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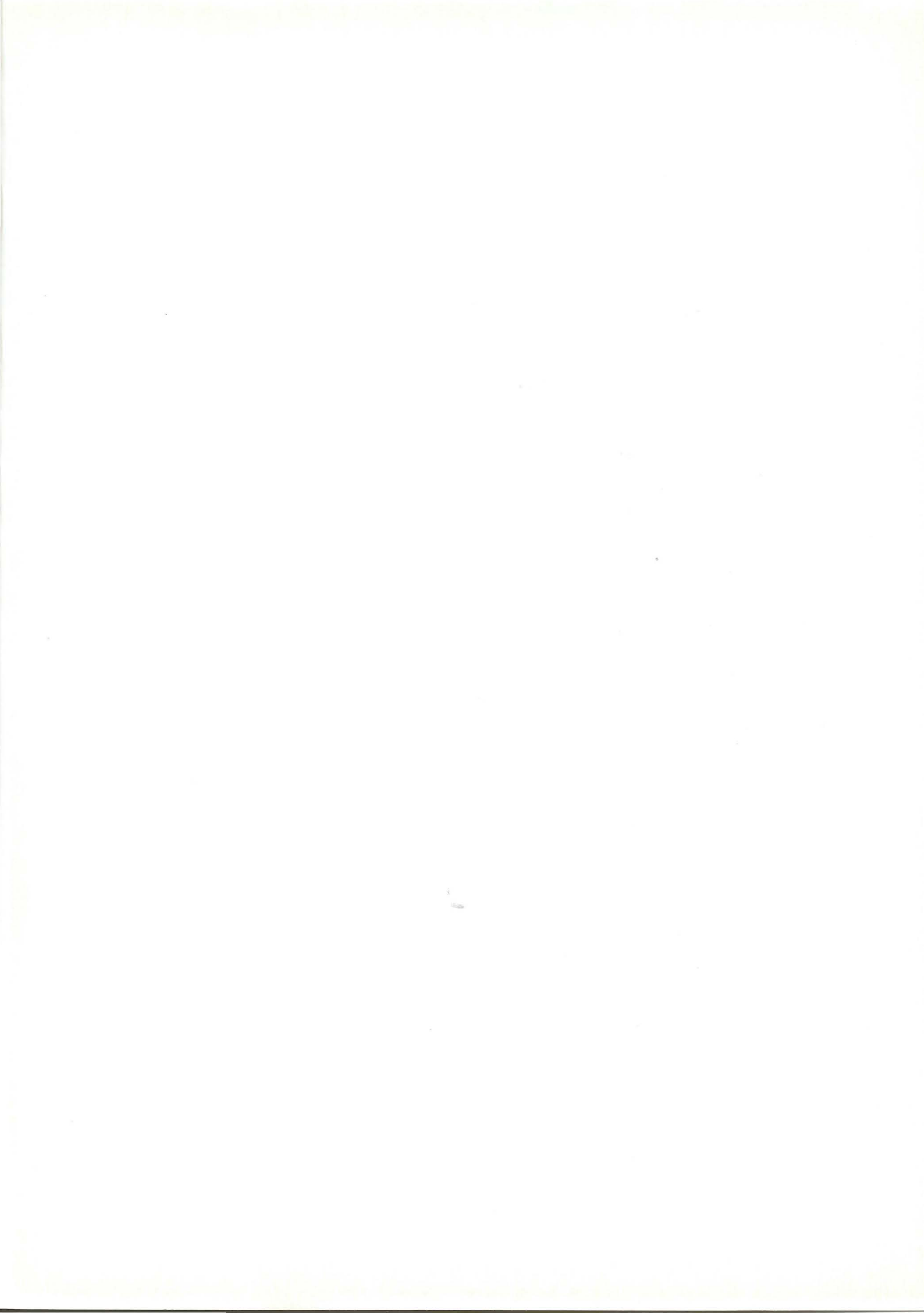

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Overland

Temper democratic, bias Australian

Spring 1973

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Overland is a quarterly literary magazine which tries to appear every three months. The subscription rate is four dollars a year (four issues); for students, Nuiginians, pensioners the subscription is two dollars. Manuscripts are welcomed but s.a.e. required.

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FRANK MOORHOUSE

Concerning a Reunion with an Ex-wife in Portugal

A. When I received your letter after seven years of silence I found myself 'quaking'—an embarrassingly standard reaction from one who has always wanted to have special and atypical reactions. Why should you, the ex-wife, cause me more inner-commotion than someone more alive and more recently relevant (and in one case, more gruellingly relevant)? I realised that I had very much wanted to hear from you again. That was what I realised.
B. Love making on a flat rock in hot river bushland, shrilling like a whistle. On those summer days there was as much noise in the underbrush and trees as in a city. Did it hurt her backside? Were we doing it because of the *idea* of it? Observations not made at the time. Questions not asked at the time. I did (and do) things partly, or maybe fully, I realise now, because of the *idea* of it, to experience something postulated or described by other human beings, say in anthropology, a ritual, or in literature, a celebrated experience.

Do I do it as a way of knowing others by doing what others have done? Is it an attempt to identify with 'humanity' to gain some 'humanity'. She always said I was cold. Everything we did together was for *the first time* and could not avoid being motivated by experiment. Seventeen. We pretended that we weren't experimenting, and in fact, pretended, by bravado, that nothing was being done for the first time. As if the unwillingness to admit to innocence is evidence of some pre-existence. If only, if only, if only we hadn't had to pretend. I mean not only about sex but about the whole mechanics of courtship. If we could have only admitted we didn't know and have relaxed in each other's ignorance. Why do the innocent detest innocence?

