versed on the details of the ILP's summer school. Because he attended? Or at least considered doing so?
12. Crick, *George Orwell*, p.294.
13. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol. 4 In Front of Your Nose*, eds S. Orwell and I. Angus, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, p.162.
14. George Orwell, 'Why I Write' in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol. 1*, p.28.
15. George Orwell, 'Letter to Francis A. Henderson (extract)' in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 4, p.564.
16. Keith Laybourn, *A Century of Labour: A History of the Labour Party 1900–2000*, Sutton Publications, Stroud, 2000, p.159.
17. V.I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing" Communism—An Infantile Disorder' in *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975, p.350.
18. Orwell, 'Why I Joined the Independent Labour Party', in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol. 1*, p.374.
19. Andrew Milner, *The Road to St Kilda Pier: George Orwell and the Politics of the Australian Left*, Stained Wattle Press, Sydney, 1984, p.73.
20. *Ibid.*, p.82. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.190.
21. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.157. George Orwell, 'James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution' in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 4, p.212.
22. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, pp.157, 177–178.
23. Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs*, MUP, Melbourne, 1964, p.181.
24. Orwell, 'Why I Joined the Independent Labour Party', p.374.
25. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.152.
26. Witness George Bowling's reactions to the 'Pixy Glen' in Upper Binfield: "doesn't it make you puke sometimes to see what they're doing to England, with their bird-baths and their plaster gnomes, and their pixies and tin cans, where the beechwoods used to be? . . . Sentimental, you say? Anti-social? Oughtn't to prefer trees to men? I say it depends what trees and what men" (George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962, p.215).
27. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.151.
28. Orwell, 'Why I Write', p.28.

Andrew Milner teaches in the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University. He has written eight books, some of them textbooks, some scholarly monographs, but still describes *The Road to St Kilda Pier* as his best. The second edition of his *Literature, Culture and Society* will be published by Routledge next year.

THE DISHONEST THIRTIES RECALLED

REFERENCES TO THE WORKS of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler are the stock in trade of intellectuals of the Right, yet both placed themselves firmly on the Left. At the same time they decisively distanced themselves from the Soviet system. "It is a tragedy", said Orwell, "that in the popular mind Socialism is somehow identified with Russia." In New York in 1948, Koestler, while condemning "the Babbits of the Left", declared: "I am a man of the Left . . . To the Babbits of the Right I have nothing to say. We have no language in common". Bertrand Russell had visited Soviet Russia in the early twenties and considered that, "with every day I spent in Russia my horror increased", while, in 1937, in *Back from the USSR*, Andre Gide bitterly denounced the system which had betrayed "what it had allowed us to hope for".

For those who discovered anti-communism in the climate of the Cold War, it may be difficult to appreciate what the world looked like in the thirties, in that "low, dishonest decade", as W.H. Auden described it, in which, as Trevor-Roper remarked, "our superiors were lunatic in their anti-communism". *The Times* was edited by Geoffrey Dawson, who, as Lord Northcliffe remarked, "was naturally pro-German. He just can't help it". British PM Lloyd George described Hitler as "the greatest living German", and wrote: "I only wish we had a man of his supreme quality at the head of our affairs today". Robert Gordon Menzies said: "I think there is a great deal to be said for Germany re-arming", Wilfrid Kent Hughes published *Why I am a Fascist*, while Prime Minister Lyons reproved H.G. Wells for "insulting the leader of a friendly power [Adolf Hitler]". It was the time of Munich, when Neville Chamberlain surrendered the Sudetenland without a murmur. These were

the "shabby years", as William Manchester described them in his biography of Churchill, when "Britain's rulers sought an accommodation with a criminal regime, turned a blind eye to its iniquities, ignored its frequent resort to murder and torture . . . seeking only a bulwark against Bolshevism". Capitalism only survived when Franklin Roosevelt defied all the 'correct' economic theories of the day and launched the program of massive public spending known as the 'New Deal'.

John Maynard Keynes, in an interview with Kingsley Martin in 1939, said "the only ones in politics worth sixpence . . . were the intellectual communists under 35 . . . the nearest thing we have to the typical non-conformist Englishman who made the Reformation, fought the Great Rebellion, won us our civil and religious liberties and humanised the working classes".

Compare the record of those on the Right, the 'Guilty Men', the subject of Victor Gollancz's famous tract of the time: Chamberlain, Sir Samuel Hoare, US Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, Lords Halifax, Lothian, Redesdale, Mount-Temple, Earl Jellicoe, Sir Barry Domville, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, Sir Oswald Mosley and his Blackshirts, Lord Astor and 'the Cliveden Set', E.W.D. Tennant and the Anglo-German Fellowship, Sir Horace Wilson, the Marquis of Londonderry, R.A. Butler, the Duke of Hamilton (probably) and Sir Neville Henderson (certainly). At the height of the Sudeten crisis in 1938, Henderson told the Germans that Britain would not risk one sailor or airman for Czechoslovakia. Hitler was not 'appeased', he was encouraged. He was their creature.

Even after Hitler got off the leash and overran Western Europe, diplomatic channels were opened

through Mussolini, and Lloyd George and Menzies reportedly had ‘discussions’ about replacing Churchill. But Churchill was not impressed by someone “who loathes his own people”, as he remarked to the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King. Meanwhile the Duke of Windsor was waiting in Lisbon, in ‘conversation’ with some Swedish diplomats and Birger Dahlerus (the Swedish businessman who was a friend of Goering), for the call for his triumphant return to the throne after Hitler had his way. Churchill heard wind of it and despatched HRH to govern the Bahamas.

I remember the times well. I was 12 when the world was heading for catastrophe, listening to the BBC at 1 o’clock as the world held its breath and wondered if Hitler could be stopped. What did Hitler and Chamberlain discuss in secret in that hotel room from which Chamberlain emerged with that famous scrap of paper? What else could it have been but a free hand for Hitler’s “*Drang*

Nach Osten” which he had foretold in *Mein Kampf*, the book Lloyd George compared to Magna Carta? “Peace in our time,” said Chamberlain! The Right supported Hitler (and later the Taliban) to look after Russia. They supported Saddam Hussein to look after Iran. The trouble was their creatures got off the leash. How could anyone trust the Right again? These events are burnt into my brain.

MAIN SOURCES:

- John Lukacs, *Five Days in London May 1940*, Yale University Press, 1999
- Andrew Boyle, *Climate of Treason*, Coronet, 1979
- William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill*, Vol. 2, Little Brown & Co., 1988
- David Day, *Menzies and Churchill at War*, Angus & Robertson, 1988

Bruce Anderson graduated with Honours in Politics at Melbourne University in 1947. He knew Overland’s founding editor Stephen Murray-Smith from childhood in the early thirties.

Reunion

My friend arrived from Perth. We shook hands under the clocks
of Flinders Street station—whose signalling of order
is like a derangement in one’s own mind, is like
the appropriation of all times—on Melbourne’s implacable paving.

I can’t maintain a sense of our togetherness,
despite our always treading the ground of the same country,
despite my knowing that Western ground so well, with barefoot knowing,
and the knowing of so many of my life’s journeys.

It’s more like now he’s joined me down on the far far heavier end
of a see-saw, while Perth is floating up near Asia,
and after threading our way through the crowd,
in this lowering humidity, and talking above the city-noise,
he’ll return to that ethereal otherness,
and our meeting will evaporate as the rain does
in even the winter sunshine over there.

MIKE HEALD

STRATEGY, ORGANISATION AND THE STUDENT MOVEMENT

THE SYMPOSIUM ON Australian Student Activism in *Overland* 173 opened an essential discussion for those interested in developing a robust left political culture in Australia. Campus has been the primary base for left-wing or radical ideas for at least the past twenty years. The late eighties saw two waves of student protest. The first came with the introduction of HEAC in 1986. The second came in 1988–89. Taken together, they are the last sustained mass campaign on campuses. Things changed over the intervening years, with a slow decline in student activity on campus and at the same time the increasing implementation of various federal governments' neo-liberal agendas. The new situation has tertiary institutions that, in the words of the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee, "operate in a funding environment based on demonstrating efficiency through cost reductions rather than through the greater value of the courses they provide and the research they undertake".¹ In the early years of the new century the level of student activism has declined to such a point that it is sometimes difficult to locate. Most remarkable has been the lack of student protest and response to Brendan Nelson's *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*, the bulk of which was passed by the Senate at the end of 2003, ushering in among other things up to 25 per cent fee increases for students. Indeed, the student movement was at its lowest point in decades at precisely the moment it was facing its greatest challenge for fifteen years. What is the relation between the decline in activism and the new neo-liberal university? Why isn't the student movement leading social struggles today? Should we believe Mick Armstrong, who answers that "I don't believe, as some have argued, it is because structural changes,

such as the increasing number of students working, have made it impossible to organise students".² Is there a way the student movement can revive? If so, what will it look like?

THE STUDENT TODAY

To try to get a picture of students today there are at least four crucial changes which have occurred over the past ten or fifteen years that need to be considered:³

I. The Mass Student

Numbers of students have vastly increased, while the kinds of study they are conducting has changed:

- Education participation by 20–24-year-olds has risen from 25 per cent in 1991 to 34.8 per cent in 2001.⁴
- Students studying in higher education institutions have risen from 585,435 in 1994 to 929,639 in 2003.⁵
- TAFE students have risen from 985,900 students in 1991 to 1,749,400 in 2001.⁶
- Apprentices and trainees have increased from 160,000 in 1991 to 316,000 in 2001, though the bulk of these are trainees rather than apprentices.⁷
- Growth in Business (43 per cent) and Law/Legal Studies (86 per cent) during the nineties.⁸
- Growth in postgraduate coursework students, from 85,764 in 1994 to 201,653 in 2003, and a growth in higher degree research from 31,011 in 1994 to 45,656 in 2003.⁹
- Part-time students/external students comprise approximately 40 per cent of the total student body.¹⁰

2. The Fee-Paying Student

By the end of 2004 student debt is predicted to top \$10 billion.¹¹ Approximately two-thirds of all students in 1998 had a HECS debt.¹² One in ten students obtains a loan to continue studying which amounts to an average of \$4000.¹³

3. The Working Student

In 1984 full-time undergraduate university students worked an average of five hours a week during semester. By 2000, full-time students worked an average of 14.4 hours a week, nearly three times the 1984 figure. During the same period the percentage of students working has risen from about 50 per cent to over 70 per cent.¹⁴

4. The International Student

Currently there are:¹⁵

- 153,400 international students of which 72,700 are studying in the higher education sector and 30,800 in VET. Overseas students comprise 13.9 per cent of all students. The percentage has risen in the higher education sector from 5.5 per cent in 1991 to 15.5 per cent in 2001.¹⁶
- 85 per cent of international students are from the Asian region.¹⁷
- Of these, there is parity between men and women, and the bulk of them are under 25. Most are concentrated in business, administration and economics degrees (44 per cent higher education and 58 per cent VET).¹⁸
- Overseas students are paying more in fees, rising from \$883 million to \$1.8 billion between 1994 and 2000.¹⁹

A POLITICAL HISTORY

What effect the above structural changes to the social and political composition of students will have on student political activity is unclear. One could claim that students will inevitably 'retreat' from collective action on campus because they are forced to work more, pay more fees, live longer with their parents and so on. Student subjectivity, in this view, is increasingly dominated by disengagement from campus life and is taking on subversive forms that are primarily individualised: cheating, plagiarism, manipulation of university policies and procedures (appeals, special consideration, grievance procedures). Students have thus adopted the perspective of negotiating a difficult

terrain and using all the available mechanisms. Yet such a student subjectivity could equally be attributed to the defeat of the old left-wing notions of free education as a social good and to any sense of students or society having collective interests. Have we witnessed simply the victory of neo-liberal ideology among students? Do they simply have nowhere else to turn? Is it, in other words, a result of *ideological* rather than *structural* change? One could easily claim, by contrast, that students are *more* likely to become active as the pressures of bending to the neo-liberal university, of having to work and study, of leading a fragmented, functional existence increases their sense of disempowerment, dispossession and exploitation. The student is increasingly, to borrow from Lukacs, reified. Of course such a view lacks polemical charge, for the decline of student activism has paralleled these very developments. Neither of these options (structural changes blocking activism versus structural changes generating activism) is compelling because they are essentially economic and reductive ways of thinking about the issue.

The point is to have a *political* as well as an economic analysis of the past fifteen years, or more interestingly, to understand each as interrelated phenomena. One of the critical elements—alongside these structural changes—in the current absence of student activity, remains the failure of the student movement to challenge neo-liberal attacks throughout the late eighties and nineties: the HEAC charge; HECS; Austudy loans; VSU (WA and Victoria); international student fees; postgraduate fees. Indeed it was the failure of the student movement during this time that allowed the structural changes to the student population to occur. If the overall trend was one of rearguard action against an increasingly aggressive neo-liberal agenda, there were also minor victories that punctuated the nineties. It is important to recall that it is not as if the movement was crushed or faced serious persecution. Rather, it shared with the Left as a whole, a general failure of nerve driven partly by the virulent anti-left ideological offensive symbolised by Fukayama's 'end of history', the apparent power of neo-liberalism, and a more general confusion about effective strategic options.

ORGANISATION AND STRATEGY

Like much of the Left, student activism failed in

one decisive arena: that of organisation. The student movement failed to develop or maintain the forms through which potential activists can develop their own proactive capacities: the passing on of information and knowledge, be that political (analysis, strategy, tactics), historical (the lessons of previous campaigns), or practical (how to campaign, run an election campaign, involve new activists, write articles, lay out leaflets). It is precisely in this strategic vision that the future of the student movement rests. Jeannie Rea glosses over this problem when she claims that students have always been hard to organise and that they “do have to constantly reinvent the wheel because there is a three to five year turnover”.²⁰ The problem is that they have to reinvent the wheel without help, without a layer of other activists who might pass these skills on, without any mechanisms to minimise the problems of quick turnover.

Lack of radical organisational forms is a much greater problem than the presence of what Mick Armstrong calls the student “bureaucracy”, by which he means full-time student union office-bearers. He overestimates the blockage caused by this ‘bureaucracy’ when he calls it a “factor” in the decline of the movement. His claim that “the student movement is more heavily bureaucratised than it was at the high point of struggle in the late sixties”, conflates student representatives with student bureaucrats and presents them together in a one-sided, unremittingly negative way.²¹ While many student unions are run by ideologically conscious bureaucrats, associated often with the ALP, there are many independent representatives who are drawn first into student union activity as an expression of a desire to act around their immediate needs and interests. That these independents are drawn into a bureaucratic mould is as much a result of the failure of any left alternative as the expression of separate interests, perks or privileges. Despite the limitations of their approach some of these representatives help to keep the embers of student activity warm. And while the failure of the student office-bearers to mobilise against the war on Iraq was a “wasted opportunity”, the question is whether this was a failure of strategic perspective or a reflection of their status as paid representatives. Armstrong seems to lean towards the latter explanation; why else would he mention their increasing numbers?²² The real issue, however, is

how to approach paid office-bearer positions, and how radical activists might work with those representatives prepared in some way to fight. Rather than get caught in some bureaucrat/rank-and-file antinomy, the task is to transcend the two, binding representatives to activism.²³

The failure of student activist organisation reflects a broader failure of strategic perspective. Any collective effort implies a relative unity of focus, an ability to answer key strategic questions. What is the role of student unions? What is the significance of the Nelson Review? What are the forces arranged against the Left on campuses? How are international students to be involved? What alliances need to be forged? How is an alternative education system to be conceived? These are the issues on which there is silence at the moment; real work must be put into these questions. There will be no going back to the old days of social-democratic ‘free education’ without another long economic boom, something unimaginable today. Thus, the period of the nineties was a period of transition in the student movement, from the defence of the old social democratic liberalism to fighting in the new context of neo-liberalism. New forms and a new political composition will emerge from the new context. Ben Rosenzweig is right when he suggests that we have come to the end of an era in the history of the student movement and that the movement will “have to address the forms of disciplining and social control constituted through the imposition of neo-liberalised social relations”.²⁴ There will be a greater class edge to the future movement, as students are increasingly bound to a life of debt repayment, possibly with greater cross-sectoral alliances and with such forces as unions for whom students may work (as well as the staff unions). The Left must also reconsider its relations to international students, exploited and isolated, and an important bloc in student union elections. All this remains in question form. The solutions will be brought about not only by theorising but also by doing, by organising. It is in this direction that student activists must turn.

1. AVCC, *Our Universities Our Future, Support Paper C*, p.10. Available at <www.avcc.edu.au>.

2. Mick Armstrong, ‘Australian Student Activism’, in *Overland* 173, 2003, p.36.

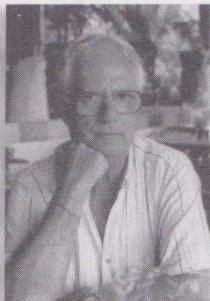
3. The statistics quoted by different sources vary, at least

partly because of different counting methods. I have used the same source for individual statistics to keep consistency.

4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). All the ABS figures cited can be found on the ABS website.
5. DEST, *Higher Education Report for the 2004 to 2006 Triennium*, p.9.
6. ABS.
7. ABS.
8. DEST, *Higher Education Report for the 1999 to 2001 Triennium*. Available without page numbers at <www.dest.gov.au>.
9. DEST, *Higher Education Report for the 2004 to 2006 Triennium*, pp.11-12.
10. DEST, *Higher Education Report for the 1999 to 2001 Triennium*. Available at <www.dest.gov.au>.
11. DEST, *Higher Education Report for the 2004 to 2006 Triennium*, p.66.
12. Simon Smith, Carey Ramm and Rebecca Archold, *Investigation of the Sources of funds for Up-front HECS Contributions and Postgraduate fees paid by Australian students EIP DETYA, 1998*, Table 4.
13. AVCC, *Paying their way: A survey of Australian Undergraduate University Student Finances*, AVCC 2001, p.2.
14. AVCC, *University Students Meeting Their Living Costs: The Facts*, p.1.
15. ABS.
16. ABS.
17. DEST, *Higher Education Report for the 2004 to 2006 Triennium*, p.31.
18. ABS.
19. ABS.
20. Jeannie Rea, 'Australian Student Activism', *Overland* 173, 2003, p.38.
21. Mick Armstrong, 'Australian Student Activism', *Overland* 173, 2003, p.37
22. *Ibid.*
23. Of course tactically one might need to 'go around' office-bearers, or eject them from their positions; it is a matter of what kind of relationship one seeks in the long term.
24. Ben Rosenzweig, 'Australian Student Activism', *Overland* 173, 2003, p.40.

Rjurik Davidson is Research and Information Officer at RMIT Student Union (TAFE) and a long-time socialist activist.

comment | LEO VAN DE PAS



FLAWS, NOT ONLY IN THE GLASS

To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe the truth

G.M. Glaskin, c. 1994, photo: Leo van de Pas

APRIL 19, 2001, is a day that will remain with me for a long time. The day itself didn't seem to be memorable for any reason, but the repercussions came later. Carolyn van Langenberg had asked me to pick her up and drive her to the UWA Press, to discuss a possible biography of the late author G.M. Glaskin. Then, as she was pressed for time, would I drive her to the airport? Wanting to help her in any way I could, of course, I did.

At the airport I parked my car, in a place for short-term parking, close to an entry.

Kindly, Carolyn asked me to come in for a cup of coffee as she still had to wait before her plane was due to leave. Returning to my car I found a hefty parking fine. Never mind, it was for a good cause, or so I thought.

Then, a considerable time later, I received an-

other fine for driving through a red light. The time and place recorded seemed strange to me; I checked and at that time I was driving Carolyn through Perth to the airport.

Bad luck comes threefold, or so they say. The third piece of bad luck involving Carolyn van Langenberg happened on 5 September 2002, though I was not to find out until 3 December 2003.

In July 1968, while living in Amsterdam, I met Gerry Glaskin. He asked me if I would come to Australia to help him with his work. On 4 October 1968 I arrived in Perth and from that day I was with Gerry until he died, aged 76, on 11 March 2000. For the last period I was his carer, and from December 1998 until December 1999 I cared for him at home, though doctors thought he should perhaps be in a nursing home.

In the thirty-two years we were together I helped him with his work. Because of my assistance he was able to write *The Eaves of Night*, a memoir about his grandmother. I made it possible to produce *One Way to Wonderland*, another memoir. The hardest work for me was the first of three books on the *Christos Experiment*, as it entailed transcribing tape recordings.

As a genealogist I researched Gerry's ancestors while he wrote short biographies of his parents, grandparents and other relatives. From this research I learned a great deal, not only about him and his family but also about the history of Western Australia.

Once Gerry looked on someone as a friend, they would remain friends for life; he had as many women as men friends. One friend he and I made in 1969 was the painter Nigel Thomson and over the years we collected five paintings by him.

Nigel's sister wants to record his paintings, and as she was told that Gerry owned at least one, she tried to find him. On the internet she found an article by Carolyn van Langenberg, a 'pubtalk' given on 5 September 2002, from which she learned that Gerry had died. Through a mutual friend she heard about me, and that I had several paintings by Nigel and was living in Canberra. She made contact and had a productive visit, though a devastating one for me. I did not know about this pubtalk. As Gerry's partner, I would have expected Carolyn van Langenberg would have let me know about this talk and would want my support with her work. Searching the net, I soon found the pubtalk site, under the auspices of Murdoch University. Shocked by Carolyn's article, I approached Murdoch University which, on my request, removed it from their website.

What shocked me? If it was the truth I would not have blinked an eye. Instead it reveals laziness in research, ignorance and an unexpected degree of hostility, given that she had never met her subject.

She asserts that she put her findings:

past a psychiatrist and a psychologist [neither had met Gerry] and they both concur that, at the end of his life, he may well have had Asperger's Syndrome, a condition that implies a narcissism and sociopathy combined with a kind of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Some workers in the field actually put it on the Autism spectrum.

I do not remember having given her the names of any doctors attending Gerry over a period of some

thirty-two years. I understand autism to be a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life, and that it is not something that develops at the end of someone's life. In any event, over all those years I found Gerry to be warm, responsible, responsive and caring, hardly the symptoms of autism.

She is continually negative about her subject. For instance:

No End To The Way is a novel that exposes a truth rather than tells a rollicking tale. But its success seemed to convince Glaskin that he should write in order to be shocking. He wanted to write *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Myra Breckinridge*.

Suffice to say that Gerry's book was published in 1965, Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* in 1968, Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969. How could Gerry want to write like either of these books when they had not yet been published? The supposed 'shockers' that followed were *The Man Who Didn't Count*, *The Road to Nowhere*, *A Bird in my Hands*. Obviously Gerry was not of the opinion that "he should write in order to be shocking".

Elsewhere she writes:

So Gerry, from an early age until he left school, got to see the big screen free . . . He was a fantasist and, lacking imagination, he drew on those pictures he watched in the garden cinemas for his story lines.

Having all Gerry's books, I looked for ones that might be based on movies he saw in the 1930s. I could not find any.

I do not know where she gets her information from, but some of it is blatantly wrong. For instance, she writes: "He continued to travel backwards and forwards from Amsterdam to Perth, finally settling in the latter in 1979, or thereabouts." Gerry had settled in Perth in 1967 and I arrived there in 1968; and for both that was home till Gerry died.

She states further:

Glaskin established a myth believed overseas that he left school because his family were [sic] so poor that even though he was on a scholarship to help pay his fees and educational expenses, he had to go to work to put shoes on his younger sibling's [sic] feet and books in their bags. I am assured by Lew (one sibling out of five alive) that this is nonsense . . . Gerry took a few liberties to self-mythologise himself [sic] as the

writer from destitute origins—for the purpose of advertising perhaps. After he left school, Glaskin worked in a variety of jobs, beginning with . . .

In fact, he never took up that scholarship because he did go to work to earn money. Whether he paid for shoes or books is irrelevant. Gerry went to work at about 15; his brother Llew, born in 1932, was then only 6 or so. A sister, older than Llew, confirmed to me that Gerry had to discard the scholarship and go to work.

Van Langenberg mentions David Marr's admirable biography of Patrick White, but she does not acknowledge that Marr gained considerable insight from his conversations and interactions with Manoly Lascaris. She skirts the issue of Glaskin's partners as if they aren't important. To me, how a writer lives is the crucial point of understanding why and what a writer writes.

"I have waded into Grant Stone's basement at Murdoch University intent on searching through Glaskin's papers for the revealed person, not the one who brought upon himself much ill-repute," van Langenberg writes. Before she waded in, she had been told that Gerry had destroyed all private papers, and that one segment of his other papers had gone to a university in Boston, a further segment to another US university and only the residue was at Murdoch University. She must have known that the "revealed person" could not be there.

She writes: "I have found evidence in his papers that he had a dreadful attitude to women. But in the novels women are clothes props, long suffering mothers, stiff and middle class, unresisting anima in the

style of Fritz Weiss, but never a moll put up to put down." Gerry, with reason, had a dreadful attitude to a few specific women; however, he had many women friends, Han Suyin from the 1950s till he died, Ruby Beacham, Rae Kean from 1966 till he died, Flo Bandsma, Margaret Walker, Sally Myer, Helen Sinclair-Wilson, Jane Vandon, Jean Ewers, and many more. He had written a one-woman play about Marilyn Monroe, successfully performed in Perth, and a play about Daisy Bates and Ernestine Hill, with only two characters. 'The Eaves of Night' (in *Two Women*) contains the story of his grandmother, certainly not a clothes prop, long-suffering mother or stiff and middle class.

What offends me very much is van Langenberg's statement as fact: "Those last years of his life were terrible." It was in those years that Carolyn spoke to Gerry on the phone, perhaps three times. She never met him. Gerry had almost become a recluse because of physical disability, and I was the only person constantly with him. The Department of Veterans' Affairs accepted me as his carer and I was responsible for him. Is she suggesting that I had made his life terrible? The only people who would know are myself, a few friends and his sister. Van Langenberg did not speak in depth to any of these. Gerry's last year in particular was peaceful and happy, until he had to go to hospital for the last three months of his life.

Leo van de Pas is responding to Carolyn van Langenberg's talk 'The compelling Mr Glaskin, a work in progress' which was at <www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/pubtalk/2002/glaskin.html>.

Carolyn van Langenberg responds

THE PAPER Leo van de Pas refers to was a working paper based on preliminary research in one archive, held at Murdoch University in the Humanities & Social Sciences' Special Collection under the auspices of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Western Australia. I spoke to the paper at the pub as if it were notes to jog my memory.

It was suggested by someone (I can't recall who it was) that I should give permission for the paper to go on the pubtalk website. I gave permission, adding that I needed time to do the footnotes and references before it went up on the website, then I

forgot about it. It had no footnotes or references.

Leo van de Pas was not mentioned in this paper.

G.M. (Gerald Marcus) Glaskin is a writer whose contribution to the early Australian literary perspective on Asia and also, outstandingly, with *No End To The Way*, to gay writing, has been largely overlooked by critics. Research on my literary study of G.M. Glaskin is still in progress.

Carolyn van Langenberg is a writer and researcher. Her latest novel is blue moon (Indra Publishing, 2004).

WRITTEN ON THE STREET

... learning to go forward by turning back the clock ...
—Bob Dylan¹

IT IS NO GREAT SECRET that the book I recently co-edited with Carole Ferrier, *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History*, takes its cue and inspiration from Jeff and Jill Sparrow's *Radical Melbourne: A Secret History*.² This wide overview of sites and sagas in the deep north is structured upon the latter's adjustable template; and, if all goes well, the model will inspire a whole series of radical capital city histories eventually. Nor need it all stop there: Radical Wollongong, Newcastle, Broken Hill, Port Pirie, Fremantle, Townsville or Mt Isa would all give the premier cities a run for their money.

But I would like to go back in this article to a time well before *Radical Melbourne's* appearance in 2001 to re-encounter some of my own private motives for engaging upon street research. A good starting point is the opening of Mena Calthorpe's novel, *The Plain of Ala*, where she writes of an old bushworker, named Arthur. She says:

It didn't occur to Arthur during any part of his life that he'd been involved in history.

When he was old and dying and almost beyond passing on his tales and legends, his friends often said he should have written it all down. Not that they gave much thought to history either, though they knew something of it. It was all writ large in the names of the old colonial and squatting families. But if you asked them about their ancestors, what they were doing while the leading families were making history they'd look at you in astonishment and say: "What us? We were only working."³

I grew up in suburban Brisbane from the late 1940s in Arthur's kind of world, where such sentiments were commonplace. Yet looking back on it all now, history was all around us.

I think back to my youth and detect moments of a flickering, perhaps dawning consciousness of this. We had migrated as a family of ten-pound migrants in 1948 from a place in South Wales seemingly 'steeped in history'. In fact, history was mostly all it had left. Merthyr Tydfil had once produced up to 40 per cent of the pig-iron in Britain, from nine massive iron and steel works, to fuel the great Industrial Revolution. In mid-1831, the townspeople had risen in insurrection against persistent exploitation and had actually beaten back, on three separate occasions over four days, the military forces sent in to suppress them: "an event without precedent in the history of civil conflict in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain" to quote Welsh historian, Gwyn Williams.⁴ In this rising, armed male and female workers had flown the Red Flag for the first time. The town had later elected one of the first pacifists to the British Parliament and was afterwards represented by the famous Scottish socialist, Keir Hardie.⁵ During the Spanish Civil War, it had contributed one of the biggest contingents to the International Brigade. Now that was a real radical city. One of its neighbours, a township called Maerdy at the very head of the Rhondda Valley, was nicknamed 'Little Moscow'.⁶

And then we had migrated to this sleepy little suburb called Bardon, on the western rim of Brisbane where the city met the bush. At first glance it seemed that the moments of significance there had been when they put in the street lighting and guttering—and

there wasn't even very much of that. The only secret language that the surrounding silences seemed to yield was the deafening roar of cicadas. It appeared devoid of 'interesting times'. At school, what was mostly reinforced was that I lived in a suburb with no history, in a city with no history, in a State and nation with virtually no history—certainly no history of the sort to stir the blood or to move the soul.

Yet, despite all this, there were flickerings of something else, initially puzzling but increasingly exciting, which began to disturb such notions. Every month during the early 1950s, I would buy an Australian boys' magazine called *The Silver Jacket* (published in Sydney by Arthur Gorfain), a heady mixture of comics, stories, jokes and factual accounts about things mainly Australian.⁷ And in one issue, there was this illustrated poem by Henry Lawson called 'Faces in the Street'. Around its border there were drawn Dickensian images of urban suffering. Lying upon my bed, I read:

*They lie, the men who tell us for reasons of their own
That want is here a stranger and that misery's unknown;*

*For where the nearest suburb and the city proper meet
My window-sill is level with the faces in the street*

*Drifting past, drifting past
To the beat of weary feet*

While I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.

And the poem climaxed:

*I wonder would the apathy of wealthy men endure
Were all their windows level with the faces of the poor?
Ah Mammon's slaves, your knees shall knock, your heart
in terror beat*

*When God demands a reason for the sorrows of the street
The wrong things and the bad things
And the sad things that we meet*

In the filthy lane and alley, and the cruel heartless street.⁸

Lawson's poem of 1888 is, of course, well known. But it was not to a young boy in his new bedroom in sunny suburbia in Cold War Australia of 1953. I looked at my window and the banana fronds outside and tried unsuccessfully to imagine Lawson's urban flotsam drifting past. It did not make sense. I reassured myself that he must have been writing about another country—South Wales perhaps—but certainly not Australia. But I was never sure and the puzzle continued to haunt me.

It was many years before I discovered how and

where Lawson came to write that poem, in an unpublished manuscript, entitled 'Fragments of Biography' in the Mitchell Library. It bears quoting, for it reflects powerfully upon what we are exploring here: how an understanding of where we are contributes to the knowing of who we are; and how place is not simply geographic location, but layer upon layer of historical location as well. This is Lawson again:

Another rainy night on Petersham railway platform. I don't remember what I was doing there unless I had been out late to see about a job. The sickly gaslamps again, the wet shining asphalt, the posters on the mean brick walls close at hand, the light glistening on the enamelled iron notice saying "Second Class Wait Here" and I alone and tired as usual and cold with a shoddy overcoat, coarse as sacking and warm as a refrigerator. But it was hear [sic] I struck the keynote or the keyline of 'Faces in the Street' . . .⁹

After reading that, it would be a very unimaginative soul who could stand on Petersham railway platform again and not reflect that he or she is simultaneously standing in time—that the ghost of Henry Lawson may be loitering nearby, and that his concerns that miserable night still remain our own. From such parochial awareness the seeds of historical, and indeed political consciousness can germinate.

And so, in insignificant fibro and weatherboard Bardon, I started to cultivate that initially sickly little plant, which sprouted unpromisingly at first out of the streets where I lived. The familiar environment became like a puzzle; and its challenge was to connect the dots from the present back into the past. The 'obvious' gradually became more unstable and malleable. For instance, that long bush track over the mountains which connected where I lived to the suburbs of Ashgrove and The Gap: It was, I was told by an old Park Ranger, an Aboriginal pathway, where people had walked since long before the time of Christ.

I eventually learnt that Lloyd Rees, the renowned landscape artist, had lived nearby and that the scrawny old fellow who ran the corner store was Paul Grano the poet, who had helped Clem Christesen found *Meanjin* in 1940. Gwen Harwood had also lived within close walking distance; as did Martin Haley, the Catholic writer and avid Santamaria supporter. Francis Adams had written the resounding revolutionary verses, *Songs of the Army of the Night*, at a house called 'Paradise' in adjacent Red Hill. The



Place is not simply geographic location, but layer upon layer of historical location as well.

Quaker activist, Margaret Thorp, whose pacifism had prompted the savage women's-only riot at the Brisbane School of Arts in 1917 and Emma Miller, the mother of the Queensland labour movement, who had hat-pinned the Police Commissioner's horse during the Black Friday rout of 1912, had also lived close at hand.

When Adams had moved to Rosalie, again on Bardon's borders, he had been visited by William Lane and Gilbert Casey among others; and here they had plotted the ill-fated New Australia utopian colony in Paraguay. Lane's brother, Ernie, who wrote for the labour press under the pseudonym of English peasant leader Jack Cade, would go walking in the same mountains behind Bardon that I explored as a child, accompanied by A.G. Yewen, friend of William Morris and a founder of the Australian Socialist League. Henry Lawson himself would go with them at times, and he would try out new verses on them as they strolled together through the bush.

Into these same mountains, a little further to the north-east, had come such people as Vere Gordon Childe, Jack Lindsay, Percy Stephensen, Eric Partridge and Elton Mayo on annual summer camps run by T.C. Witherby of the Workers Educational Association towards the end of the Great War. Childe wrote *How Labour Governs* under Witherby's auspices before becoming a leading global pre-historian. Lindsay would flower as one of the world's most prolific socialist writers; Partridge revolutionised English grammar and composed the first *Dictionary of Slang*; Stephensen became a leading radical nationalist, a translator of Lenin and an Australia First internee in the Second World War; Mayo founded Industrial Psychology in the United States.

Yet I was raised to believe, both by conventional wisdom and my State schooling, that my immediate world was untouched by history. I would later discover that the school I attended, Ashgrove, had had as its founding headmaster, the poet James Brunton

Stephens, author of the epic verse 'Convict Once'. But, of course, I was never taught this. I was also afterwards told by another Ashgrove student of my era that in one of the suburban homes I would pass each day, going to and from school, lived an elderly woman who was formerly a model for Norman Lindsay. This ex-student is Pat Eatock, the first Aboriginal woman to stand for Federal Parliament.

My secondary schooling was at Brisbane State High where the Barjai cultural movement, which attracted such prodigious talents as Barrett Reid, Laurence Collinson, Barbara Blackman, Charles Osborne, Thea Astley, Laurence Hope and many others, had originally been launched. Lillian Roxon, pioneering rock journalist and author of the world's first *Rock Encyclopedia*, had also attended State High—but again we were told none of this. The headmaster had tried to crush the Barjai movement with the same vehemence as this institution employed to stamp out rock'n'roll when I attended there in the late 1950s, banning the *Barjai* magazine and threatening to expel its members.

So my generation, among others, grew up robbed of its immediate heritage by such mainstream dismissiveness and ignorance. At 60 I am still endeavouring to reclaim bits of it, recently learning, for instance, how Raymond Dart, the famous anatomist who named *Australopithecus africanus* in 1925 and helped expose the Piltdown scandal, was raised in Toowong, a suburb adjoining Bardon. Such information seems buried, like time capsules, in the streets around us; and one needs to dig for it like an archaeologist, trowelling down through stratas of time to relocate that precious lode.

The thrill of establishing one's propinquity with stirring moments or celebrated people is one goad for undertaking this reclamation. Another is uncovering the more comprehensive and enduring history of community and struggle embedded in the commonplace. Radical urban history, in particular, suf-

fers from an act of dual erasure. First, streetscapes and built environments are continually cannibalised and reconstituted to serve corporate and municipal needs, launching a direct assault upon both community and memory. It is a kind of highway robbery really, and especially pronounced in Brisbane. The author John Birmingham has written:

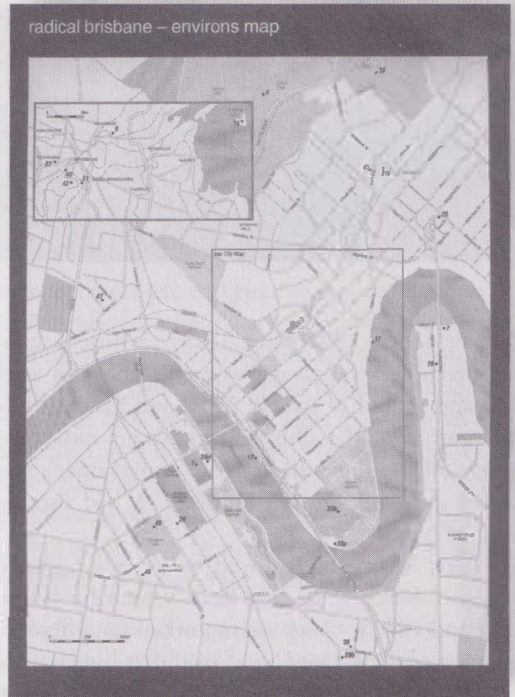
I often wonder, when I'm home, whether the city is eating itself and leaving nothing for story-tellers in the future. Or whether the older, pre-Vegas Brisbane will simply contract to a few protected acres around Spring Hill and Paddington, creating a sort of literary national park out of Nick Earls's Zigzag Street while the rest of the city is given over to A.V. Jennings and the Deen Brothers . . .

It . . . [is] sobering . . . to have outlived the landmarks of your youth at only 30. The sprawling weath-erboard town was gone. Familiar pubs disappeared. Whole blocks of the city itself given over to concrete car parks. And it had all happened, not in some cata-lysm, but by council order and brown bag payoff.¹⁰

Urban alienation, adrift from the anchor of a known past, is a logical outcome—the anchor buried deep down in the rubble, the alienated self reflecting in the new glass façades.

Yet even when buildings, squares and alleyways, where memorable events once occurred, have been spared, there is usually little indication ever provided of their relationship with an ongoing people's history. Though there are probably more war memorials in Australia than wombats, how many commemorative plaques to moments of domestic radical or racial conflict exist? As we comment in *Radical Brisbane*, the history of workers' struggles, or of racial, ethnic, gendered or generational struggles, invariably inspires oversight and repression rather than civic monuments.¹¹

So, as social historians, we are left to do this unwelcome sculpting of lost places and forgotten causes. For it is an empowering thing to learn the intricacies of one's past—not so much the distracting myths of jumbucks and Anzacs—but a past which enriches one's identity as perhaps a worker, a woman or a migrant, an Aborigine, a gay person or an activist—or any combination of these—in this emphatically forgetful society. It is empowering to realise that one does not struggle alone, locked into the immediate moment, but rather that one is part, per-



haps, of long and grandly fought traditions of struggle. As Dan O'Neill said at *Radical Brisbane's* launch, when recalling the civil rights campaign of the late 1960s:

In 1967, as 4000 of us marched out of the Queensland University on a bright day in September, I remember thinking, "This is good. At last we're bringing this place into history, lifting it out of its provincial dullness . . . finally bringing it into a greater order of significance, a new dimension of reality . . ."