All alone on a flat rock up the river under a sky, a five minutes of intercourse neither of us aroused fully, the oppressive summer sun trying to get through at us through the leaves. Maybe there was some trembling passion. But more than passion was that we were necessary for each other. To have made love in open bushland was necessary for a seventeen year old intellectual so that he had 'had' the experience.
C. So, a man's ex-wife, well, legally still "wife", writes to him after seven years of silence and offers to do a favor for him at the University of Lisbon, Portugal, the country in which she now lives. I naturally look for concealed motives. No such thing as the free lunch from an ex-wife. One immediately asks how it is with Paul and the children.
D. Oh to be on your breast again, to have passed back to the infantile sexual semi-consciousness. Your night-dress between us saying "This is a female body". Saying "Maybe it will be offered for you". The night-dress both presenting the body and withholding it. Tantalising modesty, a nylon night-dress saying maybe this motherly female body will be offered to you for fondling and then for you to enter. Maybe I'll pull up this night-dress and offer my body for you but now only the one breast held free of the night-dress for my mouth, the body obvious but covered by nylon, warm against me, covered and withheld. Then at last the pulled up night-dress, the exposure of the body, for pleasuring, the sexual offering.
E. Lunch with Wesley.

A. Now, I thought, this isn't just a little old letter from an ex-Eden High School girl now living in Portugal offering to help out an ex-Eden High School boy still living in the State of New South Wales, even though some distance from Eden, all sorts of distance—both Edens. What-

ever, it was great to hear from you. God knows where you are at now—intellectually, ideologically. Paine's *The Rights of Man* and Bertrand Russell . . . what now? As you know (although you may not) I gave up pharmacy and went back and did sociology. I have a study retreat at Backhouse Mountain. I am given enough money, currently, by the foundations to carry on my perverse little researches. I am not dismissed totally by Society but am considered, well, perverse. Or more bluntly my work does not reveal or concentrate on the more positive and savory aspects of the human condition and the Left feel I should be more socially relevant in my work. I've been called a "sociological misanthropist". Imagine, a boy from Eden High School becoming a sociological misanthropist. Imagine.

B. A Sunday school picnic. Black-haired, volatile, frenetic girl. I am burningly aware of her but it is not affection in any civilised sense—more elemental awareness. Those breathless pre-pubescent chasing games, only just contained within some frame of sensible and ordered rules but really sexually propelled. We always caught each other roughly, struggling, and then the clinch was broken after exhausting all the permissible—but insufficient—touchings of bodies, hands, all a subterfuge, the concealed meanings of the game below our knowledge. Retreating then, to our own sex group, jeering and bantering, very hot, flustered, panting.

C. Of course my first thought, damn it, is, can in all honesty we be contemplating reunion? It cannot be expressed, there are all those verbal preliminaries, cautionary manoeuvring, beware the illusions of memory, the illusion of passing time, the promotion of romantic mystery, the magic of reunion. For christake how can I delude myself. It's not likely, it's not on, the letters anyhow do not hint at it. Her letters let's face it are relatively banal, almost dull, "I hope this finds you as it leaves me". Yet she was always conventional, verbally conventional, that is. Maybe it is her "artless charm" or her "common humanity" which people were always trying to convince me that she had. All right, maybe my love for sociological jargon is too readily deflated by her "earthy vernacular" (an expression used once by Wesley, although one was never sure that Wesley did not mean it acidly). But I mean it is also her inability to delve, to turn on herself critically, to turn on to anything critically, which in part drove our marriage to the wall. The language one uses is, after all, a revelation of the calibre of the intellectual artillery, the social circumference being drawn, the user's atmospheric visibility range, the mental throw. Her words show her in a tight (warm maybe) but tight little fog.

D. I can remember your adolescent lips, the moisture of their young purity, the saliva and the warm air of your lungs, on my face from a warm sweet mouth, the juices of your virgin body, the activity of your lips, their relaxation, their membrane smoothness, their muscularity, the lips of a fifteen year old girl who grew up on dairy products and the white meat of fish.

E. I sort old files. I discard now incomprehensible notes. I classify adolescent love letters but find them tiresome and turgid with now unfelt passion, and poor vocabulary. Unerotic. I look at photographs of Robyn, giggling cheeks, and her, jesus, so supple body.

A. Your last letter, of course, was the key one. So you and Paul have broken up. Well, well. I feel for you. You always invest so totally in a relationship. I know that. Two relationships in your life, both broken. But I guess that a fashionable liberated view would be that marriage is well, transitory, rather than permanent. That to talk of 'failure', meaning the failure of a relationship to be long lasting, overlooks the quality of what was achieved and what did exist, and in some cases, what remains after the relationship finishes in that *form*. Me? I've travelled too far from 'pattern' to return to anything resembling it. Uncommitted.

Thank you for arranging that other business. Much appreciated. But so, the letter was not just an 'old times' note but really something of a cry from the heart. At least you are economically without stress—and at least he's not tearing you apart with dispute about the child. Well, I have to ask it—how is my child? Two men in your life leave you with two children. That's about the first time I can remember that I've allowed myself to think "my child", to admit to having fathered a child even—though I'm aware that I have contributed nothing to it than a spurt of sperm. I know that if I allowed myself to think of it as "my child" I would have had this fruitless obsession. I knew it for those two early years. As you know I told you, and I respect you for having done it, that I wanted to know nothing about the child. Even now I am uneasy about admitting its existence to my conscious mind. I have a child, I fathered a child, her name is Chris.

B. Asleep in each other's arms in a steam train

rocking through the dark lucerne fields and the sleeping cows. Without tickets. Jumping from the train before it reached the station. Did we do that? Wow. Everything about her was perfectly acceptable. Any proposal was just right. She grazed her elbow. I licked it. I have swallowed her blood, her saliva, her tears. Surely there is some sort of essential subfusion from that. We used to say and think that the sperm was absorbed into your body and we became unified that way.