If only, as we encountered the phalanx of police, and sat down in Roma Street with linked arms according to our pre-arranged plan, I'd been able to realise that fifty-five years ago, in the same Roma Street a bit further along, in Market Square, not 4000, but 10–15,000 protestors had been set upon by the forces of the State over a similar struggle for rights.

We weren't taking Brisbane into history for the first time at all. We were already in history, bringing up the rear, observed by ghosts, who might have been heard, by ears more historically sensitive than ours, asking, "What took you so long?"¹²

So *Radical Brisbane* revisits the ghosts of past events at present places—ghosts who might also be asking us, as historians, "What took you so long?" The sto-

ries that these seemingly innocuous places disclose run from the 1820s to the 1980s; but each one discovered seemed to beckon towards several more. As I had once learned of Bardon, a supposedly vacuous landscape can be riddled with meaning: sites of ruling- and working-class struggle, of cultural confrontation, of racial and ethnic riot, of women's mobilisation and of generational clash. So many good causes, so much variety, so many great yarns . . .

Although there is often not much left to see, as time and location merge there is still everything to imagine.

Such envisioning adds new lustre to the mundane streets. It can be a powerful exercise to impose this dramatic temporal grid upon an everyday, spatial one; and to re-hear, above the traffic roar, the lost tumult of redress. O'Neill found his reading of the city a "surrealistic" exercise, one which projected him outwards rather than back into the isolated text:

Aborigines are hanged on Wickham Terrace . . . Lower Albert and Margaret Streets are full of Chinese being spat upon and bashed; even the Eagle Farm racecourse is being set upon and trashed; workers are being attacked at whatever Trades Hall site they walk out of; the auditorium of the School of Arts in Ann Street is full of women brawling over Conscriptation in World War One while lower Ann Street is hosting full-scale Catholic versus Protestant riots . . . as a real, yet intensely symbolic club comes down time and time again on the head of the only Communist ever to be elected to an Australian parliament. And I haven't even mentioned the poor Punks being harassed by the cops in Caxton Street or the first rock'n'roll riot erupting in and around the old Stadium building. Or the fact that you can now look into the City Beach Surf Shop . . . and hallucinate convicts being flogged . . . with the cat o' nine tails, or someone coming up and reporting a sighting of Captain Logan's ghost on the site of the Cultural Centre.

It all sounds like Bob Dylan at a certain stage of his career. And they say Brisbane has always been a dull town . . .¹³

Well, perhaps you might put this book down to the fact that we heard 'Desolation Row' one time too many in the 1960s, when some of our own activist images were being moulded. But you might also detect here the faith of numbers of younger contributors, refusing to accept that they live in a cul-

tural and historic desert, and bursting with a curiosity to decode scripts out of their environment different from the safe, mollifying drivel they were often force-fed at school, in order to make new sense of their surroundings and suppressed, communal past.

For me, it all goes back to blissful, banal Bardon, where life on the surface had seemed as bereft of history as the empty paddocks round about, and as flat and as dull as the fibro in our Housing Commission homes.¹⁴ But, of course, as we lately discover, there is really nothing dull even in suburban fibro. Rather, it is packed with hidden menace; and thereby hangs yet another tale. As Basil Bernstein once cautioned in *Class, Codes and Control*, "the most important exploration is that of the obvious".¹⁵

1. Bob Dylan, *World Gone Wrong* CD (1993), Columbia CK 57590, Liner notes, p.7.
2. Jeff and Jill Sparrow, *Radical Melbourne: A Secret History*, Vulgar Press, Carlton North, 2001; Raymond Evans and Carole Ferrier (eds), *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History*, Vulgar Press, Carlton North, 2004.
3. Mena Calthorpe, *The Plain of Ala*, Hale & Iremonger, Marrickville, 1989, p.9. I am indebted to Ian Syson for this source.
4. Gwyn A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising*, Croom Helm, London, 1978, p.25, 154 and *passim*.
5. Iain McLean, *Keir Hardie*, Allen Lane, London, 1975; Kenneth O. Morgan, *Keir Hardie. Radical and Socialist*, Orion Books, London, 1997.
6. Jan Morris, *Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country*, Viking, London, 1998, pp.415-449.
7. *The Silver Jacket* ran for fifteen issues from October 1953 to December 1954. See Cyril Pearl, *Australia's Yesterday: A look at our recent past*, Reader's Digest Services, Sydney, 1974, p.162; Vane Lindesay, *The Way We Were: Australia's Popular Magazines 1856-1969*, Mead and Beckett, Sydney, 1983, pp.126, 128.
8. Henry Lawson, 'Faces in the Street', *Bulletin*, 28 July 1888.
9. Henry Lawson, 'Fragments of Biography', Mitchell Library ms. A 1888.
10. John Birmingham, 'The Lost City of Vegas: David Malouf's old Brisbane' in Robyn Sheahan-Bright and Stuart Glover (eds), *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland Writing*, UQP, St Lucia, 2002, pp.5, 7-8.
11. Evans and Ferrier, *op. cit.*, p.17.
12. Dan O'Neill, Launch speech for *Radical Brisbane*, Museum of Brisbane, 29 April 2004.
13. *Ibid.*
14. See also Raymond Evans, *Fighting Words: Writing about Race*, UQP, St Lucia, 1999, pp.1-12.
15. Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p.18.

Raymond Evans is with Carole Ferrier co-editor of *Radical Brisbane* (Vulgar Press, 2004) and is Adjunct Professor with the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas at Griffith University.

AN INCIDENT AT THE UPPER ROSS

Remembering black American servicemen in Australia during the Second World War

ON A MAY EVENING IN 1942, militiamen of the 11th Brigade took up positions along a road outside Townsville. Intermittent shots had been ringing out up ahead for the last few hours, giving 31-year-old Staff Captain Learner Harry Duddington of Brigade HQ serious cause to wonder whether tonight wouldn't be his baptism of fire.¹ He issued ammunition to his Bren gunners and ordered the powerful anti-aircraft searchlights mounted on nearby trucks to be switched on. They lit up the empty road ahead.

Several kilometres away, Private Jack Richardson and his comrades of the 26th Battalion were being rushed by lorry toward a roadblock near the Ross River. The men had been issued with full battle kit and live ammunition.² Locals had reported the sound of Thompson sub-machineguns firing in the distance near the newly constructed Kelso airfield.³ Whatever was going on up ahead near Laudham Park, it was unlikely to be an exercise.

The threat that had materialised near Townsville on that May evening wasn't the long-dreaded landing of Japanese marines or a surprised band of Axis saboteurs. Nor was it even an attempted breakout of POWs from a prison camp. The troops rioting at their bivouac outside Townsville were Allied servicemen, wearing the uniform of the United States army. But to many of the Australian soldiers they represented a foreign danger only marginally less threatening than the forces of Imperial Japan itself. They were African-American soldiers of the US 96th Engineers (Colored).

Details of the riot at the 96th's camp at the Upper Ross are few and sketchy. Not only has the pas-

sage of time confused places and dates for some of the participants, but heavy wartime censorship suppressed all but the vaguest references to incidents of inter-Allied strife, and any published mention of racial problems in the US army in Australia was disallowed altogether by the Chief Publicity Censor.⁴ Rumour and conjecture have consequently filled much of the void.

Whatever the particulars of the case, the determination on the part of the Australian soldiers to prevent the rioting black GIs from reaching Townsville—and their willingness to use violent force to do so—tells us much about the deep fear and suspicion aroused in much of white Australia by the presence of black US servicemen during the Second World War. For many—especially in Queensland where the bulk of black American servicemen were stationed—fear and ignorance of these foreign 'invaders' would lead to a number of ugly confrontations, and would bring many white Australians face-to-face with their own racism for perhaps the first time, while simultaneously allowing them to contrast this favourably with the more overt racism of the segregated US army.⁵

The first contingent of black American troops was re-routed from the Philippines and arrived in Melbourne in January 1942. The War Cabinet was forced to countermand the decision of local customs officials to refuse them entry.⁶ Canberra's intervention did not, however, mean that the White Australia policy was to be repudiated. The Australian government had initially opposed the deployment of black troops, curtly informing Washington that "We are not prepared to agree to [the] proposal that [a] pro-

portion of United States troops to be despatched to Australia should be coloured".⁷ Even senior US officers believed the presence of black troops would "adversely affect relationships between Australians and Americans and nullify any military value derived from their use".⁸ The US army was, however, reliant upon segregated negro units for much of its labouring duties. MacArthur was unwilling to re-organise the US military to accommodate local sensitivities, however much they met with American approval. Care would however be taken to ensure black units were kept segregated and isolated, in regard to local "susceptibilities".⁹

As Kay Saunders notes, no issue united the electorate in 1942 like the White Australia policy, cutting across most class, gender and party political lines.¹⁰ For the Australian government, acceding to American demands for the entry of black troops was bitterly resented. The greater peril of Japanese invasion had forced a suspension of the White Australia policy, but this would be a temporary expedience, and the Australian government would seize every opportunity to enforce and extend the segregation of negro troops from the white Australian mainstream.¹¹ In this the US army was to be a more than willing ally.

That black Americans would be regarded as only slightly less unwelcome than the Japanese was soon made plain to the soldiers of the US 96th Engineers (Colored). Arriving in Brisbane on 8 April 1942, they were kept aboard ship for hours, as "there had been a lot of trouble with negro soldiers in that city" already.¹² Eventually they were allowed to go on hikes in the surrounding hills, but were prevented from being "turned loose" in the city itself. Segregation in recreation was already in force in a city that would see almost a million Allied servicemen pass through it before the end of the war.

It was soon clear what 'trouble' regarding black American soldiers meant. For the notoriously heavy-handed American MPs, often the mere appearance in public of a black GI was justification for a beating, or worse. While on leave in Melbourne, AIF soldier Roland Griffiths-Marsh offered a cheery "G'day mate" to a black American GI window-shopping in Bourke Street after midnight:

I had only walked about twenty-five to thirty paces when I heard a muffled thump, followed by a deep sigh. Turning around, I saw three tall, white American servicemen with the black MP armbands stand-

ing over the prostrate negro, long wooden truncheons hanging from wrist-thongs around their right hands.¹³

Such stories of violent American excess became commonplace. A black American GI was shot dead outside the Argent Hotel in Mt Isa in late 1942. Another was shot dead in Cairns. Both incidents took place in full view of witnesses.¹⁴ The novelist Ruth Park claimed to have witnessed the murder of black soldiers by American MPs on two separate occasions.¹⁵ Jack Richardson saw a white GI stab a black American soldier in the back after being knocked over in the foyer of a crowded Townsville cinema.¹⁶ A black GI was reportedly shot dead near the Eternal Flame in Anzac Square, Brisbane, for secretly crossing over to the north side, off limits to blacks.¹⁷ Harry Duddington had to wrest a pistol from the hand of an American officer after he was accidentally jostled by a black American courier in a Townsville pub. "Steady on, mate," Duddington told him. "That stuff's not on here."¹⁸

It is a dirty shame the way white American soldiers treat our boys. The Australians are wonderfully tolerant, but the Americans, especially the Southern boys, are a problem. The only solution will be to send our battalion away from any town.

So wrote Captain Hyman Samuelson of the 96th Engineers (Colored) on 17 April 1942. His observations had been occasioned by a brawl involving his regiment, newly arrived in north Queensland, which had taken place two days earlier. The 96th had been allowed into Townsville that afternoon, but Samuelson (white, like all his fellow officers in black units) was soon summoned into the city. He found over one hundred of his men loaded into the back of a truck, guarded by white GIs with bayonets fixed. "A corporal thrust a cocked rifle at me when I stopped his truck and gave instructions to his negro 'prisoners' on the back of it."¹⁹

The cause of the brawl involving the 96th is not clear. What is certain, however, is the likely response of many white Australians, let alone US MPs, to a sudden influx of bored and entertainment-starved black servicemen into a small city like Townsville, where strict segregation was generally in force. For local whites, the black American soldiers represented a wild and alien challenge to the social order, as the following story illustrates.

Sometime in 1942 Harry Duddington and his

Barry Ralph cites a “not very publicised poll” in which 20 per cent of black Americans thought they would be better off under Japanese rule.

fiancée Evelyn McGaw were walking along the waterfront in Townsville.

“Suddenly,” Duddington recalled, “up came this big negro, huge he was. I remember his white, white teeth and that his hands were full of all these pies—half-a-dozen, easily. I stepped in front of Evelyn and reached for my pistol. ‘No, no!’ he shouted, waving his huge hands, but he made sure he hung on to his pies. Then he took off like a shot.”²⁰

Bloated by the passage of sixty years, this account is a striking caricature of the black American and his dangerously ‘bestial’ appetites—for food, violence and sex. For Duddington, his actions were a defence of the white Australian order as important as anything going on in New Guinea. He wouldn’t have hesitated to shoot if necessary, he said.

It may be that this voracious black GI was a member of the disgruntled 96th, and that Duddington’s robust reaction was typical of Townsville locals on the day of the fight in April, 1942. If so, ‘trouble’ was always going to be a result. What is beyond question is the remarkable yet effortless distinction Duddington draws between his own action in drawing his pistol and that of the American officer jostled in the pub: the former is a justified defence of Australian racial and sexual norms, quiet yet firm, like the archetypal Digger himself; the latter alien excess, ‘loud’, overt and disproportionate—the quintessential ‘Yank’. One is left to wonder whether Samuelson would have considered Duddington’s response “wonderfully tolerant” had he witnessed it.

It is known, however, that Samuelson did consider the 96th’s morale after the fight in Townsville to be getting “worse and worse”. After the brawl the troops were banned from the city, and so stayed at their new camp at the Upper Ross with nothing but old movies and an inadequate beer supply for their amusement. Most of the GIs were broke and couldn’t afford what beer there was, anyway. Three days before he was shipped to Port Moresby as advance supply officer for the battalion, Samuelson observed the simple and obvious plight of his soldiers: “They want to be free, to be with a woman.”²¹

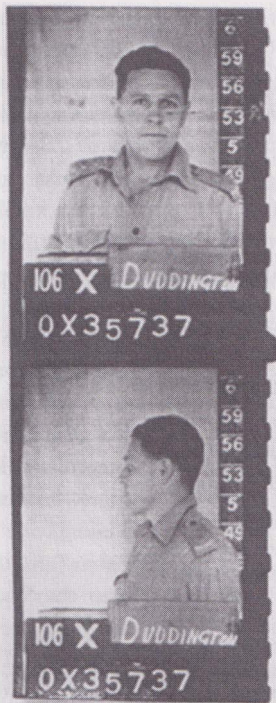
No other single issue was guaranteed to raise white Australian ire as that of sexual relations between white Australian women and black American servicemen.²² Rumours circulated that the US army was staffing brothels with local white women for the exclusive use of black American soldiers, leading to outrage that extended as high as the federal cabinet. For Herbert Lazzarini, Minister for Home Security: “Brothels for Black Americans . . . [are] likely to become the gravest possible menace to the Australian war effort . . . the mere suggestion that the Americans are allowed to use Australian girls to satisfy the lusts of American negroes seems to me to be incomprehensible.”²³ White women who were known to attend the Dr Carver Club, a black American servicemen’s recreational centre set up in South Brisbane in 1943, were subsequently interrogated by the vice squad.²⁴

In reality, the majority of Australian women in such centres were Aboriginal.²⁵ This was particularly the case in Queensland, where those few Murriss not confined to remote missions by the *Aboriginal Protection and Preservation Act 1939* tended to congregate in poor, inner-urban neighbourhoods shunned by polite white society; the same neighbourhoods where black GIs were confined. Shared experiences of racism and segregation led to shared recreation, habitation, and often romance. While black clubs like the Dr Carver gave both African Americans and Murriss the opportunity to socialise and relax free of the harsh gaze of US MPs and Queensland police, there were important differences in the racism(s) the two groups endured. For the AIF, racially exclusive enlistment criteria that had prevented many Aborigines serving in North Africa were relaxed once the Japanese threat imperilled the Australian mainland. Aborigines did not serve, like African Americans, in separate, segregated units. By September 1945, around 3000 had served in the AIF.²⁶ The 1939 Act did, however, strictly control the movements and liberty of all Aboriginal persons in Queensland. While white Australia viewed the Aborigine as quiet, meek, and essentially child-like,²⁷ the negro

was seen as large, loud, voracious and physically intimidating. While some concern was voiced over potential ‘negative’ influences exerted by negroes over Aborigines, the bulk of white opinion approved of each of the other dominant society’s racist policies. The overt segregation of the US army was soon heartily endorsed by Queensland society,²⁸ and likewise US General Patrick J. Hurley was able to write approvingly in June 1942 that “I have never seen the racial problem brought home so forcibly as it is over here in Queensland.”²⁹

While relations between white Americans and their white Australian hosts were not without strain and occasional spectacular violence (as the infamous Battle of Brisbane and lesser mass brawls between Diggers and GIs attest), the rapid convergence of both societies’ racist attitudes certainly contributed to the resentment and frustration in black American units like the 96th Engineers. The hypocrisy of segregation and entrenched discrimination in an army engaged in a global ‘struggle for democracy’ certainly was not lost upon black GIs in Australia and elsewhere. Jackie Robinson, member of a black company at Fort Riley in the US, observed: “They want to send me 10,000 miles away to fight for democracy when a hundred feet away they’ve got stools I can’t put my black butt on to drink a bottle of beer.”³⁰ The effects of this hypocrisy were perhaps particularly acute in the Pacific war, where the racial element in the struggle against Japan was used so forcefully in Allied propaganda. One is left to wonder at the impact upon the morale of non-white Allied soldiers of this propaganda; if not upon negro and Aboriginal soldiers, then certainly upon Filipinos in the US army and East Indians in the Dutch, both of which groups were stationed in Australia in some numbers.³¹

This rise in resentment at discriminatory treatment did not go unnoticed in Allied intelligence circles. Fears of mutiny among black troops had begun to mount since their arrival in early 1942, but in nearly all intelligence assessments entrenched racism and segregative policies were overlooked as significant contributive causes of black dissatisfaction.



Instead, the official finger was pointed at possible Axis *agents provocateurs* or communist agitators. Following a violent incident in the north Queensland town of Ingham involving black GIs, the Security Service of that state sought assistance from US army intelligence as to the possible influence of Axis sympathisers in fomenting negro restiveness. The Americans discounted the idea, remarking instead that it was most likely the result of agitation by a “communitistic element, who advocate equality between the white and coloured servicemen.”³² The brawl had been occasioned by protests at a ban on black servicemen at dances. “Why shouldn’t we go to dances with white people? We are as good, if not better than, the white race,” one black GI is said to have remarked, sparking an immediate and furious attack from incensed MPs.³³

The Left was not united in its opposition to such discrimination. While the Communist Party was officially committed to combating racism and promoting internationalism,³⁴ Brisbane’s *The Worker* defended its vision of an exclusively white, workers’ Australia.

Crimes by negroes, particularly sex offences against white women, are causing considerable concern in those Australian areas where negroes are located . . . In Sydney the complaint is made that negroes prowl about the city at night, many of them carrying knives. Women who frequent the Domain draw them in their hundreds—an ugly sight in a white man’s country.³⁵

Distrust of the black soldier was not confined to fear of his appetites should he be ‘turned loose’ on the white public. Barry Ralph cites a “not very publicised poll” in which 20 per cent of black Americans thought they would be better off under Japanese rule.³⁶ Given that Japan was scrupulously portraying itself in Asia as the liberator of subject peoples from white colonialism—and even training anti-colonial “independence armies” such as the Indian National Army (INA)—there is little doubt the US high command considered black troops best kept far from the combat area.