C. "But I'm against hard drugs". Is that really worth saying. Jesus, I mean, she'd be hard pushed (unintended pun) to define "hard". If she'd taken the sort of issue on, but no, regardless, of the complexities (which is about the only interesting thing about drugs left to discuss) she states this ordinary proposition as if I might be damn well interested. The extent of her position is so mundane as to be unworthy of a note—even in a 'chatty' letter. We are all against debilitating addiction. But the ulcerated businessman with psychological family problems is maybe leading an equally debilitated life. What about occasional use of a drug like cocaine for instance? Oh, but it all comes back to me. I'd be muscling someone in discussion, trapping some verbal dodge, unravelling someone's assumptions, stopping a meaning drift, or maybe on a sprint of analysis, when she'd say, "But doesn't everyone know that", or "You intellectuals just want to make difficulties for yourselves". Really, she had a disdain for inquiry. She had a bunch of simple minded—if progressive—propositions about society and a disdain for inquiry. To these psychological railings she would cling. A disdain, in reduction, for my values.

D. I could tongue you for hours. I could delight in your flavors. I was the first to touch you there.

E. Spicy fruit rolls, coffee without milk, no sugar, Costarican blend, a garden of ankle-length grass, a Venezuelan hammock, days of rich note-taking, slow reading, at Backhouse Mountain.

A. I'd guess I'd call it a kind of personal anarchism—Sydney anarchism if you like—or better still, Backhouse Mountain anarchism. Amoral, interest-conflict interpretation of life rather than moral interpretations. But taking into consideration that 'morality' is a reality and operates as an influence in the lives of some people. The anti-authoritarian life style and a political preference for government actions which maximise freedom of choice. (You remember Jimmy and the way he talked—when we were living together and first met him we were socialists and couldn't buy it then. He died last year of lung cancer. As you might have expected.)

I guess this is partly why I've stayed my distance from the academy. I didn't want to become involved in making rules and enforcing rules. Look at Milton. *Look at Milton*. He sits on committees daily and hasn't published a paper for twelve years. All right, administration is part of the working of freedom but the real work for a scholar is inquiry. It has occurred to me as I write to you that this application of the mind to day-to-day workings of a system could be seen as critical inquiry. As long as there is some adherence to scholastic values. Maybe. We have the Grecian uneasiness about the application of the intellect to the day-to-day affairs. But what good has it done Milton? He has a range of nervous stress symptoms, Hestia is hysterical, relations between him and students is fragile and mistrustful. He sought the prize. The ladder, the race the prize. What a prize. (His relationship by the way to Wesley's brother is weird. Very very weird.)

B. Her first orgasm—was not with me. She didn't really have orgasm until she went off for a lost weekend with that bore. How can that be? That remains a human relations puzzle. The greatest bore in the staff club turns her on and becomes for a weekend the world's greatest lover. I suppose we are all a bore to someone. Then we talked for the first time about sex. We achieved some sort of sexual rapport, of a mechanical kind. It hurt her sitting atop leaning back. But I would've taken almost anything to regain my sexual pride, to equalise with that bore.

C. What the hell does she mean she "knows better than to become involved with married men". A trite moralistic thing to say. What a crude, false sort of ordering of her human relations. A statement so representative of her damn thinking.

D. She saying "Yes come"—the commander, opening herself physically, verbally commanding me. I wanted to be commanded by you. Why is it that you had so much emotional command over me while I considered you an intellectual inferior?

E. Monday: arrange for D's photograph for article.
Tuesday: invite Sunday guests—Milton?
Wednesday: inquiry consul re visa?
Thursday: discussion with Wendy re magazine.
Friday: Jack Kerouac Wake? Wesley?

A. Yes, I enjoy the dinner party and the luncheon now more than I do the party. That's a very over-

thirtyish thing to say. I like wine, not a buff, but well, I have explored a few vineyards. I like a heavy cabernet. Still a palate which enjoys the vividly definite. Probably not a well-tutored palate. Do you get Australian wine in Portugal? Your "dropping" now to Majorca for the weekend, so casual, seemed to me, here at Backhouse Mountain, as unreal as if you had said you were lunching with King Arthur. How parochial my life must sound. My letters say Backhouse Mountain, Southern Highlands, New South Wales. Yours say London, Majorca, Lisbon, Madrid. You talk of Sillitoe, Richard Burton, Crossman, and others you've met. I talk of Milton, stress-ridden associate professor, Michael Thornhill, film-maker undistributed, Robert Adamson, poet uncelebrated. You've come a long way from Eden, Robyn. Backhouse Mountain, as you well know, is scarcely a hundred miles from Eden.

B. That party at the end of high school. The beer we took to it. The girls said no alcohol. Robyn excepted, already seeing herself as the hard-bitten, hard-living, journalist. The girls were high school age but even then adopted the role of Guardians of the Morality. Guardians of the Home. The young warriors wanted to be starting on their time of moral disorder before 'settling'. The girls forced us to recognise that they were the 'good girls'. They were the girls one settled with, not the 'bad girls' who one caroused with. For our end-of-high-school party we should have had 'bad girls'. If we'd known any. That sad miserable dichotomy between wives and sensuality. Robyn and I have drunk together many times since. She, I think, hankered after some anarchy. How is it that through my life I have never really experienced 'carousing' or 'whoring' or ever felt 'debauched'.

C. Nothing.

D. There in the country perhaps. New England at the university, a small farm, another child. To gently love your pregnant body, your swelling stomach, to fill you with sperm, to impregnate you, to gently love your pregnant body.

E. I am writing to confirm arrangements which have been made with your Institute for a grant of six thousand dollars to complete the project "Communications in a Country Town—Gossip and Rumor". I may be out of the country during May and June and would want the payments to be made directly to this account number . . .