As a result of such suspicion, many negro GIs

feared that the army would 'get rid' of them once they'd outlived their usefulness. Jack Richardson tells of a conversation with black American soldiers in Townsville—perhaps with men of the 96th itself—in which they voiced fears of being put aboard a troopship which would then be torpedoed . . . by *American* submarines.³⁷

White Australia held similar suspicions regarding the trustworthiness of its black population. In Queensland, authorities warned that:

The half-educated half-castes and aboriginals have been largely influenced by Communist and Anti-Capitalist propaganda for many years . . . They are extremely class-conscious and consider that they have had a raw deal from the white man. These sentiments are NOT displayed to the white man's face, but are most evident when the coloured people are together in groups. There is little doubt that the JAPS would find many of them willing helpers.³⁸

Frustration, segregation, hypocrisy, fear, boredom, discrimination, distrust. Barred from Townsville and fed up with inferior entertainments, half of the 96th was to be shipped to New Guinea. Captain Samuelson had already left by 21 April 1942. The remaining companies were to be attached to the 46th Engineers, to continue the tedious and exhausting labour with which they had become so familiar, like the construction of dusty rural roads and airfields like Kelso. Under the temporary command of a Major Yoder (a man of "foolish habits" according to Samuelson, who was "a very entertaining talker if he would shut up after 10 or 15 minutes of his machine-gun gab") and a Captain Behrens (" . . . no better than . . . Yoder"),³⁹ the men of the 96th somehow reached breaking point.

One of the white officers may have struck a black American GI, as many locals later maintained.⁴⁰ Whatever the spark may have been, it is known that local residents reported gunfire coming from the camp sometime between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. that May evening. At first it was thought to be war games. Then the rumours began to circulate: the blacks had shot their officers. They had seized rifles. Officers and MPs were firing back with Thompson SMGs. The blacks were drunk and had commandeered trucks. They were heading for Townsville.⁴¹

There is no doubt that the young Staff Captain Learner Duddington, in command of his militiamen at that roadblock near the Ross River, felt himself to

be in defence of his society against a seemingly wild and incomprehensible alien force. Up ahead were scores, perhaps hundreds of drunken, lustful and rapacious "Boongs" ("that's what we called them then"),⁴² surging toward a helpless city of white women and children. No doubt the image came to him of the black GI on the Townsville waterfront—huge, powerful, insatiable. Against that fearsome unknown that would perhaps soon burst into the illuminated road ahead, he made ready as a soldier had been trained. The troops took up firing positions, and he loaded his pistol.

At this moment a remarkable thing happened: a US officer appeared. Of course, being white, the Australians held their fire. Duddington hurried to speak to him. He was a Major. Perhaps this was Major Yoder of the 96th Engineers, he of 'foolish habits' and the 'machine-gun gab'. He offered to go into the 96th's camp and talk to "the boys", get them to see reason. "Give me an hour," the US Major said. Duddington agreed: "And then he walked off up the road, all by himself. I'll never forget that image".⁴³

The rumours concerning the 96th's mutiny multiplied over following days. Nineteen coffins had been ordered and sent to the camp. The negroes had made it as far as Corbeth's waterhole before being beaten back.⁴⁴ But my grandfather's story was less spectacular and perhaps more credible—that "plucky little US Major talked them out of it".⁴⁵ If this was Major Yoder's work, his 'machine-gun gab' was certainly of use on this occasion. Given the evident willingness of the Australian militia to mow down the mutinous black soldiers with Bren guns, however, it's likely that even the most taciturn officer of the 96th would have been quite persuasive in encouraging a rethink.

Samuelson makes no published mention of the episode, nor its aftermath, in his war journal. The companies of the 96th shipped to New Guinea arrived soon afterward. Perhaps his remarks were censored, or he himself never learned of the events. Many of those who participated—like Harry Duddington, who would become my grandfather—are now dead. Others, like Jack Richardson, never made it to the scene, but were called back before being fully deployed, the crisis having passed. The fate of the mutineers, or at least their ringleaders, is known only to US military archivists.

What is certain is that Australia's institutionalised

racism endured long after the menace of Japanese invasion had passed. Aboriginal citizenship was recognised only in 1967, while White Australia existed as official government policy until 1972. The US army, by contrast, officially de-segregated in 1948. African Americans would serve alongside whites and other races in frontline units in Korea and Vietnam, but could still be refused entry for R&R in Australia by their supposed allies.⁴⁶

For many Australians, the segregation and control of black American GIs was seen as part of the same struggle as that of resisting Imperial Japan—defending a male, white Australian order. Had it not been for the courage of a member of the only section of the Allied military to bridge that seemingly intractable racial divide—namely the often racist white American officers of black regiments—the troubled history of African-American servicemen in Australia in the Second World War may well have been much bloodier and far more tragic.

1. Harry Duddington, interview with the author, 22 July 2000.
2. Jack Richardson, telephone interview with the author, 5 August 2001.
3. Peter Dunn, 'Negro servicemen riot at the Upper Ross, Townsville in May 1942', <home.st.net.au/~dunn/ozatwar/riotupperross.htm>.
4. Chief Publicity Censor 1 October 1943. From Queensland archives, series BP242/item Q40135, cited in Brisbane City Council, 'Brisbane Home Front 1939–1945 kit', Brisbane, 1995.
5. Libby Connors, Lynette Finch, Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor, *Australia's Frontline: Remembering the 1939–45 War*, UQP, Brisbane, 1992, p.185.
6. Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor, 'The Management of Segregation: Black American Servicemen in Queensland 1941–45', in *War On The Homefront: State Intervention In Queensland 1938–1948*, UQP, Brisbane, 1993, p.65.
7. Dr H.V. Evatt, Minister for External Affairs, cited in Barry Ralph, *They Passed This Way: The United States of America, The States of Australia and World War II*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 2000, p.248.
8. US Lt.Gen. Brett cited in *Ibid.*, p.249.
9. Cited in *Ibid.*, p.248.
10. Saunders and Taylor, 'The Management of Segregation: Black American Servicemen in Queensland 1941–45', p.59.
11. *Ibid.*, p.65.
12. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (ed.), *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored): The World War II New Guinea Diaries of Captain Hyman Samuelson*, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, 1995, p.42.
13. Roland Griffiths-Marsh, *I Was Only Sixteen*, Imprint, Sydney, 1990, p.260.
14. Ralph, *They Passed This Way*, p.258.
15. Saunders and Taylor, 'The Management of Segregation: Black American Servicemen in Queensland 1941–45', pp.73–74.
16. Jack Richardson, telephone interview 5 August 2001.
17. Peter A. Thompson and Robert Macklin, *The Battle of*

Brisbane: Australians and the Yanks at War, ABC Books, Sydney, 2000, p.171.

18. Harry Duddington, interview 22 July 2000.
19. Hall (ed.), *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored)*, p.47.
20. Harry Duddington, interview 22 July 2000.
21. Hall (ed.), *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored)*, p.47.
22. Kay Saunders, 'Racial Conflict in Brisbane in World War Two: the imposition of patterns of segregation upon Black American servicemen', in *Brisbane At War*, Brisbane History Group Papers, Brisbane, 1986, p.29.
23. Saunders and Taylor, 'The Management of Segregation: Black American Servicemen in Queensland 1941–45', p.79.
24. *Ibid.*, p.74.
25. Saunders, 'Racial Conflict in Brisbane in World War Two: the imposition of patterns of segregation upon Black American servicemen', p.34.
26. Kate Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', in *Australia's War 1939–45*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p.45.
27. Connors, Finch, Saunders and Taylor, *Australia's Frontline: Remembering the 1939–45 War*, p.165.
28. *Ibid.*, p.185.
29. Saunders and Taylor, 'The Management of Segregation: Black American Servicemen in Queensland 1941–45', p.66.
30. Ralph, *They Passed This Way*, p.245.
31. Frank McBride and Helen Taylor, *Brisbane Remembers: The Home Front 1939–1945*, Brisbane City Council, Brisbane, 1995, p.9.
32. Anthony J. Barker and Lisa Jackson, *Fleeting Attraction: A Social History of American Servicemen in Western Australia During the Second World War*, UWA Press, Perth, 1996, p.182.
33. Saunders and Taylor, 'The Management of Segregation: Black American Servicemen in Queensland 1941–45', p.77.
34. See Barker and Jackson, *Fleeting Attraction*, p.182.
35. Ralph, *They Passed This Way*, p.259.
36. *Ibid.*, p.261. Another source citing the same 1942 survey claims 18 per cent of black respondents felt they would be better off under the Japanese; 28 per cent felt they would fare worse; and 31 per cent felt there would be no difference in their treatment. See Lyn Gorman and David McLean, *Media and Society in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, Melbourne, 2003, p.95.
37. Jack Richardson, telephone interview 5 August 2001.
38. Barker and Jackson, *Fleeting Attraction*, p.183.
39. Hall (ed.), *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored)*, p.46.
40. Dunn, 'Negro servicemen riot at the Upper Ross, Townsville in May 1942'.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Harry Duddington interview 22 July 2000. In Queensland, this derogatory term initially referred only to negroes. Only after the war was it applied to Australian Aborigines, who had previously been called 'Boories'. See Connors, Finch, Saunders and Taylor, *Australia's Frontline: Remembering the 1939–45 War*, p.183.
43. Harry Duddington, interview 22 July 2000.
44. Dunn, 'Negro servicemen riot at the Upper Ross, Townsville in May 1942'.
45. Harry Duddington, interview 22 July 2000.
46. Peter Blaje, former US Marine, interview with the author 27 August 1995.

Dan Leach is completing a PhD in History at the University of Melbourne.

JACK LONDON AND THE NEVER NEVER



AN UNREMARKED OUTCOME of Jack London's visit to Australia is an unpublished 'preface' for a proposed American edition of *We of the Never Never* (1908), the famous memoir by Jeannie Gunn recording station life on a property in the Northern Territory managed by her husband, Aeneas, during 1901–03. If closer to a blurb or brief introductory note the preface is a fascinating document. It was Jeannie herself who described it as a 'preface'. As it turned out, the sheets for the edition were imported from the UK and the preface omitted.

London, seriously ill, arrived by steamer in Sydney on 1 November 1908, having left his fifty-foot yacht, the *Snark*, in the Solomons. He stayed in Australia for five months, too "miserably sick" to write much about his stay and spending much time in hospital, though he visited Melbourne and Tasmania (for health reasons). He had hoped to lecture in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Broken Hill (where a bitter labour strike was occurring) on socialism, labour relations and literature but he had to cancel these plans. He did however write six articles for the Sydney *Star*, including impressions of Sydney and socialist topics.

He praised the strike conditions at Broken Hill, ironically finding Australia less advanced in industrial disputes than America where "our police, private detectives, Pinkertons, professional gun fighters, our constables, sheriffs, and US marshals, our militia, regular army, and even, our courts, fight the battles for capital against Labor". Reciprocally the *Star* welcomed London as "a novelist of romantic reality . . . [and] the humanitarian instincts that would uplift Labor and the lowly", finding him intellectually "robust, virile, boyish, unfettered . . ."

London was constantly in the public eye but rarely was he reported as commenting on Australia or Australians. He did tell a Melbourne *Herald* interviewer that "Australia is first cousin to America. They have the same sort of patriotism", both talking with pride of their countries. London also wrote a long, ironic reply to a letter in the Melbourne *Socialist* which accused him of being a snob and not contributing to the socialist movement in Australia: "If comrade Anderson ever tells funny stories I wonder if he is so religious a zealot that he never tells one story that fails to have incorporated the theory of surplus value and the class struggle".

The London preface reads:

While on a many months' visits to Australia, I endeavoured to make myself acquainted with the literature of Australia. Of the best several books of Australia, including its classics, such as *For the Term of His Natural Life*, and *Jim the Penman*, and not forgetting the splendid novels of G. Lancaster and the sympathetic work of Lawson, I felt must be included *We of the Never Never*. A more human book of any time or place has never been written; nor has a more human book of Australia or Australian pioneering ever been written. As few human documents succeed in doing *We of the Never Never* touches the red arterial blood of man and the warm heartstrings of the woman. To know the land of the Never Never under the tutelage of Jeannie Gunn, is to know life clean, sweet, and brave, noble and alive. To an American it is remindful of his own history of the conquest of the wilderness.

—Glen Ellen, California, 27 December 1910

With hindsight you could say that London's view of *We* reflects his own preoccupations as an American writer and author of *The Call of the Wild*—the battle against the wilderness, the romance of pioneering, the triumph of the higher human qualities—more than it tells us about the book, either as we would place it today in an Australian context, or as Australian readers of the 1920s saw it. London's description converts it into a pioneering saga, so popular with Americans. (This popularity was one of the reasons why they, and not the English, first took up *Richard Mahony* and also, improbably, the later *Tree of Man*, first published in the US.)

But we should be wary of adopting an easy superiority to the past, remembering that each generation views books through preconceptions of genre and national characteristics and the expectations these carry with them. "Socialist" though he was, as he declaimed in an interview with the young Vance Palmer (in the Brisbane *Worker*, once edited by socialist William Lane), he was openly racist (as he showed in reporting the world heavyweight title fight between Tommy Burns and Jack Johnson, a black American, for the *Sydney Star*). Accordingly he sees the book as a "white" memoir, omitting any mention of the Aborigines, presumably part of the "wilderness".

Australian readers of the twenties and of a long time later valued *We*, as did London, for its apparently authentic and graphic picture of white pioneering in the NT, but also for its pictures of station Aborigines. It sold half a million copies. Both the locale and its people were not written about in popular form until the anti-racist novels of Prichard and Herbert in the thirties and some of the spate of escapist outback travel books. Some forty years after its publication it was being set as a school text in NSW, presumably to acquaint pupils with both pioneering history and Aborigines. While today their depiction is acknowledged as racist, ironically it was used to introduce the existence of Aborigines to many Australians who would otherwise have had little or no knowledge of them.

London's preface is of wider interest for its recording of the Australian books that impressed him, even if they would have been regarded as classics of the time, particularly Clarke (whom the visiting Mark Twain had earlier admired). G.B. Lancaster (Edith Joan Lyttleton, Tasmanian-born

writer who travelled widely and achieved an overseas reputation) had published two Australian novels by this time but her most popular novel, *Pageant*, an epic of Tasmanian history, was not to be published till 1933. Lawson on the other hand has never been widely known outside Australia, though he published two books of short stories in the UK in 1901. His battlers would have appealed to London. The unexpected inclusion is *Jack the Penman* (1890). It has lapsed into obscurity. Written by Percy Hulberd and Tennyson Smith it was based upon the crimes of a forger of the name of the title, who was tried and convicted in 1857. Except for Lawson, London was drawn to historical writers, perhaps for providing background to a new country. While attracted by romance he also favoured social protest in Clarke and Lawson.

Grattan, a New York journalist and critic, who visited Australia in the 1920s as husband of a touring actress, went out of his way in an essay he wrote on Australian literature to mention London's high opinion of *We*. Grattan himself looked at it more critically. While seeing it as "the finest book of reminiscence produced in Australia", and as "charmingly idyllic", he noted that it gave "little knowledge of the sterner side of tropical station life".

The preface is nevertheless important as a document of the time, representing an American view, especially as few comments on Australia and Australians by London survive.

ADDENDUM: A short story by Jack London set in Sydney, an unremarked product of his Australian trip, and possibly of his reporting of the famous fight, has recently been published in Michael Wilding and David Myers (eds) *Best Stories under the Sun* (CQUP). Entitled 'A Piece of Steak', and in London's realist style, as well as similar in sentiment to Lawson's city stories, it is about an ageing fighter living with his family in poverty who tries unsuccessfully to make a comeback against a younger man.

NOTE: A ms copy of the preface in Jeannie's hand is held in the State Library of Victoria. Thanks for permission to publish are due to the Jack London estate.

Laurie Hergenhan, who recently co-edited *The Letters of Xavier Herbert*, is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Queensland.

Versions

We go towards, whispering.
The night not turning over

restless
in its own body, us in

one animal
holding another

and you,
your yellow bloom—

a childhood autumn
full

STEPHANIE BISHOP

On my way to work

Some tourists asked me
to take their photo
with a camera thin as a plasma TV,
clumsy as a placard.
They gestured me further away
back along the street,
up four flights of stairs
onto the window ledge
to catch a whole block of their holiday
and them, especially them,
through a puzzling viewfinder
with no edges like the field of vision,
and through the wind-grabbed and buffeted lens.

GRAEME MILES

Remedy

If thought divides and divides again,
reducing one definite to fragments
of options, doubts and imagined outcomes,
then it's time to take the long road home

across the bridge by the rolling mill
and down the steps to the twenty minute stretch
along the canal, where a dying industry reveals
itself through the unhinged flaps
of corrugated steel and the flames that leap
between the gaps divert the eye.

Ignore these distractions and keep to the path
until the low wall crumbles, then cut
through the tangle of rubble and weed
and peer through the bramble on a field
appearing lush in the grey home surround.

And listen, for the sound of certainty
as a bat meets a ball which flies from the middle.

JASON BRENNAN

Reflective Detail

Looking from the height of Modernity:

Vienna, Barcelona, Berlin reflected plate glass—
permuted vista Rococo details: *funhouse* distortion

Carnival

Day of Dead,

Black Madonna,

flaccid hibiscus . . .

the beloved return on leather wings, rubberised
membrane visage— an origin of recoil, of
transmogrified hunger.

They return . . . They return . . .

cloak in substance:

scent of woodsmoke, eucalyptus/oak winter,
sheoak needle pallet . . . take us in . . . take us in,
contrition fleshing grasp— the soft, slack warmth
against our palms.

Each time they follow us on glistening streets, pursue
from this errant balcony, that blown detritus,
we look into the centre of what remains and
see nothing.

ZAN ROSS

Propinquity's Premise

(*For C.H.*)

'Thank you for the life,' meanings
including adieux and accents,
with mentions of salubrious events/

issues containing contentions of
cages and caiques. While trades
and traditions wonder if the sun's

hours are there to arrest time
or to assign chequered moments
to action, freedom of speech

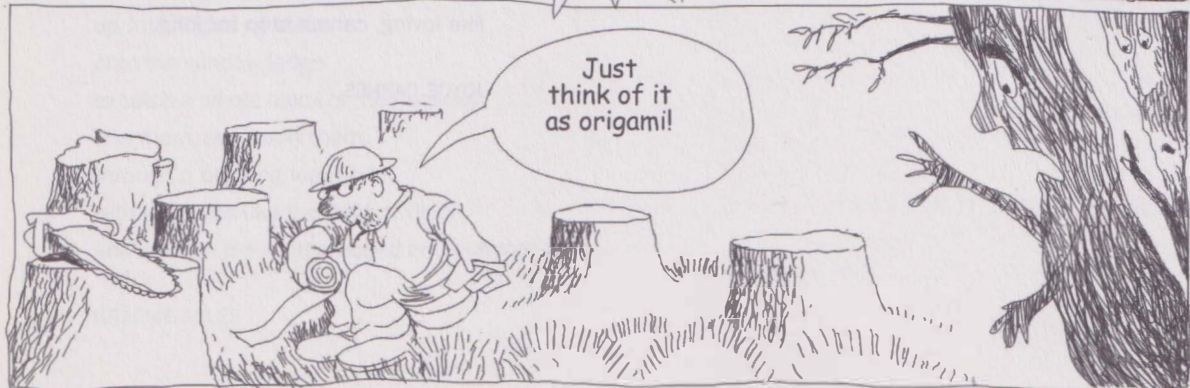
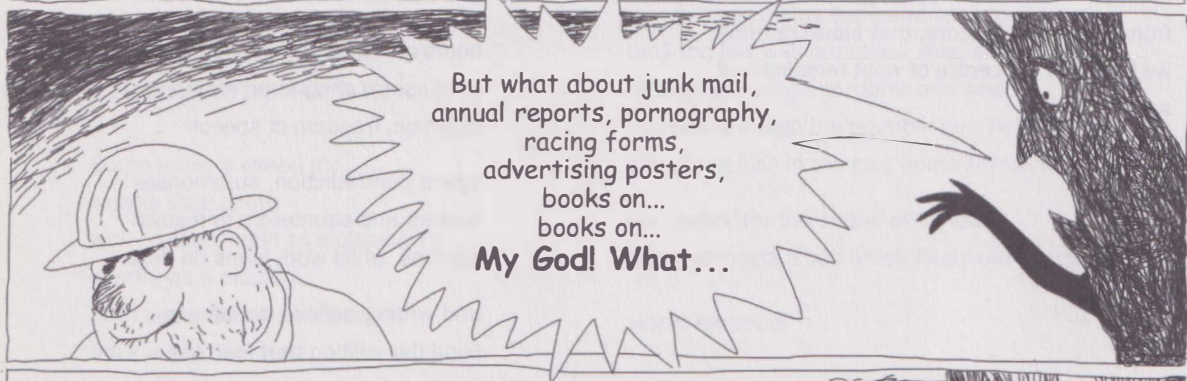
spans contradiction, summonses
scorers and saunterers to festival
stations, while work leans on time

and writing defines definitions,
filing the volition that learning,
like loving, cannot stop for long.

JOYCE PARKES

Food for Thought

by Lofu



review | RACHAEL WEAVER

IMAGINED FUTURES, INTIMATE PASTS

Shirley Hazzard: *The Great Fire* (Virago, \$28)

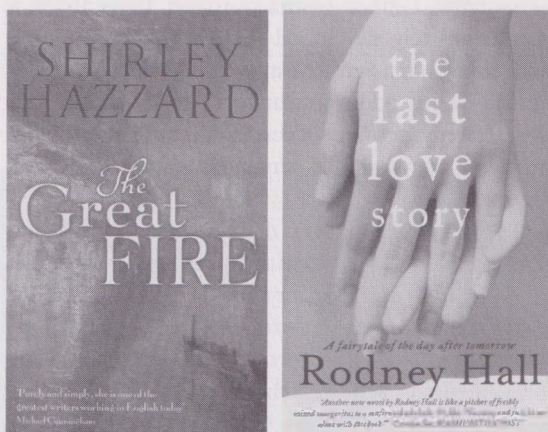
Rodney Hall: *The Last Love Story* (Picador, \$22)

At first glance, these two recent novels by Shirley Hazzard and Rodney Hall seem to have little in common: *The Great Fire* is historical and international in focus, *The Last Love Story* futuristic and distinctly Australian. Further inspection, however, reveals an interesting coincidence of preoccupations and themes.

Both books offer accounts of post-traumatic societies in which their characters are forced to negotiate new and difficult realities; both are love stories that figure damaged male protagonists; both pursue narratives of regeneration and redemption through virginal female love interests and both feature unreasonable mother figures as obstacles to the protagonists' relationships. The cultural and historical crises the texts imagine and explore are even named alike: the "Great Fire" versus the "Great Day". The respective treatment of these common themes, however, is very different.

The Great Fire opens in Asia, two years on from the end of the Second World War, amid the "side effects, aftereffects" of violence. Aldred Leith, a reluctant British war hero, arrives in Japan after two years spent in China to commence writing an account of his travels. His process of reappraising the recent past, of taking stock, connects with the general mood—his seeming numbness is reflective of a broader sense of bewilderment in the sudden, relative stillness of a peace that seems tentative and unreal. They have been through their "own Great Fire" and "the entire world" Leith thinks at one point "needs comforting".

Hazzard's prose is voluptuous yet restrained, and deeply accomplished, almost seeming to emerge from the period it evokes. This sense of historical acuity arises partly from the novel's sweeping scale and partly from the language itself, not least in the use of anachronistic phrasing like "I'm damned" or "my teeth are the devil". The novel's interest also lies in the way it relates individual to more universal experience, though



at times this emphasis is laboured. For example, as Leith's boat approaches its island destination:

The little riding lights, rocking emerald and ruby, would have shown the man smiling—as a man might privately smile at almost anything; over the memory of a girl or the prospect of a good dinner; at the discomfort of an enemy or a friend. As a woman smiles over a compliment or a new dress.

Beyond its stale invocation of gender difference the passage offers little other than the fact that Aldred Leith smiled a very general smile indeed.

Moments like this in the writing are rare. But the stereotyping the passage points to is sometimes evident more generally, especially in relation to the Japanese population. Early in the book, for example, Leith witnesses Australian Brigadier Barry Driscoll abusing "a young Japanese" for a minor infringement. He notices that "though menaced by Driscoll's body, the youth did not flinch or retreat . . . Nor could it be said he was impassive. The word, rather, would have been 'incalculable'". Or even 'inscrutable'. At the same time that such characters register little through their "inexpressive eyes", their blankness contributes to a convincing sense of cultural distance and incomprehension as former enemies set about negotiating new realities.

In contrast to the inaccessibility of the locals, the central characters are finely drawn. Driscoll and his appalling wife Melba are rendered in acute caricature as obnoxious Australian arrivistes, while their anomalously charming children, Benedict and Helen, are subtly portrayed, despite the romance-plot familiarity of Benedict's invalidism, Helen's dedication as his nurse, her love for Leith and the opposition of her parents. Leith's Australian friend, Peter Exley, is also extensively developed in an intersecting narrative set in China. Sensitive and highly educated, Exley initially seems oddly similar to Leith, but ultimately this strategy proves successful because it provides nuanced revelations of personality rather than stark oppositions.

In a broad sense, both men are faced with dilemmas that provide them with opportunities to re-accurate in postwar society. For Leith, this takes the form of his relationship with Helen, a "changeling" whose youth and love promise to resuscitate him. The dilemma itself—of whether to defy social convention and marry a much younger woman—is in many ways so 'normal' after the chaos of war that his very process of questioning it seems to have a restorative effect. Exley, in contrast, is confronted with more ambiguous choices and, in some respects, threatens to surpass 'Our Hero' Leith as the less predictable and more compelling character.

The themes of love, individual alienation and social crisis also pervade *The Last Love Story*. In contrast to the historical and geographical specificity of *The Great Fire*, however, Hall's book seems timeless and placeless. Subtitled 'A fairytale of the day after tomorrow', it is set at an unspecified point in the near future in a city built of twin towns that face each other across a river. Six years before the tale begins, violent social insurrection and rioting have resulted in "The City's" radical re-division into "City North"; a place of poverty, Christian fundamentalism and ideological repression, and the decadent "City South"; wealthy, hyper-developed and corrupt.

The line dividing the twin poles is reinforced with landmines and razor wire and expected comparisons (for example, with Berlin or Israel and Palestine) are explicit in the text, rendering attempts to identify 'real world' points of similarity redundant and adding to the impression of a familiar world 'made strange'. The sense in which the book works to distance and re-imagine familiar reference points—the line it treads between the ordinary and the fabulous—is its main

strength. What prevents the twin cities from resembling some kind of dystopian Albury-Wodonga is a combination of Hall's light touch as a writer and the mythic elements he institutes through the novel's fairytale premise.

The writing itself is deceptively simple, vernacular and compelling—almost journalistic in its appeal, especially early in the book. As the scene is set in the opening pages, the twin towns rise up organically, as if animated, and the description is strewn with sharp observations of "the murderous hatreds of neighbourliness". At moments, however, the journalistic elements predominate, for example the scene at the wharfs where the protagonists' meeting reads too much like a weekend newspaper exposé of what young people get up to at dance parties. The meeting is credible though, and Paul, an electrician from the North who has remained in City South since the "Great Day" of the split, and Judith, a sheltered, middle-class girl from the South, commence a trajectory that will transform them both.

Now, as anyone who has ever seen *Forrest Gump* must know, an intellectually impaired protagonist is a dangerous choice, and Judith is "what her mother called 'slow'". But she is confidently handled and remains a sympathetic character throughout, though an awkward shift from past to present tense, presumably designed to add immediacy and believability to her course of action in the final pages, is unconvincing—as are some of the events that unfold in the closing chapters. Judith Stott is constrained by an interfering mother who, as a more central character than *The Great Fire's* Melba Driscoll, is also more complex: her motivations are more fully explored. The representation of Paul, the banality of his characterisation as someone who has lived up to his negative school reports, is also convincing.

As with numerous examples of contemporary Australian fiction that might be shown to contain fairytale motifs, for example; some of Murray Bail, Janet Turner Hospital and even Peter Carey's writings, the fairytale aspect of *The Last Love Story* does not necessarily imply magical elements or a happy ending. Instead, the story's simplicity, the figure of the questing 'hero,' and the transformation of the oppressed female character into a figure of increased agency, could all be said to refer to fairytale tropes.

Indeed, in a sense an 'ordinary' existence is what constitutes a fairytale in the novel. The mundane detail of everyday life is what is sought in the alien-

ated world as, perhaps, evidenced by an old book, *Every Woman's Guide to Keeping House*, that Judith carries like a talisman. It could be argued that the book represents her fairytale—some 1950s idyll of married life. Likewise, Paul is drawn to her (both as a pawn in his plan, and personally) because “she was like a person left over from some previous generation”. More generally too, this raises the question of whether ultimately—as a fable that critiques late-capi-

talist culture and globalisation—the novel itself, like Hazzard's, also looks back to an earlier time. Whatever the answer, there are two final qualities *The Great Fire* and *The Last Love Story* share: the vivid evocation of their fictional worlds and the obvious experience of their authors.

Rachael Weaver completed a PhD in English with Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne in 2003.

Affairs of the Heart

SUSSAN KHADEM

John Clanchy: *Lessons from the Heart* (UQP, \$22)

Peter Goldsworthy: *Three Dog Night* (Viking, \$29.95)

Catherine Padmore: *Sibyl's Cave* (Allen & Unwin, \$21.95)

What better landscape for stories of the heart than the heart of Australia? Tales of love and loss are set among significant sites of Ayers Rock, Alice Springs, Adelaide and New South Wales. In very different ways three writers have chosen to write about affairs of the heart.

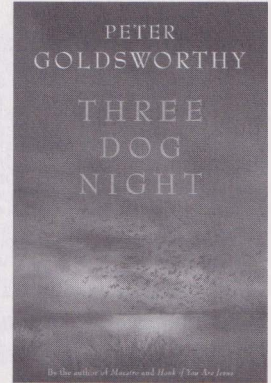
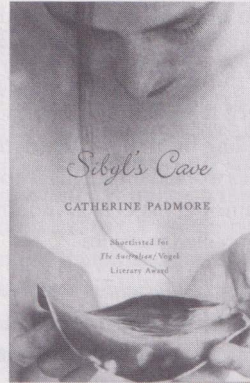
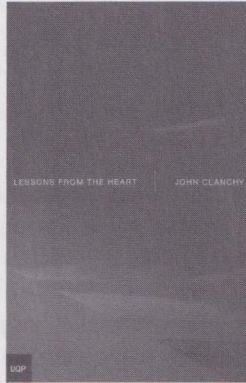
In John Clanchy's *Lessons from the Heart*, the sequel to his previous novel *The Hard Word*, the reader becomes better acquainted with the character Laura Vassilopoulos, who at 17 has come to a turning point in her life. Her lessons in love take place during a school trip to central Australia.

Laura is a Greek-Australian adolescent battling with her final year of high school and her personal feelings of inadequacy. On a school excursion to Central Australia, Laura's friend Antonia Darling initiates an affair with a handsome, youthful teacher, Mr Dwayne Prescott. The affair becomes exposed when Prescott is held accountable for an unsupervised student who falls from Ayers Rock while attempting the climb.

Clanchy writes the teenage female mind convincingly and engagingly. The English teacher, Miss Temple, compares Laura to the character of the same name in Patrick White's novel *Voss* and describes her as being equally “intense”. Laura uses Phillip Larkin's poetry to give voice to the feelings she has after los-

ing her lover. She is aware of the darkness of her skin and finds issues of race important. Meeting other students on the trip she tries to guess their racial background and says: “I love people who are like that. Like him and Luisa, and some of Mum's students, who are Indian and Asian and that.” Cultural difference is a significant theme throughout the book. Laura asks Miss Temple why the Aboriginal people at Ayers Rock do not wish to have their photographs taken. Miss Temple replies that it has something to do with the “processes of reification and the appropriation of the identity of the Other.” This is not just a simple story about love but a story charged with spiritual questions of identity and belonging. Laura at times shows a little too much maturity for her age, but her analytical eye plays an important part in deciphering the events that occur.

Also seeking answers to her questions of love, sexuality and identity is the protagonist of Catherine Padmore's novel *Sibyl's Cave*, shortlisted for the *Australian/Vogel Literary Award*. Billie is a 60-year-old woman living a reclusive life as a successful artist in NSW. Her life was not always easy and her secrets



become unravelled when her niece Lorelei travels from Norfolk to visit her. Gradually through the novel the many lives of Billie, also known as Cibelle, Sybille, Queenie and Bella, are revealed. Padmore uses the myth of the Sybil of Cumae to write a captivating story of one woman's life after losing her family. Like the Sybil of Cumae, Billie uses leaves as her artistic medium. On the leaves she draws faces from her past, faces that belong to her adoptive family and link her back to her Italian origins.

Padmore successfully portrays the diasporic experience:

Sentences behaved differently in this cold country, she realised. They had an odd rhythm not like the sing-song melody of Sybille's own language. Here, sentences sloped down at the end, with the gravity of a rock thrown down a steep hill to the sea. The child knew about the forces pulling from the centre of the planet. Perhaps these forces worked on language too, affecting the way words came out of people's mouths, pulling them as the moon pulled the tides.

Peter Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night* is also a tale about the quest for identity and love. Martin Blackman is a well-established psychiatrist living with his wife,

Lucy. Lucy is the centre of Martin's world and we enter his world: "If love is an obsessive-compulsive disorder—same driven behaviour, same altered brain state, same chemistry—then I have been ill for years. But never as sick with bliss, as *diseased*, as now." His love is shaken when he introduces Lucy to his old friend Felix, who is fatally ill. The dying man's wish is to 'borrow' Martin's wife. This leads to a complex love triangle that leaves Martin fighting with himself and his feelings.

Throughout the novel Lucy's character isn't particularly believable and Martin's infatuation with her is at times a bit over the top:

"I'd eat her shit," I say, then turn away, uncertain where the words have come from. Accumulated frustration? A desire to hear something true spoken, something from the heart, even if I have to speak it myself, from my heart?

However, the many subplots and the Aboriginal folk story—also about two men fighting over one woman—add depth and complexity to the story.

Sussan Khadem is a postgraduate student at Victoria University.

Carefully Realised Moments

KALINDA ASHTON

Neil Boyack: *Transactions* (Vulgar Press, \$24.95)

Wayne Grogan: *Junkie Pilgrim* (Brandl & Schlesinger, \$22.95)

Transactions traverses the Australian landscape from housing estates to river camps, from the jingling rush of poker machines to the drudgery of furniture factories, from a storm on Altona beach, to the makeup sales counter at Myer. The "brick and the tin and the tar of Spotswood" gives way to the "dull loungeroom light" of a hotel room, or the window-view of the city from Crown Casino where "the buildings of Melbourne [are] black teeth".

Boyack's talent lies chiefly in his ability to capture the threads of ordinary life. *Transactions* articulates the pauses of everyday life: the desolate last days of a dying love affair, the growing menace of a group of thuggish, drunken men at a camping site, the wrenching monotony of unemployment, a sick woman's placement of a chair in the shower to help her wash.

Boyack's writing is both lyrical and savage. Many of the intricately rendered moments in this collection, like the title story, are concerned with transactions of one kind or another—characters are caught in negotiations and exchanges, they make promises, purchases and compromises.

In 'Pioneers of the Estate', the narrator remembers his high-school football team breaking into a house that contains a twenty-year-old calendar and unopened Christmas presents which the boys take and redistribute to their families, flinging picture-slides of holiday destinations over the fence.

In 'The Gamblers', Chris Rintoole, a bank teller who'd rather be a chef, bides his time waiting for the lucky five-cent machine that once won him seven dollars. In the early hours of the morning a chance meeting with a magician who throws knives at his wife delivers him a ticket to a draw for the \$50 prize.

Elsewhere, Rudi grooms his dog, 'Nothing Special', for the Bendigo races, where he hopes that

“history may have made a space for them” to win a place. ‘Retail #1’ and ‘Retail #2’ carry an energy and vibrancy that some of the other stories don’t possess. One of the dangers with writing committed to constructing carefully realised moments is a lack of movement and pace.

Some of the strongest writing emerges from relationships. A forgotten neighbour haunts a house: “Through our apartment he became a darkness, something that bled in me every so often”. Grandparents’ pictures of Uluru pinned to the fridge reveal “the boundaries of their worldliness”.

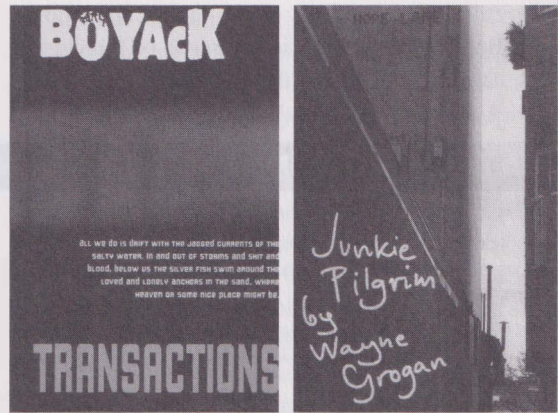
At times the transitions in Boyack’s stories are not handled well. The distinctions between past and present, memory and journey can be easy to get lost in. But these are minor quibbles. This is a great collection, stories relayed with an admirable, spare matter-of-factness.

WAYNE GROGAN’S *Junkie Pilgrim* takes up transactions of another kind. His protagonist, Chris Coates, is a heroin addict who scrounges out an existence in the “badland aura of the Cross”, selling stolen perfume and cigarettes to shady dealers. After a stint in prison Chris gets a job on the wharves and tries to clean up, but lapses back into smack and becomes entangled in the unforgiving world of organised crime.

Like Peter Corris, Grogan takes the backstreets of Sydney as his chief terrain. Chris witnesses how the “bold, junk-wrecked whores angled up the boulevard like submerged dummies skewing off a pool hall” and gets “Imax close to bruised elbow-crooks, misdrawn lipstick, blackened female eyes, desperation and self-destruction”. When Chris gets involved with notorious crim Snowy Johns and the gaggle of corrupt cops he drags in his wake, things only get worse. And worse.

Junkie Pilgrim has the grit and savagery some of the better grunge novelists used to effect in the nineties. Chris is a confessional narrator, laying bare the desperation and heart-rending savagery of drug addiction. The novel has plenty of narrative pace, intricate plotting and hard-boiled energy.

There is not one ounce of idealisation or romanticism in Grogan’s portrait of a heroin addict: this is an account of an absolute descent into hell. Chris thumps his mother’s television down the stairs to sell while he is sheltering in her home, he shits himself in the streets of Sydney waiting for a hit, he thieves candlestick-holders from the Catholic church he has



run to in hope and fear, and watches a bawling baby in the throes of heroin withdrawal as he waits to score off her parents. As Grogan puts it: “Here were no elegiac junkies, wan and meaningfully different, but hard men sucked into smack, broken to an irrelevant warmth, hulking through right rooms talking loosely of ‘Mr X’, scratching a craggy face, a lodged syringe flapping on a forearm.”

While the narrative drive of *Junkie Pilgrim* is compelling, the novel seems to take a while to get properly started and the ‘flashforward’ opening chapter doesn’t really work. However, there are some truly poignant moments in the novel. Chris’s attempt to get off smack is almost unbearable to read; it sees him pissing into empty beer bottles in his room, a private act hidden from the women whose house he shares. Grogan has a deft touch and his sketches of minor characters are wonderful.