A. You are imprinted on me because we went through everything together the first time. We *entered* as it were together, turned to each other for comfort and aid during those prickly uncomfortable low-ego days of youth. Rites de Passage. Your letters cause an emotional disturbance in a pleasant way, but the key thing is that you still affect me. Which is saying no more than you are emotionally alive for me, which is surprising, to me. I am deeply relieved that you also hold no ill will. It is surely an indictment of our conditioning that we should be feeling needless guilt, both of us, after these years, simply because of the breakdown in our marriage—guilt that we should have failed the institution—for godsake.

I sometimes shudder at my sexual pig ignorance during those years. But why should I? Why should I have felt some special responsibility to be sexually sophisticated, sexually informed even. We were of the same age, same background, same education. Must have to do with expectations of the male role. The male should know. Yet we could not talk. And I could not *look*. I really think that I could not physically look at you naked—I mean I could not bring myself to look at your breasts *qua* breasts.

Yes, please let's keep writing, I find this renewed contact with you fascinating and warming.

B. Schwarz and Walker. Damn their souls.

We read their books together, those Penguins on sex, so foggily inexplicit, so prescriptive, so anti-sensual. The books stank of fear of sex. Depending on those swine for help in our dumb, bewildering sexual darkness. The sweaty, guilt-twisted, clumsiness, trying to break from our timidity but failing and then resorting to lies, sexual noises that lied, the lying grunts and sighs, hiding our miserable uncertainties, or eagerness to please, to be pleased, wanting to be overwhelmed with a sensuality which we never seemed to find.

Schwarz and Walker, those bastards.

C. I find her sexually evasive in her letters. She won't *meet* my statements. But also on other subjects. She talked only once of sex and then used the expression "her sexual chemistry". For godsake. Am I creating my own private illusion about her—attributing 'cosmopolitan' sophistication to her, trying to tell myself she isn't the same irritating girl from Eden High but now in fact a world-experienced woman living a cosmopolitan life in Lisbon? Does she for instance now have taste? I think she wasn't distasteful but she certainly didn't have taste when I knew her. Yes I am creating my own private illusions about her. Yes.

D. Put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone. Suspended silence of a breathing presence. Physically out of reach. Removing that adolescent trepidation of intimate closeness, dread of the physically unknown. Yet on the telephone, the reaction in a fly excitingly confined, safe from challenge, threatless excitation.
E. The telephone account at Backhouse 94 is now overdue.

A. To be frank, I consider your going to a fortune-teller to be a form of hysteria. It certainly conveys to me that you are not as self-contained, as in control, as you present yourself. It is a resort to the non-rational. It is the first break I've seen in your coping image. I have a double reaction to it. I see it as hysterical and it worries me for what it says about you. But at another perspective I am prepared in all scientific humility to grant that there are, so far, unexplained aspects to ESP and that para-psychology may have something to offer. More, that some people have highly developed antennae and hypersensitive insight. But as a way of either looking to the future or as a way of ordering one's life, or producing solutions to crises — bunk. Maybe a good fortune-teller would be descriptively acute enough to permit 'projections' on the sort of data which the acuteness would provide about the subject's personality. Let's face it, girls in times of emotional stress, and I'm not being unliberated here, simply descriptive, tend to superstition. To seek irrational solution. I have had my Tarot cards read and have talked with the guy who did the reading. It seems, firstly, that to be a good Tarot card reader, or fortune-teller, you need out-of-the-ordinary perception, a sensitivity to personality clues and signals, and to be able also to collect and process these minute reactions to key words like 'death' and so on. Secondly there is a proneness of a person having a fortune told to be in a high state of preparedness to believe (especially if he has sought fortune-telling as a way out of a personally painful situation). This causes the subject to screen out the wrong guess, and the misperceptions, and to seize and elaborate the near-guesses and vaguely accurate perceptions. There is, I am sure, a secondary elaboration, a filling out of the generalised statements of the fortune-teller, an investing of these with personal significance. There is a need also for the person who has sought this intellectually unrespectable experience to justify it by making exaggerated claims for the experience. I don't think this is conscious lying— it is more an unconscious cover-up. I suppose it could be of value in that it is usually only one small part of an overall attempt, at a time of crisis, to find data about ourselves and to gain resolution of the crisis. I suspect it is dramatisation of the decisions and the self-insights already gained. A supernatural confirmation of something the unconscious has already formulated. It is also perhaps a relief from the hopeless inadequacy of 'rationality' in times of personal crisis.

I don't mean to be hard on you but my reaction comes from pained disappointment at the crack which has appeared in your 'level-headed' control of your life.
B. We had bought a new car, in the first week she ran into another car. She cried bitterly with self-failure and with distress at having damaged our bright new possession, so important in our minds and lives at the time. I'd been in a rage and refused to comfort her. I have since experienced myself that peculiar high anxiety which comes from a car accident, especially a minor accident when there is no numbing from physical pain or shock. It involves some sense of psychic hurt, the car as extension of self. I suffer retrospective guilt for having not comforted her. For having withheld love, using the situation to punish her. I want to say this to her in intimacy and to absolve all the rancid guilt, burnt like black grease into the rim of my soul.
C. Really, what about this incredible fortune-telling nonsense. How can I buy that? She is a nut. How did a girl from Eden High, a teenage atheist, a rebel, end up at a fortune-teller? Her only mysticism has been a smattering of Church of England Sunday school. How could such a commonsense girl end up in a darkened room of a Portuguese gypsy seeking supernatural insight into the future? What atavism is this?

How could I ever mystify myself, blind spot my brain, enough to enter back into a confident, laughing intimacy with this woman? It is inconceivable.
D. Nothing.
E. For Sunday ten steaks, ten dozen oysters, Porter said he'd do the salads.

What about this damn Kerouac Wake and the aftermath? See Wesley's brother.