Perhaps it is unfair to criticise a novel for what it does not do, but while *Junkie Pilgrim* is set on the docks in the 1980s there is only a peremptory picture of life on the wharves. Wayne Grogan spent sixteen years as a wharfie but most of the novel shows us only corrupt, thuggish men like Bobby Stanley who catapults Chris into the hands of Snowy Johns. We see very little of the Waterside Workers Federation and industrial militancy. While Chris gets advice from his father to avoid jeopardising hard-won conditions by stealing from the wharves and there is a cursory reference to the union struggles of the 1950s (the subject of Amanda Lohrey’s wonderful novel, *The Morality of Gentlemen*), the mainstream life of the docks remains largely untouched. In these troubled times of union-bashing, that’s a shame.

Of course, this is in keeping with the suffocating insularity and unbearable intimacy of Chris’s world,

where alternatives—if they exist—cannot be glimpsed and the novel’s strength is the sense of foreclosure that hangs over Chris’s life, the brutality and raw-

ness of an existence at the periphery.

Kalinda Ashton is a Creative Writing tutor in the English Department at the University of Melbourne.

small presses | SIMON SELLARS

Andrew Hunting, George Dunford, Katie Falkiner and Rose Mulready (eds): *All Change Please* (Cardigan Press, \$19.95)

Adam Ford, Stephen Grimwade, Anna Hedigan and alicia sometimes (eds): *Going Down Swinging 21* (Going Down Swinging Inc., \$17.50)

Anthony Lynch (ed.): *Space: New Writing* (Whitmore Press, \$19.95)

At this year’s Melbourne Writers’ Festival, John Murray said he appreciated the fact that short stories are a perfect barometer for measuring fresh literary talent, Eva Sallis likened short stories to “tantric sex in five minutes” and Frank Moorhouse bemoaned the scarcity of outlets for publishing these orgasmic bundles of joy. Meanwhile, the *Age* highlighted the issue of literary “gatekeepers”—publishers who apparently block up-and-coming writers from readers due to the fear that new Australian fiction won’t sell. Yet when emerging writers unite in their resolve to do something about lost opportunities and lack of outlets, they get ignored. In the 2004 Writers’ Festival program, the local small press was actually invisible.

Cardigan Press, formed by a collective of RMIT Professional Writing and Editing students in 2002, is an independent initiative worthy of recognition. They’ve just released a third anthology of short fiction, *All Change Please*, the main purpose of which is to showcase the efforts of its core members—all eleven have at least one story in here, some have two or three, and there’s a smattering of contributions from outside. On the whole it’s a strong collection glued together by a nominal conceit: *All Change Please* is designed to be read on public transport.

The anthology is in four parts: ‘Express’ stories, with a word limit of 500; ‘Short Trip’ (1000 words); ‘Unexpected Delays’ (2000 words); and ‘All Stations’ (3000 words). The shorter efforts are intricate snapshots with a sense of life continuing beyond the narrative frame. Jane Ormond’s ‘A Convenient Mythology’ stylishly literalises this technique with its sneak peak into the Polaroid-obsessed psyche of the central character. Elsewhere, there are vignettes about factory life (‘Short Work’, Paula Hunt’s super dis-

section of the male psyche), tortured booksellers, jilted lovers and phantom limbs. Some are neat summations of irony, some are pastiches, others are worthy experiments, but after one too many ‘situations’ I yearned for real narrative development, something with a mean kick in the tail. In the ‘All Stations’ section, the writers have the space to really stretch their narrative legs and for the most part the results are worth waiting for, like Tony Reck’s ‘Nightshift’, with its sculpted wordplay, propulsive rage and bitter core of eroded humanism.

All Change Please highlights the joy to be had from reading short stories—the sense of delight in unravelling compacted ideas—and while they don’t necessarily conform to Sallis’s tantric euphoria, they certainly linger in the badlands of the mind. One thing to note is the predominance of stories written in the first person—this really is the ‘me’ generation. Cardigan Press, as promising as it is, will become a real force to be reckoned with when its writers develop to the point that they can also trust their interior thoughts to external characters.

Anna Hedigan is one of the Cardigan principals and also a member of the editorial team that publishes *Going Down Swinging*, an annual ‘literary magazine’. *GDS* was the Cardigan Press of its day, formed by Myron Lysenko and Kevin Brophy in 1980 as a reaction against limited opportunities for Australian writers. Twenty-four years on, that attitude endures although the tone has substantially changed. Now under the editorship of Hedigan, small-press impresario Steve Grimwade and poets alicia sometimes and Adam Ford, *GDS* has morphed into a jokey, self-deprecating exercise in matey banter—“GDS-ness” as they term it. The team’s editorial for the 2004 edition references Kim Basinger as a cod philosopher, while mixing metaphors of its own. According to Grimwade, “Community *can* still the modern economy” (that might be a typo), while Hedigan promises that “*GDS* gives a gooey slice of the Australian literary torte”. Actually, the editorial style is a good reflection of the content: a post-mix of pop culture and puns that clearly doesn’t take itself too seriously.

As far as the short fiction is concerned, this means that some of the ideas are in thrall to an arch self-reflexiveness that tends to overshadow narrative and character development. Ultimately, I respond more to the disciplined grit of the longer Cardigan pieces than these loose, unstructured tales that never really kick out of first gear. But then again, *GDS* doesn't pretend to be a champion of the short story, exclusively; it also includes comic strips, poetry and a spoken-word CD, all under the rubric of 'literature'. Without an overarching theme or concept, I find this promiscuity of styles distracting. The kitsch nuttiness and the gonzo poetry is all there, but in the effort to cram so much into one place, some of the writing becomes compromised. Fragments are the preferred option, the quirkiest and more culturally loaded the better, but I'd like to see these writers wrestle ideas to the ground, rather than letting them touch the ropes with barely a scratch.

Brophy pops up again as a contributor to *Space: New Writing*, a new publication from Geelong. *Space* takes the journal format—short fiction, prose poems, reviews, a photo gallery and essays—and its writers have quieter, more contemplative concerns. A key to *Space* lies in the reviews: with dissections of Nic Roeg's multilayered film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and the tricky oeuvre of novelist Italo Calvino, you know that *Space* is dealing with detachment and the cool irony of popular culture rather than bathing in the sensory overload of Tarantino, zombies and two-minute noodles. From there, film—of a par-

ticular ilk—becomes an effective device in Brian Edwards's series of prose poems that turn the mythmaking of Hollywood 'New Wave' movies—*Easy Rider*, *Bonnie & Clyde*—into a lament for lost mythologies.

Similarly, *Space's* essays (on "personal space"), particularly Maria Takolander's lyrical evocation of what it means to be Finnish, cross over into the nebulous territory of fiction, while the short stories are essentially essayist where observations end up as some kind of societal critique, shot full of oblique angles that invert the personal into the political. It's fitting, then, that the journal also includes a photographic series by Sharon Jones that channels the spirit of J.G. Ballard's work, all high rises and office buildings, cold, distant and impenetrable—mirrored surfaces reflecting us back to ourselves in an endless feedback loop. On that score, *Space* is remarkably consistent.

Whatever your predilection it's clear that the art of the short story, in Melbourne and Geelong at least, is alive and well; rumours of its death have been greatly exaggerated. Still, whether any of these writers gets promoted to the 'Premier League' is something that can't be answered here; certainly, they deserve to be acknowledged for their initiative, encouraged for their passion, honesty and drive, and—in certain cases—nurtured. Maybe the Festival next year.

Simon Sellars is a freelance writer and editor. He edits and publishes the online cultural magazine, Sleepy Brain <www.sleepybrain.net>.

Move over Ned Kelly

JOHN MORTON

| K.S. Inglis: *The Stuart Case* (Black Inc., \$27.95)

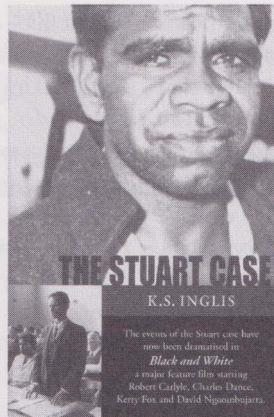
Shortly after Christmas in 1958 an 8-year-old girl named Mary Hattam was violently raped and murdered at the South Australian coastal town of Ceduna, leading to what I recently heard authoritatively described as "the most famous criminal law case in Australia after that of Ned Kelly". The man accused of the crime was a young Aboriginal man whose full name was Rupert Maxwell Stuart. 'Max' acquired the nickname 'Yatala', after the Adelaide prison in which he was incarcerated, on and off, for more than twenty-five years. Three books and two films now tell the story of the case. *The Stuart Case* was the first on

offer to the public in 1961. The 2002 version remains unmodified, save for the inclusion of an epilogue comprising four chapters devoted to various matters, including Max Stuart's fate after the commutation of his death sentence in 1959 through to his recent building of a successful post-jail career as an Aboriginal lawman and active figurehead in regional and national Aboriginal affairs.

The Stuart Case was not only the first extensive commentary on the aftermath of Mary Hattam's brutal murder: to this day, it remains the most comprehensive, unbiased and even-handed account of

the case. The lengthy epilogue confirms that Inglis is a masterful writer, a balanced sifter of evidence and a commentator free of axes to grind. Sir Roderick Chamberlain, who led the prosecution during Stuart's trial, published *The Stuart Affair* in 1978 in order to confirm Stuart's guilt. Father Thomas Dixon, the Catholic priest very actively involved in Stuart's defence, published *The Wizard of Alice* in 1987 in order to persuade us of Stuart's innocence. Similarly, Ned Lander's and Rachel Perkins's docudrama *Broken English*, screened on Australian television in 1993 and the 2002 feature film *Black and White*, starring Robert Carlyle as Stuart's defence counsel, David O'Sullivan, both lean heavily towards the portrayal of Stuart as the victim of a conspiracy initiated by police investigators. However, a reading of *The Stuart Case* confirms an impression that can be gained from the whole corpus—that the case itself was about much, much more than the rape and murder of a young girl and the trial of a young Aboriginal man. It is symptomatic of this story that the main star of *Black and White* played the role of Stuart's lawyer, with David Ngoombujarra playing Stuart almost from the side of the set.

What makes the Stuart case a historical landmark is neither the sheer brutality of Mary Hattam's murder nor the fact that an Aboriginal man stood controversially accused of that act. Rather, the suggestion that Stuart might have been wrongfully accused of such a shocking crime brought into play a set of forces that committed to battle with such vigour that the precipitating factors became almost incidental to the conduct of the war. The most notable interventions came first from the young Rupert Murdoch, aided by his editor of *The News*, Rohan Rivett, and later from the Liberal Premier of South Australia, Sir Thomas Playford. By June 1959, in spite of a later abortive appeal to the Privy Council in London, Stuart's trial—including his appeal to the Full Court and a failed application to appeal to the High Court—was finished. It was then that Rivett and Murdoch, in communication with Father Dixon, intervened to give heightened publicity to the campaign casting doubt on Stuart's guilt. At the same time, the longstanding conservative government of South Australia came under increasing pressure from



such publicity, culminating in Playford's announcement of a Royal Commission to investigate the evidence. Inglis makes the telling comment that, by then, it seemed that "South Australia's institutions were themselves on trial".

Not surprisingly, the Adelaide establishment vigorously defended itself. The Royal Commission trod a very rough path between August and December 1959, finally concluding that Stuart's conviction had been wholly justified. But by then much of the sting had been taken out of the case by the commuting of Stuart's sentence to life imprisonment, a move evidently prompted by political expediency rather than any genuine concern for Stuart's welfare. One of the more disturbing outcomes of the case was the filing of charges of seditious and criminal libel against Rivett and Murdoch's company, News Limited. And while these charges were eventually dismissed or withdrawn, Inglis was prompted to make the following final observation in 1961:

The line from Australia to a police state is long. It is nevertheless continuous. When . . . Rivett was accused of seditious libel one was reminded that the free society is a precarious achievement, depending as much on the absence of seriously divisive issues as an allegiance to liberal principles among holders of office. On a map of the world the threats to freedom in South Australia which arose during the Stuart case were doubtless small; but they are worth taking seriously.

It is a pity that Inglis was not tempted in the epilogue to reflect briefly on these remarks in relation to the recent happenings of the so-called Hindmarsh Bridge affair, during which, in 1995, another South Australian Premier, Dean Brown, called a Royal Commission to inquire into matters that once again embroiled quarters of Adelaide's establishment in vituperative conflict over an alleged miscarriage of justice.

Inglis's new epilogue does reflect upon the longer term consequences of the Stuart case, concluding that it was more or less catalytic in a number of respects. It ineradicably altered the course of some individuals' lives—Stuart's of course, but also many others, including Playford's, whose conservative government was almost voted out of office in 1962 and was finally displaced in 1965, in spite of the

gerrymander that had kept it in office for so long. (At the time of Stuart's conviction, Playford had already had a record-breaking term of twenty-six years as Premier, but the Stuart case indubitably caused him much political grief.) Playford and most of the other protagonists in this story are no longer with us, Rupert Murdoch being one notable exception and Max Stuart another. The epilogue reflects thoughtfully on the fates of those no longer here, most notably in relation to Chamberlain's excessively patriotic and rather paranoid *The Stuart Case*, which concludes with a paean to British justice and a sideswipe at "the revolt against authority" allegedly characteristic of a declining post-Second World War culture. Inglis assesses *The Wizard of Alice* rather more sympathetically, but is critical of Dixon's assessments of evidence. While Inglis certainly remains sceptical about the prosecution's case against Stuart, he nevertheless maintains his belief, contra Dixon, in the possibility of Stuart's guilt.

It is not until the final chapter that we learn about the recent fate of Stuart himself—about his 1970s and 1980s applications for parole, his returns to Yatala after breaching the terms of his parole, his eventual full release, his building of a prominent career through association with the Central Land Council, his celebrity appearances at public events, his personal role

in the pursuit of land and native title rights, and his participation in ritual politics as a "senior Arrernte lawman" (in relation to which there is a minor error on page 393 where a Luritja or Pitjantjatjara phrase is said to be Arrernte). In 2000 Stuart even welcomed Queen Elizabeth II to Alice Springs and presented her with a totemic painting depicting the local topography and dreaming. It is events such as this that lead Inglis to the conclusion that Stuart "had achieved some kind of redemption", all the more ironic for the Queen having been the nominal head of the British judiciary that in July 1959 dismissed his final petition. It is tempting to think that Stuart might have asked the Queen for a pardon in exchange for the painting of Alice Springs.

In the meantime, there has been no earthly redemption for Mary Hattam, nor any for her brother, who, in the penultimate paragraph of this book, is cited as wishing that the story involving his sister's death would stay buried in the past. There is, of course, no chance of that; for, sad to say, Mary Hattam has tragically become a bit player or scene setter in a drama much bigger than her mere life—or even her horrible death.

Dr John Morton currently teaches general anthropology and Aboriginal studies at La Trobe University.

Contested Cities

JOHN McLAREN

Peter Yule (ed.): *Carlton: a history* (MUP & Carlton Residents Association, \$59.95).

Jeff Sparrow and Jill Sparrow, *Radical Melbourne 2: the enemy within* (Vulgar Press, \$50)

Raymond Evans and Carole Ferrier (eds), *Radical Brisbane: an unruly city* (Vulgar Press, \$50)

Although these three books all tell historical stories from the ground up, they represent very different kinds of history. *Carlton* is the story and celebration of a suburb. It is an edited history that achieves its unity through continuity of time and commonality of place. Its story is of successive waves of incomers building and populating a new environment immediately north of Melbourne. *Radical Melbourne 2* and *Radical Brisbane* are both histories of resistance. Although each has some unity of place, albeit wider than a particular suburb, they both have a coherence that comes from

a common political stance. Their cities are places of resistance to the power of capitalism that moulds their economic and built environments. While *Radical Brisbane* is an edited history, bringing a range of perspectives to an unfolding story of trouble, *Radical Melbourne 2* is written by two self-described activists who portray its events from a single, unflinching perspective.

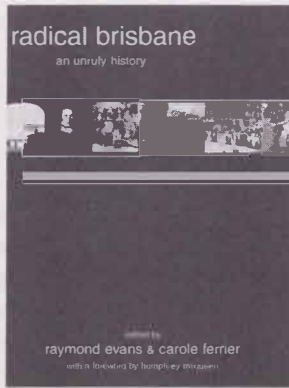
Carlton is the easiest and hardest of these books to review. It is a handsome publication, profusely illustrated, and offers pleasure to anyone who picks it up and browses through it. For past and present residents of Carlton, it offers the further pleasures of nostalgia and recognition. Yet these very pleasures may obscure the stories it contains of poverty, hardship, and struggle against the authorities who have constantly tried to destroy its character and achievement against the odds.

The ambiguous nature of the Carlton story is captured by Arnold Zable in his introductory essay, 'Carlton Dreaming'. This captures the spirit of the multiracial Carlton where he grew up, which was marked by deprivation and conflict as well as by play and fellowship. Zable takes his story up to the fight against the plans of the Housing Commission to raze the old Carlton and replace it with brave new flats. He concludes by showing how the success of this fight led to the displacement of many of the older inhabitants by new gentry and how the flats that were built continue the Carlton tradition of providing a place of shelter and opportunity for the outcasts of many societies.

The following chapter recalls the Wurundjeri people who were displaced to make way for the invaders and settlers. Further chapters describe the building of Carlton, the communities who settled there, the businesses, institutions, sporting clubs, politics, and the architectural development. Two chapters on the buildings, by Miles Lewis and Alan Willingham, represent some of the difficulties of a history of this kind. Lewis provides a detailed catalogue of all the notable houses and other buildings in Carlton. Willingham captures a particular period of housing development, the conversion of what were often slums by the postwar migrants from the Mediterranean. Their bold primary colours, their vines, concrete and terracotta, their steel-framed windows and pergolas, have often been mocked by later comers and devotees of the heritage museum. Willingham shows how these homes represented the labour and aspirations of the families they sheltered.

The chapters on institutions and on politics also give a human dimension to a story that otherwise tends to be overcrowded, necessarily, with names rather than people. It shows how the people found ways of being heard when the authorities denied them expression of their municipal identity (as they continue to do). The history of the many schools is a record of response to continuous social and demographic change and government obstruction. The story of Melbourne University, both as an institution and as a built environment, is a story of both civic development against the odds and neighbourly obstruction beyond reason.

The book as a whole is a celebration of the achieve-



ment of settlers to whom the tyranny of distance gave metropolitan confidence and, often, overweening pride; of the struggles of this community with its immediate neighbours; and of its steady entanglement in the affairs of the global community.

In contrast, the radical cities books both start from the fact of the entanglement of Australian working people with the forces of global capitalism. Their cities are not places of achievement so much as places built to celebrate the discipline of labour. The books celebrate the way this discipline was constantly challenged and spaces of freedom recovered, at least briefly.

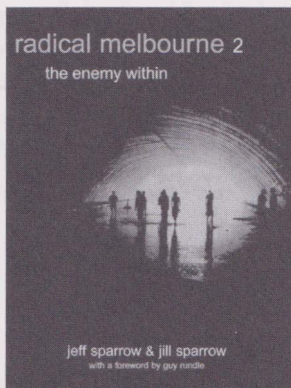
Radical Brisbane starts by examining the way that settlement was built on the violent dispossession of the people who had for millennia possessed the place in freedom, and was continued through the exercise of violence against Chinese, islanders, convicts and workers. Three constant themes are the brutality of the police, the manic reporting of the press, and the tyranny of authority. *Radical Melbourne 2* builds on its predecessor, *Radical Melbourne*, to extend the story to the present day and a few places in the inner suburbs. The Brisbane book is an edited collection of essays, mainly by Raymond Evans, supplemented by the work of other urban and cultural historians who share his passionate opposition to racism and belief in justice. The tone of the essays is generally descriptive and analytic, but incidents come to life as they are recalled by writers who participated in them. Evans on the Springbok tour confrontation is classic in its insight and vivid economy.

The Melbourne book is a collaboration of just two authors, whose consistency of tone is humorous and dramatic. As well as showing the constant struggle against power, the book shows the equally constant fissions among the strugglers. Protesters are divided between militant minorities, seekers after consensus, and advocates of the majority, between class and nationalist warriors, between anarchists, libertarians, revolutionaries, radicals and disciplined unionists. At times all come together for a brief triumph of unity, but in most cases the street actions do no more than keep open the possibilities of freedom in the face of implacable institutions. All are in ambiguous or hostile relationships with political labour, although there is less evidence of

reactionary unionism than in the Brisbane book.

The Sparrows have cast their net wide. They take the reader on a tour of Melbourne that includes mods and sharpies, activists of Women's Lib, film and jazz, radical printeries and bookshops, and explorations of the city's literal underground. As well as showing the enthusiasms and risings of the Left, they have a keen eye for upswellings of rural discontent on the Right and for the continuing hidden conspiracies of the Right against both the perceived threat of revolution and the actual practice of democracy. Dugout Doug MacArthur and General Tom Blainey, both despisers of the men under their commands as well as of the people in general, take their places beside Tom and Margot Mahood and Bernie Heinze, who at different times provide concealment for Communist Party presses, and the witty and ingenious activists of campaigns against political police or unhealthy advertising. The essay on the Movement is the best brief account of its activities I have seen. The authors show a particular talent for the apt phrase that not only sums up a particular episode but places it in its historical and social context. Their description of "the mainstream press" invoking "the spectre of bloodshed", with Archbishop Woods calling on the public to repudiate violence and the police Chief Commissioner Jackson appealing for "community restraint" before the mass mobilisation after Kerr's coup in 1975, epitomises the opposing forces who compete throughout the book for ownership of the city and its spaces. The authors take us on a walk, guided by excellent maps, around the sites of old confrontations that lie hidden behind the orderly façades to remind us of the inherent vulnerability of the corporate city.

Radical Brisbane also comes with maps to allow the reader to become a walker, but it is organised chronologically rather than spatially. It is an unfolding, a continuous history of conflict rather than the discovery of fragmentary moments of a past still beside us. Yet it is equally a call to action to continue the work of earlier generations of progressives. If anything, it shows a more violent capitalist establishment, a more reactionary Labor Party and a more obdurate radical opposition than is found in the Melbourne book. Yet it was also a Labor government,



led by T.J. Ryan, that almost precipitated armed conflict between state police and the army when Billy Hughes was attempting to impose conscription during the First World War. The Second World War saw actual armed violence in the Brisbane streets when rioting broke out between American and Australian troops. In telling this story, Raymond Evans and Jacqui Donegan show how these riots were precipitated not merely by sexual rivalry, but also by the differences be-

tween the possessive sexuality of male Australian culture and the more sophisticated approach to women of the Americans. The years after the Second World War also saw a continuously intensive war instigated by governments and waged by the police on unionists, youth, students, women and Aborigines. Riots took place as youth tried to enjoy rock 'n' roll or punk, students tried to stop tours by racist sports teams, women tried to drink in public bars or campaigned for equal pay, and Aborigines fought against total repression. Two future Labor premiers took part in some of these demonstrations, but even Labor governments continued to support police reaction.

The tone of both books is summed up in Joanne Watson's closing words to her essay on the Brisbane Wharfies Club, which uses "a site of song and ceremony" to tell the story of "struggles by working people and radical movements" and of "declarations of solidarity with those struggling for justice around the world". "We need to remember", she writes, "these people and what they did, in the challenging times ahead." This implicit challenge could however be lost if the books become merely vehicles of nostalgia for times when the class struggle was clearer. The account of the mobilisation against globalisation at the World Economic Forum that concludes the Melbourne book shows also the divisions that rend the labour and protest movements and make their victories so fleeting. The unity of a common cause is too often lost amid competing agendas and factional squabbling, so that a proud history is also a sad history. In her Afterword to the Brisbane book, Carole Ferrier reminds us that the bitter fight goes on. The fight will not however be won by fighting old battles. Socialists must not only recall their history, but rethink its lessons for the present in ways that mobilise people against a capitalism that constantly changes

its forms but never its nature. The Carlton book records both the triumphs and the losses incurred in building a city, but the two radical histories show how the capitalism that generated the city is not merely an economic system that oppresses the worker, but

a social system that denies the people their rights to live fully as workers, as citizens, as lovers, as dwellers in the land.

John McLaren is a consulting editor for Overland.

The Hope of Something Better

VERITY BURGMAN

Ross McMullin: *So Monstrous a Travesty: Chris Watson and the world's first national labour government* (Scribe, \$29.95)

A peculiar historical characteristic of the Australian labour movement was the precocity—perhaps prematurity—of its political wing. Early reforms such as universal suffrage (racial restrictions apart) and payment of members facilitated political labour's spectacularly early success. In 1903 the voting share won by the ALP exceeded 30 per cent, compared with less than 10 per cent attained by the Swedish and Norwegian social democratic parties. While British Labour had to wait until 1924 to form a minority government and until 1945 to form a majority government, Australian Labor formed a minority government in Queensland in 1899, a minority federal government in 1904 and its first majority federal government in 1910.

Ross McMullin's study of the world's first national labour government enhances our understanding of this extraordinary aspect of Australian labour. In April 1904 the Deakin government was defeated in the House of Representatives and Labor leader John Christian Watson, who had worked shovelling manure at Government House, then as a compositor, was invited by the Governor-General to form a government. In a seventy-five-member House, the twenty-four Labor members were supported to varying degrees by nine of the Protectionists.

The title of McMullin's book is from a representative newspaper reaction, that of the *Maitland Daily Mercury*.

To call this preposterous production a Government is ridiculous, and would be laughable were it not for the painful pitilessness of having so monstrous a travesty administering the affairs of a great country which needs the best services of its most patriotic, independent and capable sons.

Labor's rise to office heralded the end of the "three elevens" as Deakin termed it, provoking the fusion in 1909 of the Protectionist and Freetrade parties as an anti-Labor formation.

The apprehension of conservative commentary was paralleled by euphoria in radical circles. At Sydney Trades Hall Billy Hughes announced it was Australia's destiny to "lead and enlighten the rest of the world". The *Tocsin* declared: "The eyes of the world were upon the Watson Government and its Parliamentary supporters". Watson's more modest comment at the Exhibition Building celebratory lunch was, "I trust we shall justify ourselves to the people for all time".

At 37, Watson not only became the first labour prime minister in the world, but also one of the youngest in the British Empire since Pitt the Younger in 1783. He emerges favourably from McMullin's account. He insisted Aborigines "were entitled to most generous consideration" and his personality was unsuited to parliamentary life. Unassuming and unpretentious, he preferred to speak only when he had something to say and when in Melbourne for parliamentary sittings he stayed not in a grand residence or hotel but in an East Melbourne boarding house with a dozen caucus colleagues. He retired from the Labor leadership before it next formed government. Some politicians, McMullin observes, thrive on the pursuit and exercise of power, revel in the public gaze, become addicted to fame. Watson did not.

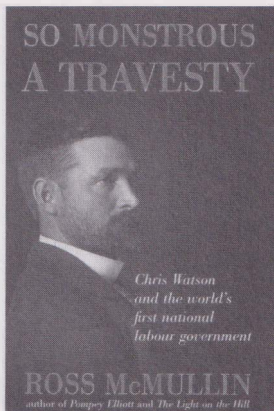
As for his 1904 government, McMullin argues its immensely significant accomplishment was proving that representatives of the working class could handle office and power creditably, that Labor governments could govern. As an anchor of the *Overland* cricket team, McMullin's choice of metaphor is unsurprising:

To extend Deakin's three elevens analogy, Watson

was intent on proceeding carefully, eschewing adventurous strokeplay as he struggled for survival on a difficult pitch. He knew that some supporters—even some team-mates—might become restless and complain that his batting was too sedate, but he was convinced that a cautious captain's innings was in his team's long-term interests.

Apart from confounding its detractors by administrative competence, the Watson government commenced some progressive initiatives (although it also policed White Australia zealously and began the establishment of an Australian navy). It reduced abuses in the federal voting system; improved mail services; abolished the requirement that military personnel in the civilian forces had to exchange salutes when out of uniform; laid the foundations for establishing a national capital city; moved towards the establishment of a national old-age pension system; and proceeded with the setting up of the nation's distinctive industrial relations system. Indeed, its commitment to enshrining preference to unionists in employment in this Conciliation and Arbitration Bill led to the government's downfall in the House by two votes in August 1904. Watson also foreshadowed legislation to establish a national trademarks scheme; clamp down on the fraud rife in the sale of goods; carry out a survey on construction of an east-west transcontinental railway; establish national quarantine machinery; and correct anomalies in postal and electoral administration.

McMullin's book also assesses the minority Labor government under Andrew Fisher 1908–1909 and Fisher's subsequent majority government. According to McMullin, this 1910–1913 government was one of



the most productive of the twentieth century: introducing land tax; extending the scope of the arbitration system; increasing and expanding the welfare state; establishing Canberra as the national capital; reducing postal charges; improving lighthouses, quarantine and copyright regulations; and establishing more uniform railway gauges.

With rationalisation and state-sponsored development a hallmark of these early Labor governments, Lenin's analysis of Australia in 1913 seems pertinent: "What sort of peculiar capitalist country is this," he asked, "in which the workers' representatives predominate in the *Upper House* and, till recently, did so in the Lower House as well, and yet the capitalist system is in no danger?" Lenin concluded that the Labor Party was merely a liberal-bourgeois party that pursued nation-building policies favourable to the capitalist economy.

And yet McMullin's account alerts us also to a radical temper now lost from Labor. Watson declared he and his party were heartily in sympathy with the essential spirit of socialism: "It is the spirit of humanity; the spirit of those who care for the poor and lowly; of those who are prepared to make an effort to interfere with the iron law of wages, and with the cold-blooded calculation of the ordinary political economist". Billy Hughes responded to the red-baiting Fretrade leader: "So far as our platform is concerned, what if it does tend towards socialism?" Nowadays, as we welcome Labor governments merely as the lesser of two evils, McMullin reminds us of a time when Labor represented "the hope of something better".

Verity Burgmann is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Melbourne.

War, Grief and Memory

STEPHEN GARTON

Graham Seal: *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and the National Mythology* (UQP, \$32.95)

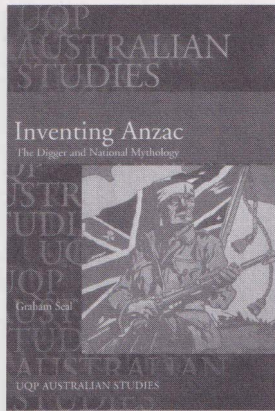
Tanja Luckins: *The Gates of Memory: Australian People's Experiences and Memories of Loss and the Great War* (Curtin University Books, \$29.95)

In 1913 one American war widow was still receiving a pension for her husband's War of Independence service. Australians have also come to recognise that wars can leave their mark long after the clash of arms has ceased. The evidence for this is everywhere.

On a recent SBS program concerning the meaning of Anzac Day the guests included veterans of the Second World War, a war widow, a Vietnam Vet and a soldier recently returned from East Timor. Noteworthy was not so much the all-too-familiar valorisation of Anzac but the dissonance between frequent stories of hardship, grief and alienation and the unshakeable faith that Anzac was the natural and unchallengeable wellspring of nationhood. Of course Anzac is a consoling tradition, one that has the capacity to transform tragedy, national and individual, into something noble, uplifting and transcendent. That is the power of a national legend.

What this faith elides, however, is that Anzac was far from natural, it was crafted and contested. It has divided as much as united, at first struggling to find a place in the national calendar and later becoming a flashpoint for generational conflict in the 1960s and gender conflict in the 1970s. What is remarkable is the resilience of Anzac Day, and all it embodies. Its current revival as a point of national cohesion is testament to its capacity to tease out the deeper emotional currents that sustain a sense of nation. Good historical scholarship, however, explains both the sustaining power of legends and the deeper cultural struggles and tensions embedded in everyday rituals. Graham Seal's study of the 'digger myth' and Tanja Luckins's exploration of war grief and memory are welcome additions to the burgeoning literature on the Anzac legend.

Seal treads familiar ground. The history of the Anzac legend is a crowded field but Seal offers something of value. *Inventing Anzac* is not the first study to draw a sharp distinction between the 'digger myth' and the 'Anzac legend'; others such as Geoff Serle were there long before. But where Serle saw a radical and working-class digger myth appropriated by a conservative, middle-class protestant elite, Seal uncovers a more complex process of interaction between a folkloric tradition of sardonic anti-authoritarianism and a formalised, patriotic and authoritarian Anzac tradition committed to national cohesion and imperial loyalty. For Seal the Anzac legend could only thrive because it incorporated elements of the older bush ethos. Seal draws on his rich understanding of the folk elements of the digger myth and a frequently



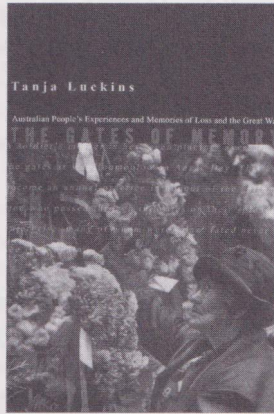
insightful analysis of obscure texts, such as the trench journals, to explore the tensions between the anti-authoritarian and the loyalist polarities in the evolving national myth.

The argument, however, peters out halfway through. Seal's exploration of the legend in its postwar context is sketchy and too focused on the public history of Anzac and its commemoration. Many soldiers returned embittered by what they saw as the neglect of politicians and the indifference of the wider public. Many were convinced that the home front had failed to support them,

and as they had shed blood for the nation, they were entitled to fruits of citizenship that should be denied to others. Calls for a Soldiers' Parliament were just the tip of an extraordinary cultural struggle over citizenship and identity in the interwar years. The history of Anzac Day needs to be situated in this broader history of return to fully grasp the political and cultural tensions in its making. Despite a growing literature on returned soldiers, Seal has generally ignored this work: indeed there are very few works cited after the early 1990s, when presumably this was submitted for a doctorate. While a valuable contribution it is somewhat set in aspic.

Luckins's study of war grief is precisely the sort of study that Seal needed to engage with. Hers is the more ambitious and difficult task. It explores the deeper currents of grief and mourning that gripped many Australians after that first landing at Anzac Cove. This is a sensitive and subtle exploration of private emotions and of how those emotions were eased and ameliorated by everyday rituals of mourning: rituals that for some continued for the rest of their lives. Luckins weaves the private and the public together in illuminating ways but she is not the first to do so. In one sense this book is a sustained dialogue with the work of Joy Damousi. Where Damousi sees grief as an issue of identity and becoming, Luckins situates it as a matter of shared relationships and family experiences. In doing so she uncovers important dimensions of postwar mourning but in the last analysis "shared relationships" is largely descriptive, and a concept that obscures as much as it reveals. Too often difficult moments in the argument are resolved by falling back to this generalisation instead of pushing forward to uncover more.

Worse, Luckins commits the cardinal sin of forcing the evidence to fit the argument. This is evident in her use of mental hospital records. *The Gates of Memory* asserts that the rising incidence of incarceration by reason of 'worry' and 'loss' is clear proof that grief and mourning had a serious impact, despite the fact that overall mental hospital admissions fell in these years. But worry and loss are not actual causes of insanity. They have no psychiatric substance. Such terms are emblematic of the desperate efforts of families and doctors to make some sense of the unfathomable. Worry, grief and mourning, like 'hit head', were the frequent resort of those at a loss to explain the onset of madness. It is only natural that in the



context of war those involved in the painful process of incarceration should fall back on such obvious rationales for decline. The facts remain; admissions declined during the War and these categories are meaningless diagnoses. At a time when the credibility of cultural history is under serious assault from its critics, efforts such as this to take cultural practices outside their rightful context, to make them explain something else, do more harm than good. This is a regrettable blemish in an otherwise important contribution to the flourishing field of war, grief and memory.

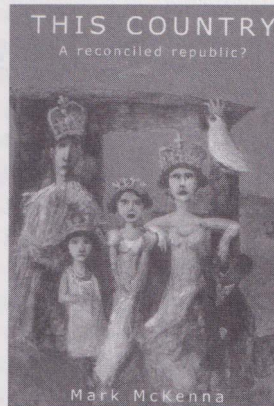
Stephen Garton is Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney.

An Activist History

DAVID WOLSTENCROFT

Mark McKenna: *This Country: A Reconciled Republic?* (UNSW Press, \$29.95)

It is amazing to think that only a few years ago reconciliation with the Indigenous population and alternative republican models were hot political topics. These days we are more worried about how many chips Mark Latham can squeeze into a sandwich and other 'non elitist' political issues. But Mark McKenna is one man who is still contemplating the issues raised by the cultural politics of the 1990s and his new book *This Country: A Reconciled Republic?* (2004) is an investigation into the complex ways that reconciliation and republicanism intertwine. McKenna is well qualified to write such a study. A prominent advocate for and historian of Australian republicanism, he is interested in both the theoretical and practical issues around constitutional change. *This Country* is an 'activist' history that makes no pretensions to objectivity. It combines highly researched historical evidence with the frustrated anecdotes of a scholar willing to engage publicly, and concludes with creative and practical suggestions for the republican future.



Perhaps McKenna's greatest beefs are with Malcolm Turnbull, former leader of the Australian Republican Movement, and former Prime Minister Paul Keating. McKenna argues that both men presented a republican model that advocated nothing more than "expensive cosmetic surgery" in the form of a new head of state. The pair, conservatives at heart, were inspired by an outmoded nationalism. To them Australian history is the story of a struggling and childlike white colony that matured in the 1990s into an independent multicultural democracy. Australia 'grew up' during Keating's reign and a symbolic change was required in order that Australia fully separate from Mother England.

McKenna demonstrates that such a historical narrative completely ignores the Indigenous population and its history both before and after colonisation. Indeed Turnbull sees Australia at a strange 'end of history' in which prosperity and civilisation have been achieved and the possibility of a first step towards justice with Indigenous people is ignored.

McKenna writes persuasively of the failings of Turnbull's and Keating's republicanism yet his suggested alternative, in which the republican and rec-

conciliation movements align, has its own difficulties. The major problem for *This Country* is one common to the Left: what is morally compelling is not often what is politically expedient. McKenna desires a genuine acknowledgement of the darker sides of Australian history in a new constitutional preamble. He argues that as most Australians supported referendum proposals to grant the Indigenous population citizenship in 1967 they will repeat this behavior and support a referendum that includes a conciliatory preamble.

However, to grant citizenship to the Indigenous population requires nothing like the re-thinking or cost of genuine reconciliation. Anxieties about the financial and legal implications of constitutional change aside, the perceived threat to our national identity and sense of moral certainty would make an inclusive republic a very hard sell. It will require, at

the minimum, a Prime Minister who is firmly committed to the concept. Unfortunately neither candidate for the top job this year has looked committed to bringing about a 'reconciled republic'.

Yet perhaps I am buying into a very modern pessimism and should take the advice that McKenna offered readers of the *Newcastle Herald* earlier this year that of seeing republicanism as "not a political liability, but a political opportunity". After all, *This Country* is more about ideas than clever marketing strategies. It exposes the poverty of our previous republican model and the assumptions buried within it. Hopefully the next major republican push will be lead by people who are excited by the possibilities outlined in this study.

David Wolstencroft is studying history and creative writing at the University of Melbourne.

new poetry | **KERRY LEVES**

A Compilation, a Vocal Dance & an Assault

Geoff Page (ed.): *The Indigo Book of Modern Australian Sonnets* (Ginninderra Press, \$20)

The sonnet comes with a formidable pedigree—Dante, Shakespeare, Rilke—and still has a lot going for it. It's short—fourteen lines—and at the eighth line it should perform a *volta*, a directional change, and the last line ought also to move and shake what's gone before, providing some kind of surprise. Shakespeare's sonnets still generate 'the anxiety of influence' (Harold Bloom's famous thesis) as they hurl themselves across time, like well-aimed stones across a lake. Will the 'sonnets' (the editor admits that some are more "fourteen line poems" than trad. sonnets) collected here keep on arriving for later times? Who knows? But some of them are pretty good. David Malouf's satire 'Health Farm' has the advantage of some tenderness towards its targets, and a walloping last line; Bronwyn Lea's '#3 from Handing Back Time' treats a moment in a difficult relationship, but is at least nuanced, charged with feeling and not without humour; Merle Glasson's 'Women waiting patiently for buses' writes something unique about women's ability to transmute the mundane—a quiet original, where the thought is inseparable from the

mimesis, yet stays in the mind. Many poems attempt something similar to Glasson's—a fresh thought arising out of a social observation. But too few of these too-many, it seems to me, rise above the level of the predictable, the neat, even the smug; their closures either tut-tutting against the banal, or portentously 'saying something' about 'the human condition'. The tight form enables poets to display their facility, and the downside—glibness, slickness—starts to pall.