A. Well, looking back over the thousands of words we've written to each other in recent months, we certainly have over the years created all sorts of distance between us. Since we first made love together in our school uniforms at Eden High,

in room 17. This distance is inevitable but it is also true, that we can communicate and in some sort of sense, like touching, but more importantly, that we *want* to communicate. That is strange. Perhaps the disparity between us, our lives in the last ten years, the levels of thinking (not meant offensively) simply means that we are distinct people and that this is a generator of fascination. It occurs to me though that we might not bother with each other if we met as strangers. Say we met at a party now, would you think me an intellectual snob—would I think you anti-intellectual? Would we want to get off together? I guess we have a special experience which bonds us above and beyond those sorts of reaction. Our shared childhood and adolescence puts our relationship outside those sorting tests which people use to select friends, acquaintances, lovers . . . We are imprinted on each other.

B. We had lived for the first year in a house, too large and in the grip of an overrun garden, the former home of a circus owner. It had out-houses smelling of animals, the private pets of the former owner. The odor of fleece, hide and manure, the animal body smells which still hung there, would come through our noses and into our bodies on hot nights when we lay together rutting.

C. This should really be stopped—this correspondence, these fantasies. It is feeding the wild, caged fantasies with which I should have nothing to do. It is bad enough their growling in the night. Incompatibility is blatant but these foolish childhood nostalgic yearnings override it like some gleeful, uncontrollable eight year old. You can't go back. If I did go to Portugal and it didn't work out, what heartache and gut ache and wasted psychic energy. "If I went to Portugal—" there's the whole crazy fantasy. I think it has to do with being up here at Backhouse Mountain, isolated and brooding, talking to a note book. The drift from reality, idle imagination, self-deceptions all enticed along by erotic memories. You've been courting her, christ, since the first letter. Those ambiguous expressions like "emotionally alive", "imprinted on each other". And the rest. All the time moulding a virtue from ingredients which should render the relationship unworkable. Calling 'incompatibility' "ego autonomy"—neutralising the emotional acid with sociological language systems. Setting up special measurements so that the nostalgic remnants could be passed as a 'relationship'. All that exists is a series of letters, commonplace letters, which you've used to set up a screaming white sound of illusion until both of us have been hypnotised, listening to the wild white sound and ignoring the dull reality of the banal words. Badly imagined nostalgic innocence. Rationalisation of a formerly tested failure.

The problem is that while she has been for years a psychological presence, in that she has never left my dreaming life, she has never been an *operative* presence. That is, I didn't find myself thinking in terms of possibility—she was of dreams and fantasies, not of kitchens and bathrooms.

Safely away from life. While admittedly, at times, a miserably and intrusive presence, essentially she was an erotic and sentimental recollection. A controllable miserableness, which would be used in idle moments as a flick whip to sting a vaguely felt mood of, say, moroseness. Also I had kept the existence of the child suppressed. Now becoming rampant, badgering.

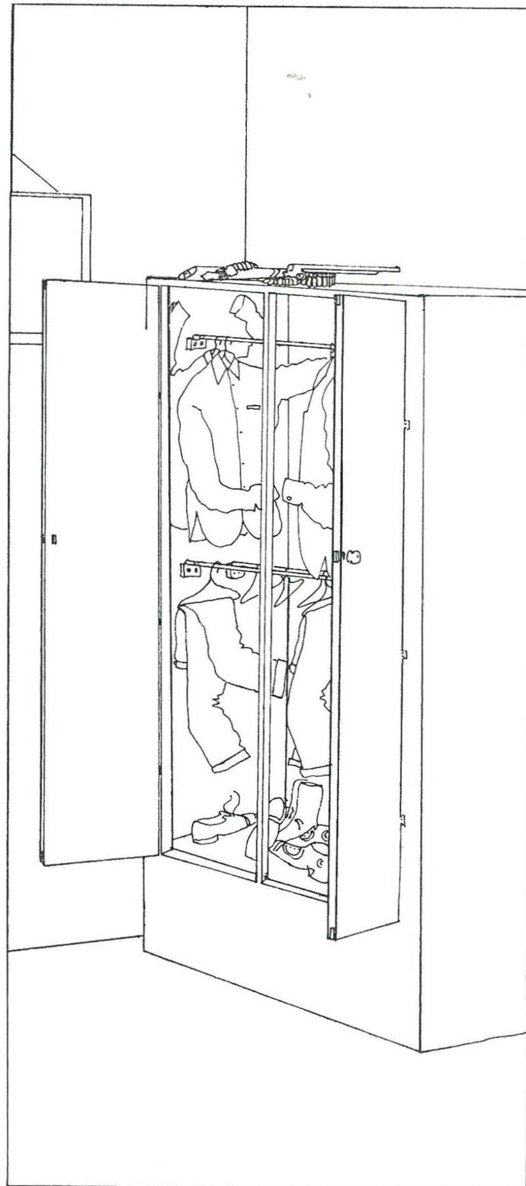
I had ripped out the emotional wires to avoid being pestered by the calls of lost aspirations. Now I hover on the point of reconnection. What should have happened is that the letters should have underscored the unreality of possible reunion. The illusions should have been invalidated by the letters. The unbridgeable distance between our personalities should have been measured and confirmed. She chose a blind inner security. I chose something else.

There is, in me, an advocate for reunion who argues that the reunion would 'humanise' me—be my salvation (would you believe?). Domesticity, the child, regularised relations, a personal commitment to another human being. Bunk. Belong once again to the great main stream of the river of life. Bunk.

D. We ran the school newspaper together. Eden High, called with adolescent wittiness the *Paradise Express.* With me writing a column signed Adam and she one signed Eve. The rebounding connotations, I know, are embarrassing for their literary obviousness, their excessive mythical weight. We turned to each other in room 17, hands inky from the Gestetner and kissed, as the light of the day faded out. There was no lights in our school. We felt for the first time in our lives another body against our own, felt for the first time free-flowing lust. We kissed on the lips for the first time, and kept kissing until we moved downward to the floor of the room. A school tunic bunched around her waist. An unzippered fly. A quick uncontrollable ejaculation. Our breathing out of cadence. The walk home, trying to keep as close to each other as public decency

would allow. Then being unable to disengage, standing physically welded, for hours until her mother came to the verandah and said my mother had telephoned and wanted to know when I might be coming home for dinner. To touch your black hair and taste your sweet saliva.
E. Knight wants to know about tutorials next year. Passport ready for collection.