The editor has arranged the sonnets thematically, which in some ways keeps the volume lively, foregrounding the stylistic range. Even so, we tend to plod a bit, through reminiscences of childhood (some of these could revise your conception of 'low-key', though Rhyll McMaster and Jamie Grant manage some tonal freshness); love (Ian McBryde's free-verse 'Arrive' ravishes the ear, stirs all the senses and feeds the mind, as does Alison Croggon's 'Aria', with its classical sinuous artifice); death (the plainer the language here, the stronger the poems, be they laconic like Philip Hodgins's, or blazingly candid like Jacob Rosenberg's, or elliptical like David Campbell's); war (David Campbell's 'Pedrina'—plain language again—is still fresh, an elegy so engaged

with who it's remembering that the end comes as a sorrow); and finally, poetry. Some few escape the categories, notably Philip Martin's lapidary 'A Sacred Way', and Geoffrey Lehmann's 'Alone in the afternoon', which uses cinematic techniques (long shots, jump cuts) cogently, for unfacile alienation and pathos. Work experience is not exactly thick on the ground, but Keith Harrison's 'Here' makes shovelling shit into something memorable. Some poems focus on the work of their own making, such as Robert Adamson's 'Sonnet to be written from prison', with its unobtrusive virtuosic rhyme-scheme, and Nigel Roberts's nifty, slangy, 'The Bottom Line'. In Martin Johnston's 'The café of situations', customers acquire names according to where they sit, which the implied poet translates into a lifestyle: "Wherever I go/ I wear the café walls around me, and the shuffling step/ of the invisible waiters brings subtly misconstrued orders/ to Broke or Loving or Drunk or wherever I happen to be."

Conversely, there are quite a few duds, tries at being poetically clever that could be read as sets of instructions on how to be stupid, poetically and otherwise. The inclusion of such things insults some of the rest. There are enough—just enough—good poems to keep the journey somewhat exciting. Writing—respectively—about a shotgun wedding; a testosterone arena; a bi-cultural split subject; and a Lacanian "man who escapes", Adam Aitken, Peter Kocan ('In the billiard room'), π.o., and Lauren Williams give the specific some felt intensity, with dramatisation and latent humour. The historical range is wide, but a reader's sense of living in a multi-culture could become muted. White Anglo-Saxon middle-class angsts and joys are mostly the go, wittily treated by Gwen Harwood, Andy Kissane and John Tranter; turbidly by many others. There's a birth-dated index of poets at the back, but the book might have benefited from datings under each poem. That way, poems redolent of an earlier time-period, like John Manifold's and Roland Robinson's, could be assessed more fairly; likewise Douglas Stewart's *kitsch*, which used to be taken seriously. Precise dating would also clarify the time-shift effected by the juxtaposition of Anthony Lawrence's 'Richard Brautigan' poem with James McAuley's 'Winter Drive'. Both are mood-pieces. McAuley's is a rhythmic study in melancholy, where the visual images are integrated into a simple single picture, and the sound-modulations command the poem. Lawrence's

images collage several lines of reference into his poem, strong sound is saved for line-endings, fragmented kinesic is the style, yet the total effect is pictorial; all of which distances McAuley and Lawrence culturally as well as temporally.

| jeltje: *Poetry Live in the House* (collective effort press, \$27.50)

This is an 'oral poetry' project (c.f. π.o., Hazel Smith, et al.). The printed text replicates and revises itself by vocals and music, on the accompanying CD. The poems, the visuals (photos, reworked photos, drawings, montages), and sounds make multiple layers of meaning and reach out, performatively, through the bars of Frederic Jameson's notorious "prison house of language" into public and more intimate spaces. But how might we occupy those spaces? How might space occupy us? In the present-time of the book, domestic spaces are for poetry—the dance of the body, the dance of the voice—and also for sociable ritual: "the kettle is on/ & life is organised again/ we have a span/ of a few minutes/ to do nothing at all". Yet the poetic voice dances itself back in time, to the "Dutch East Indies"—colonial Indonesia, 1920s–1950s. Photos and poems suggest not post-colonial "crisis", but the traces of a mode of life. The father in 'the *djongos* at sea' (*djongos* = major domo in Indonesian) arranges the space of his home as if it were a ship at sea. Mother is (kitchen) "staff", daughters are "visiting captains". The mother fights back by banning flowers, and the *djongos*, from "her" kitchen. Again, the poem doesn't seek to enmesh a reader in "human drama" but rather invites readers to consider space. Spatial arrangements are ways for the *djongos* to know who's inside, who's coming or going, and what persons both inside and outside the home/ ship are up to. The poem 'Home is where the heart is' extends the spatial theme, chanting its inquiry of fences, homilies and the unstable locus of deity (in "here"? out "there"?) warmly, lightly, implacably.

Photographs can capture some knowledge of ourselves and others in time and space. In another poem from the 'Dutch East Indies' sequence, 'baby Hansje' is continually transformed, by a camera, into a specular image. A grandfather's loving inscriptions, on the backs of these photos, are prodded for what they leave out—the names of the Indonesian servants in the photos, who surround 'baby Hansje' with smiles and care. In these poems the traditions by

whichs things and people are known are nimbly evoked. The sense of “self” as equally questioning, enabling and dismantling tradition emerges also via the use of Dutch (two translations) and by other means. In the ‘natural’ space of a park, sensations are not aestheticised in a post-romantic manner (c.f. Judith Wright, Mark O’Connor, et al.), but voice is deployed for naive, non-mimetic speakings, and a northern folkloric dark is shaded-in, as ‘selves’ split off from social credibility. All this is done with the utmost buoyancy, as are two ‘great-grandmother’ poems. These evoke the protagonist’s rather superb eccentricities. A self-fashioned social resister (“Don’t bother taking off your coats!/ I don’t wish to see you today!”) and ostentatious vagrant, this woman put on “her *oldest* rags” to beg alms outside her husband’s office building. The text understates the feminist politics (these poems are very funny) and concerns itself instead with Edvard Munch, the nineteenth-century Norwegian painter, who used “the flat emphatic shapes of Art Nouveau . . . to express an intensely personal yet universal vision” (*Heinemann Dictionary of Visual Art*). Perhaps inadvertently, Jeltje’s poem replies to that *Dictionary*’s mix of aesthetic information and here-we-go-again humanism, thus: “Munch depicts his family moping/ around the house.” Reductive, certainly, but kinda nice. Many readers/ listeners ought to like *Poetry live in the house*: for its political acuity and poetic/ musical savvy; for the breezy, biting *a capella* of *unanimus quorum* on ‘Cheer squad News’; and for its jazz, including Robert Calvert’s fiery sax.

Phillip Hammial: *In the Year of our Lord Slaughter’s Children* (Island Press, \$17.95)

Phil Hammial’s sixteenth book suggests that this and every subsequent year may be “the year of our Lord slaughter’s children”. It’s the “age of agent orange” and the “age of the first wet dream”, presided over, perhaps even narrated by “Marlene” (Dietrich?) in the role of a Scheherazade as ersatz, as anxious-making, as paranoiacally apt as the robot Maria of Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent movie, *Metropolis*. The book’s title poem is characteristically violent, less in what it depicts than its assault on discourse. Hammial’s poetry gets inside discourse categories (e.g. economics, film, life writing, novels, poetry, politics, travel) and wreaks havoc. Yet the implied poet also vocalises as Scheherazade. His poems open syntactic labyrinths, festooned with words that allure with the

promise of a new story. Would it be impossible to forge a narrative connection between, for example, the idiom “memory lane”; the vintage rock’n’roll song ‘Good golly Miss Molly’; Jesus; and “rehab. slander rubber stamped”? ‘Road Kill’ is the poem in which these signifiers float without entirely ditching their signifieds. What’s whirling around in the cultural imaginary next? What shibboleth needs some fast and fluent deconstruction? Join poet and reader at “the Café Nord,/ a shimmering mirage, its decor a cross/ between a manger and a brothel . . .” These lines (from ‘Crowd Control’) also suggest the poetry’s ancestry, from surrealism via *art brut*. And they help give it a sense of direction: onward to paroxysm, cataclysm, convulsion (“Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be”—Andre Breton). Judged by Breton’s exacting standard, these poems achieve beauty, sometimes at the expense of other poems, considered classics. In ‘Seraglio’, Yeats’s mystical question, “How shall we know the dancer from the dance?” is rephrased as a menacing imperative: “Dance or be danced.” Wallace Stevens and Robert Bly get sliced, spliced, made to move to the back of the line: “Send the ones with washing agendas/ to the end of the queue with the cabaret vocalists . . .” The echoes are tonal as well as semantic, rolling the sound of Stevens’s “Call the roller of big cigars” (from ‘The Emperor of Ice Cream’) around the semiosis of Bly’s “washing, continual washing” (from ‘Awakening’). Appropriation from a vast cultural imaginary is a notable, continual manoeuvre. Readers may encounter Sartre, de Beauvoir, Françoise Sagan, beggars, janissaries, cobras, James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Genghis Khan, Proust’s *madeleine*, Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ and a certain “vulture trainer” whose name is ‘Discipline’ (see the eponymous poem). Yet the game isn’t ‘parody’ or ‘pastiche’, as a postmodern taxonomist might suggest: it’s more a ferocious shake of (loaded) dice. Hammial’s poems assert their right to exist as processes rather than closed aesthetic objects. What they ask is that the reader participate; get involved in their clashing vocabularies, abrupt pitch-changes, circus signage—rather than sit back and contemplate until the words become ‘transparent’. They won’t. In Hammial’s hands, they’re a systematic derangement of the semiosis.

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet.

MARSHALLING HISTORY

The rum corps tradition



HIS HEAD NODDED for emphasis. The camera captured every expression as the film crew recorded the guardian of our cultural heritage fulfilling his duty as Director of the Australian War Memorial (AWM).¹ Steve Gower AO, a retired General, spoke reverently about the impressive dioramas, the collection of military records and souvenirs and the seemingly endless lists of names raised in bronze on the Wall of Remembrance. He emphasised how the Memorial was the most visited tourist attraction in the country and explained how the AWM charter existed not only to protect our heritage but to educate future generations about the truth and justice of the country's war efforts. From the Somme to Somalia, he rattled off each conflict Australians have been involved in (though forgetting Australia's longest involvement, the Malayan campaign, in which over fifty servicemen lost their lives).² Here it seemed was a man we could trust, whose knowledge and patriotic appreciation of all things military were beyond question.

Only a few months before, the same man appeared in the pages of the *Canberra Times*³ persecuting a group of ex-servicemen⁴ who had the audacity to criticise parts of the AWM's official history of Australia in the Vietnam War.⁵ The ex-servicemen argued that the historians Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins had used court-martial material⁶ made irrelevant by a later legal ruling.⁷

Michael Williams, who earned a Military Medal during the 1968 Tet Offensive, felt Gower was misconstruing the complaint and said so to the *Canberra Times*.⁸ In a move which the paper apparently thought put the issue to rest, one of the historians was allowed to publish the offending extract in the paper's Forum pages. The headline: 'The Life and Trials of the 106th Battery', was even more offensive, implying that the entire Unit had been on trial.⁹ As a member of this Unit, I was appalled at the

editorial staff's seeming surrender to the AWM, and decided to have my threepence worth.¹⁰

In a letter I offered the view that the historians' work was an insult to the C.E.W. Bean tradition, going on to say that the real culprit was Gower, the AWM Director. His complete rejection of the initial complaints led me to conclude that he did not understand the cultural responsibilities of his position. I suggested he should be replaced by someone who did.

Gower quickly put pen to paper and, after sourcing my private address, whipped off a note to me. Using the AWM letterhead, he reasserted command:

In terms of overall discipline in the battery, the evidence of one Gunner Neville William Tickner and others at the court martial is also revealing. In the context of that particular period, the defence counsel's "slack" description is difficult to challenge. It does not seem to have been at the court martial and your letter contains nothing to change the view.¹¹

He then delivered his coup de grâce:

Your attack and bluster about C.E.W. Bean and "cultural denigration" are only drawing attention to this incident, which I would have thought is best soberly and quietly accepted.¹²

Not wanting the General to think I was intimidated by the thought of his retribution, I responded with another letter to the *Canberra Times*, this one briefly suggesting the Director's letter only confirmed my earlier statements.¹³ I was rewarded with several congratulatory phone calls the day it went to press and a few days later even received a congratulatory letter. It also came from Canberra, and after apologising for its anonymity, the sender, who seemed to know Gower fairly well, wrote of the good General's workplace reputation, while still a serving member of the Australian Defence Force a few years earlier:

“Gower is a well known army thug down here . . .” It ended with an apology for the anonymity, saying because he lived in Canberra, he had to “watch his back”.¹⁴

With this background, it was little wonder I found Gower’s television performance so unconvincing. I felt disappointed for the viewers. In the end though, I decided the simple explanation was that while you can take the General out of the job, it is almost impossible to take the job out of the General.

Just the same, I felt some blame must fall on those who chose the man for the job. My anonymous informer had the view that: “He should never have been given the position at the War Memorial, but was probably sponsored by . . .” If this is true and the ‘Rum Corps’ tradition of ‘jobs for the boys’ did take precedence over the requirement to understand the nuances of cultural responsibility, something is seriously wrong.

The whole issue raises the question of just how senior military service really fits into public life. The bureaucrats, whom I assume write the selection criteria for senior public service jobs, should be held more accountable. The appointment of retired senior military personnel to positions of public office, simply because of rank, rather than recognition of prior learning, is colonial in the extreme. After all, a lifetime of the silver spoon is not a guarantee of intellect or cultural understanding.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) has long upheld the Rum Corps tradition, using retired military officers as expert witnesses in their battle against unsuspecting applicants for veterans’ pensions. Just a few years ago, a retired Colonel in his late 70s delivered a report totally discrediting a veteran’s pension claim, saying the man’s statements “could not be substantiated” or were “falsehoods”. He denied that the veteran would have done village ‘search and cordon’ operations while under his command, because: “This type of activity was a combined infantry/armour/engineering task and did not involve artillery units”.¹⁵ The veteran’s official record was tarnished. Fortunately, photographic evidence was produced to substantiate the applicant’s statements, though not before a great deal of time and money were used up bringing the case to appeal.

But perhaps the clearest example of the continuing existence of a Rum Corp tradition is the way in which select people from this same group, over the decades, have been continually used by government

and media alike as authorities on everything related to Australia’s war involvement, from the building of monuments, to the function of ceremony, to the interpretation of cultural significance. Their most recent foray was the exclusion of women protesters from the 2003 Melbourne Remembrance Day ceremony.

The freedom on which we base our democratic spirit is guarded by the sacrifice of more than one hundred thousand Australian war dead, and although some people forget, it is the legitimate right of citizens to make ceremonial interpretations of their own. The truth is that what the Rum Corps elite happen to think is only one of the opinions that should be considered.

I decided to write this article on behalf of the thousands of young Australians who died as a result of poor command decisions, such as Lt Robert Graham Birse. And I write it also for the people who have long wanted to expose bullies for what they really are, but decided to wait for someone else to do it. To quote the good General Gower: “There is sometimes a seamier side to war, and this must be acknowledged”.¹⁶

1. *Anzac Legacy*, Austar, Sky News 25 January 2004.
2. <www.awm.gov.au/atwar/emergency.htm>.
3. Steve Gower AO, Director of Australian War Memorial: ‘Vietnam war history fair and balanced’, Letters to the Editor, *Canberra Times*, 4 September 2003.
4. Noel McLaughlin, ‘Terrible disservice done to Vietnam Gunners’; Bob Johns, ‘Let’s now put the record straight’, Letters to the Editor, *Canberra Times*, 2 September 2003.
5. Ian McNeill & Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive: the Australian Army in Vietnam 1967–68*, Allen & Unwin, in Association with the AWM, Crows Nest, 2003.
6. <defenceappeals.fedcourt.gov.au/decisions/newman27091968.html>.
7. Forum, *Canberra Times*, 30 August 2003.
8. Michael Williams MM, ‘Seeking balance in Vietnam History’, Letters to the Editor, *Canberra Times*, 6 September 2003.
9. ‘The Life and Trials of the 106th Battery’, Forum, *Canberra Times*, 13 September 2003.
10. Nev Tickner, Letters to the Editor, *Canberra Times*, 16 September 2003.
11. Steve Gower AO, Director AWM, private letter dated 30 September 2003.
12. Gower, private letter.
13. Nev Tickner, Letters to the Editor, *Canberra Times*, 11 October 2003.
14. Unsigned private letter dated 11 October 2003.
15. ‘Write Way Research Services Report’ to Deputy Commissioner DVA, 22 July 1998, containing statement made by the retired CO of 4th Field Regiment RRAA.
16. ‘Vietnam gunners furious with official history’, Forum, *Canberra Times*, 30 August 2003.1

Nev Tickner is a Queensland writer who served in Vietnam as a gunner for the full 106 Bty tour, 1967–68.

MEDIA

Peter Craven's false critical coin has driven real criticism out of circulation, his only achievement as a critic having been to take up space that others might have filled productively. There must be someone, even in Melbourne, who really does know something about Proust or Homer and can write an engaging feature article about it.

Peter Hayes

LITERATURE

The sense of demoralisation many writers experience suggests the degree to which the marketplace has displaced other forms of critical evaluation and become, to a large extent, internalised as the measure of a writer's self-worth.

Andrew McCann

A foundation of honest emotion enables the expression of more profound truths than politicians, hiding behind the mask of objectivity, can offer. If the frequency with which Gig Ryan's 'If I Had a Gun' and Judith Wright's 'Australia 1970' are quoted and anthologised is anything to go by, overtly angry poetry not only demands attention, but commands respect.

Georgie Arnott

Perhaps the cultural and political climate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—even in the medium of *alternative* cinema—makes *class*, rather than sexuality, a new sin 'that dares not speak its name'.

Ivan Canadas

MEMOIR

Looking back, the ambition of these policy proposals was breathtaking. We were envisaging how the career paths of new and emerging writers could be assisted. The system eroded, in some programs quicker than others. The major fellowships were almost instantly frozen. What began as equivalent to a federal parliamentary backbencher's salary has ended up as being much less than that same backbencher's tax-free allowances.

Thomas Shapcott

HISTORY

Though there are probably more war memorials in Australia than wombats, how many commemorative plaques to moments of domestic radical or racial conflict exist? So, as social historians, we are left to do this unwelcome sculpting of lost places and forgotten causes. For it is an empowering thing to learn the intricacies of one's past in this emphatically forgetful society.

Raymond Evans

POLITICS

Tony Kevin interrogates the role of this people-smuggling taskforce, asking what they knew about the *SIEV X*, and when. Their claims to have been unaware of the boat's existence are challenged by minutes which, referring to *SIEV X* as *SIEV 8*, report "22 October: Not spotted yet, missing, grossly overloaded, no jetsam spotted, no reports from relatives".

Jess Whyte

"The most exciting in its field"

| Ross Fitzgerald, *The Australian*

"Uncomfortable food for thought"

| Debra Adelaide,
Sydney Morning Herald

"A blunt challenge to the Australian media"

| Fiona Capp, *The Age*

"A journal of variety, ideas, opinion and heart"

| Christopher Bantick,
Canberra Times

temper democratic,
bias Australian

cover photograph: Judith Wright by Mike Bowers
courtesy of the Age

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