A. Whatever else we will get from it, at least we will have indulged in boozy memories and boozy sex (maybe) accepting the terms that the visit means nothing of a commitment to any direction, other than to be fully honest, from the moment to the moment, to prevent the development of baseless hopes and private illusions which, anyhow, we are too mature, have been through the mill too often now, to in any way entertain . . .



Michael York

BRIAN KIERNAN

Notes on Frank Moorhouse

With his *The Americans, Baby* (Angus & Robertson), Frank Moorhouse seems to have won some long deserved general recognition. The book has been received enthusiastically, though more interest has been shown in the trendy nature of his material—the Sydney push, the drug scene, student radicalism, sexual permissiveness, women's liberation *et al.*—than with his handling of it. Partly, one suspects, this enthusiasm is a matter of general consciousness catching up with the individual talent. Although Moorhouse, at thirty-four, is still regarded as a "young writer", he has been writing about his urban tribe and their now suddenly 'relevant' preoccupations for most of the past decade, slowly winning an audience who could appreciate his sort of story and the sometimes uncomfortable integrity that was behind it. Perhaps also that old chestnut about Australian writers being obsessed with the outback and the mythic past helps explain the excited discovery that Moorhouse, like young dramatists and poets, is writing about contemporary urban Australian society. Whereas the new men are cool as spreading fern over the cultural dilemmas of Ern Malley's generation, accepting the society they know as the natural, familiar and substantial background to what they want to write about, their audiences still tend to be fascinated with the background itself.

Not that Moorhouse himself objects to this fascination with the sub-culture he has drawn upon for his fiction. "I find it complimentary that people are totally taken in by the performance and talk to me about the characters and the situations as though they were real. But they're realistic or naturalistic stories in their observed details only. There was a party for Rexroth which I attended, but that story ("The American Poet's Visit") was written long after and isn't a record of what actually happened. It's all been adjusted from a distance." Another example of adjustment to reality is "The Jack Kerouac Wake", a story not yet published that turns up at Sydney readings in different versions. One version is by Michael Wilding (whose own collection, which includes stories of Sydney push life, has just been published by Queensland University Press), others are by Moorhouse. Each claims to present the "true" account of a chaotic night. Each is close to the truth—but what is truth? What mainly come out of his adjustments to reality in *The Americans, Baby,* Moorhouse feels, are allegorical or politically representative characters. "If I were a literary critic, I'd suggest that Becker (his Coca-Cola sales executive and the anti-hero of a sequence of stories) is a human trying to be a technological giant—in fact playing one of America's major roles."

Moorhouse's interest in Americans goes back to his boyhood memories of US servicemen during the war and business associates of his father. They always seemed visitors from a remote and powerful land. When last year he went overseas for the first time his destination was New Orleans, the place that, particularly from his reading, had most excited his imagination. With Becker, the American who appears most frequently in his stories, Moorhouse twists a number of conventional expectations. In a time-honored American tradition, Becker is an innocent abroad; but it is the New World of Australia that corrupts him, a world that seems to him as remote from his home town of Atlanta, Georgia, as the moon. Becker's view of Australia is fresh and comic:

> Becker was thinking this: how rarely in this foul country did the milk carton open up as the printed directions promised, "to open push up here" — push up where, for goddam. It had to do with the

spread of talent across the land. For a country with a population so small they should, in terms of technology, still be peasants. That was his feeling, harsh as it may be. The way he figured it, the high-performance five-percenters were spread over too diversified an economy. By accident of history. The accident of history, as Becker saw it, was that they were English speakers. They attempted the higher technology of the main English nations. That was it. Result: milk cartons which wouldn't spout.

Becker is an outsider to Australian society as a whole, as well as to the worlds of the drag queens, speed freaks and liberated females he stumbles into. As an outsider, he is like a number of other characters who are affected by sub-cultural in-groups. Another example of the outsider, and of what Moorhouse sees as 'allegorical' or socially representative characterization, would be in "Dell Goes Into Politics". Dell returns to her country town after an unsatisfactory affair with a Trotskyist schoolteacher in Sydney. Wanting to appear sophisticated, she speaks out boldly on Vietnam, to the amazement and embarrassment of all in the local pub. Yet, as she admits to herself at the end of the story, this has only been to evade what is really troubling her. The gulf between her political 'awareness', which is no more than the holding of fashionable attitudes, and her personal experience seems to offer a more general comment about the impact of the Vietnam war on public consciousness.

For someone who sees himself partly motivated as a writer by his interest in politics and social theory, Moorhouse is cooly detached from his characters and their beliefs. As the author, he seems interested in ideology only as it affects people, and his political autobiography is relevant here:

"When I was an adolescent I became a socialist and atheist, in the usual adolescent way. After school I went into journalism, first of all as a cadet on the *Telegraph,* and met a lot of communists. By twenty, I was a co-operative socialist believing in worker's control. Then I went to Wagga and for a year edited a paper in Lockhart (population 12,000). I came back from that with a broken marriage, badly demoralized after a period of social isolation and intellectual discomfort. My reformist zeal to change society by peaceful means took me out of journalism and into the W.E.A. I had this 1920s evangelical fervor about adult education, and felt that once workers were informed and critical they would adopt the socialist alternative.

"I had three or four years as an organizer and publicist in the W.E.A. These were influential in developing my political awareness of the difference between the authoritarian and the non-authoritarian Left. This was something I had been slow to recognize. At this time I was sexually recruited into the Libertarian Society and in their atmosphere of totally free communication and interaction I felt comfortable, and able to develop as a writer.

"Previously, when I was a socialist, I often found that my fiction wouldn't fit the "class struggle" as expected by doctrinaire socialists. I still find that at a certain stage the story itself takes over, and that I can later find myself agreeing with interpretations of the story which weren't consciously in my mind at the time of writing. Anyhow, when I started to see myself as a writer rather than a socialist it was a great relief. The Libertarians don't appeal to feelings of brotherhood and compassion that aren't genuinely felt, or pretend to share the interests of groups that they don't know, like blue-collar workers. Instead their sense of community is found within their sub-culture, and many hold the enclave view that it is possible in Western society to carry on interaction and critical enquiry with only marginal harassment. This corresponds to the classical position of the writer in terms of his detachment from society and his relationship to authority.

"A lot of my writing is a natural associate of my liberatarian politics but it is not intended to be their servant. The difference between the consciously political writer and someone like myself is that the former would see the holding of positions as central, whereas I would see them as superstructure for deeper personal dynamics. People adopt ideologies to suit their personalities, and writers who take up traditional or contemporary stances are playing personality roles, posturing, dramatizing themselves."

Moorhouse's stories can be seen as a series of role performances by his characters. They dramatize themselves, and sometimes, like Dell, discover the false roles they have been playing in subscribing to stereotyped life styles. But Moorhouse's belief that any stance adopted by the writer is the playing of a role opens up in turn the question of his own stance. In his *Bulletin* review, Ian Turner provided an interesting sociological analysis of the themes of *The Americans, Baby,* and unhesitatingly delivered the right literary judgement—these are "the best short stories we've had in Australia for a long time". Yet his assumption that the stories are "deeply disturbing because the writer himself is so clearly disturbed and deeply involved" seems wide of the mark. These are the best short stories for a long time because, first of all, they *are* stories, not raw, still-quivering slices of life. They are sharply dramatized with the characters presenting themselves and their anxieties and ambivalences. If some of the dramatized attitudes and conflicts should correspond to the author's, then this doesn't show in the telling. Moorhouse's own position comes through as an ironic, often amused, scepticism towards any schematization of life. His stance is one of detachment combined with what he calls 'empathy through curiosity'—curiosity about what it would be like to be Becker, Dell, the narrator of "The

Girl from the Family of Man", or any of the characters who don't belong to the sub-culture and who react to the attempted manipulations of revolutionaries and reformists with bewilderment.

His Rotarians, he points out, are not baddies. They're just playing their adopted roles, as are the apparatchiki or the revolutionary. The question Moorhouse asks himself is whether, having shed black and white moralism, he is accommodating evil too readily. One answer to this would be that although his empathy is ironic, it is empathy all the same, and can convey more sympathy for Dell, say, then for her Trotskyist lover. The stories in his earlier collection (*Futility and Other Animals,* 1969) presenting Nish, the seedy, randy chief clerk, lacked this empathy, or human insight. They are attempts to flesh out stereotypes of 'suburban man', and the 'irony' is indistinguishable from disgust or contempt. Many of the stories in the later collection however reveal the classic morality of the writer—a concern with individuals rather than with the rigidities of any ideology. They can often be classical too in their structuring. The seemingly casual ways in which characters, settings and situations are established conceal a skilful dramatic economy. Because of this tight selectivity, the stories frequently re-read better than they read at first, not because they are 'difficult' in any stylistic or formal way, but because they seem so straight-forward and yet disappoint expectations that they will finish on a high note, as well-made stories—instead they usually leave the reader to grasp the implications himself.

Apart from his fiction, Moorhouse has written two Current Affairs Bulletins on the mass media, which draw on his own newspaper experience and the two years he spent with the A.B.C., and he gives W.E.A. lectures in this field. As one of the group producing *Thor* (previously *Thorunka*) he is associated with 'porno-politics' and a university guest lecturer on the subject. He has recently completed a chapter on censorship for Henry Mayer's book on Australian politics. His anti-censorship activities stem from both theoretical convictions and freely admitted self-interest. As a writer who accepts Freudian assumptions of the primacy of the sexual instinct, he wants to be free to explore previously taboo areas in his writing, and feels that at a time when the roles of the sexes are changing it would be dishonest for a writer not to explore them. His own books have not been interfered with, contrary to perhaps hopeful expectations in the case of *Futility and Other Animals.* His explanation is that books are privileged in comparison with magazines.

Moorhouse's interests in the mass media are also partly in liberating the short story from the straitjacket of the book, an interest shared by other young short story writers in Sydney. The secret, rapid mass-printing of *Thorunka* in defiance of the law demonstrated the revolution that has occurred in printing techniques. Recently the Commonwealth Literary Fund made a grant to launch *Tabloid Story,* which takes advantage of these techniques and will, it is hoped, make the short story as popular as poetry. Other Sydney writers associated with the project are Michael Wilding and Carmel Kelly and they hope to attract new writers from all over Australia to *Tabloid Story.*

Although he does not see them as influence on his own work — pointing instead to Barthleme, Borges and the New Zealander Janet Frame — Moorhouse admires many local short story writers: Lawson ("naturally"), Gavin Casey, Barbara Baynton . . . But why short stories?

"Well, it wasn't any conscious choice. I grew up reading short stories and wanting to write short stories. I was just fascinated by them from about the age of eleven. I read novels and plays and verse as well, but when people asked me what I wanted to be, I always said a short story writer. I suspect that the short story is a natural form whereas the novel isn't. The short story is related to dream and fantasy and the episodic breaking up of life into incidents. However, the creative span is limited by the form and I like the idea of a larger unity and clusters of stories.

"In the fifties and sixties something went wrong with the short story. TV stultified the form by taking away the light fiction role. However, the mainstream tradition continued in a purified way. It's now a minority form rather than a popular form. In 1930, the A.B.C. ran a competition and got three thousand entries. This year, as editor of *Coast to Coast,* I got 280. However, it's one of the few creative fictional forms which can be communicated outside the covers of a book, and when there aren't taboo areas I think that it will be revitalized as a form by the application of new talent."

Christmas Bungendore

They've dug three graves now Christmas is coming on
With ruddy faces round tables and turkey and beer:
The young dancing like crazy and the older ones
Swearing the nights were hotter in other years.

It was hard digging, what with the drought and all,
The crowbar inching at clay, striking fire from stone:
Not the kind of work you'd fancy after parties and balls,
So no harm in foresight. What's a man but flesh and bones?

There's Kevin and old man Bobbin mayn't see it through
The way they hit the bottle; and there's Mrs Pat
Been ailing these twelve months, her death would not be news;
And the graveyard the stiffest sinking since Lambing Flats.

No harm in being prepared the way the young
Go for pot and liquor and crowd into cars and fight:
It's the lucky ones that end up in iron lungs.
With the graves dug ready, a Christian can drink of nights.

DAVID CAMPBELL

I Ought to Know Better

The park hung hollow under trees.
And I, as hollow, pressed my face in gravel —
a wet slate taste, and grit stuck on my cheek.

I used to see her step among the roots
an angular disturbing figure
her thin form opening
a massive bloom of hair
the slow earth gliding out from underfoot.

One day she stooped (but was it true?)
to pick at something in the grass.

RODNEY HALL

from many bodies the poet speaks

I am peltskin, the white fur
a shining mass between the dark trees,
and the curved face caught in a glass sphere
peering from camera lens,
cried the hunted wolf, the white wolf
netted in snows. But I am the fir trees
and the furry skies also, his voice
flew above the dwelling places of those
who never sang, could never sing. And
his hot bowels that they left
sinking in snow said, I am the glacier. I am
the glacier's edges that cut the rope
around men's breasts, who dream
the faltering summit step by step,
and who dance once in a lifetime only
for a triumph that I can melt away from them
as my ice teeth close. The wolf's head left
planted on a fresh pine spike,
his eyes, and all his voices open.

MARC RADZYNER

Pleasant Sunday Afternoon

You mean to say we get this here
Thingummython of World Knowledge   yeah that's it
Jeez   a man's half-educated already
for nothing you might say   here have it over   TWENTY-EIGHT
MAGNIFICENTLY ILLUSTRATED VOLUMES   hey Eth
here a minute and have a look at this   well you could have
wiped your hands a bit first   she just won't
leave that bloody stove of hers alone   no of course it won't
rub off the page you silly   sorry mate
now where's she off to   what the bloody hell
not with a red-hot knife you've scorched the whole page up
to buggery   ah well   you were saying
the kids Ethel the kids   now what do you mean
not quite suitable   these kids of mine
young Stewart Ethel   what's he up to quick
starving for knowledge   hit him on the back that's it
ah there we are   a bit of the old sticky-tape
and good as new   Graham   ah Ethel   looks like Graham
is getting set to   what's that son   you already *have*
all right son I'll take your word for it
whoa there   not the   bloody encyclopaedia old feller here Eth
do something   well what's the odds   you might as well
finish him off on this   errr Contents page
talk about Tim Tyler   you married by any chance mate
well there's a treat in store   no don't get up   no worries mate
we'll sort this little issue out in no time now
what have we here   page sixty-three
(magnificently illustrated's right!)
here's sixty-one and   what's that ninety-five he
works fast doesn't he
                                        well   all right mate
if you've got to go   but call in anytime
you won't believe this but we hardly have
a visitor from one year's end to the next

hey   hey there mate   hey what about your books
his books   he's left his bloody books!

BRUCE DAWE

THREE POEMS BY MALCOLM BRODIE

Paraburdoo

north

from the camp

three ridges drift rock
ruddy scales interlock,

as logos and tense
sun and chill

scale them more.

pad soft pad, dust foot kangaroo
millimetres a stone an aeon.

birthday creeks intersow
smooth sandy seam

a hawk back-arcs in bronze

flowers badge on a beano shrub

a molar of marble

skulls of cattle, rabbit, roo

trees wizened to bone.

mt sampson
keystone of the pillars

of the hammersley range,

a wash of indigo
on an actor's eyelid,

king lear

a pantomime storm causes blindness,

cordelia in rouge.

Ding

little joe is a yugoslav
speaks three lingoes,
works on the cement bags

ivan is his mate,

bunnies for the contractors
tom and mel (who are good blokes).

joe tucks his jean ends into footy socks
so he's caught the aussie flavor
pretty quick,

instead of a giggle hat
he wears a peaked baseball cap,

this alarms us,

when we point out the discrepancy
of his dress, the cretin mutters

"no understand".

Liquorice

dennis drove the tray
for the quarry at the time
i handled the allis-chalmers.

we'd only tallied one near miss
before i left

and started
with jennings at the school
filling expansion joints in the walk.

he turned up that week
at our smoke-o,

they'd positioned him
as a chinese front-end loader

upon the ramp above the hopper
which often clogged.

sure enough, and he leapt in
like an overpaid midwife

fixed the blade between the shutters

and sliced the one hundred yards
of rubber metal-run in two,

lengthwise!

given the bullet
he used the casing for his grass.

The Rubbish Bin Campaign

The plan decided upon was, that
to emphasize their vainglory, I would
discard my medals with the other rubbish.

Having adopted this strategy, I kept
the time and place of their departure
a close secret, to avoid opposition,
or surprise encounters with,
wrinkled heroes on dog patrol.

I had not expected that the lid,
would be armor plate, nor
that medals would cling to fingers,
like brightly, striped kittens
at the water's edge. But
I moved resolutely, against
this last stand and they fell;

I had overcome, and rid myself of
some metal discs, with attached
ribbons and false concepts.

My wife heard the sacriligious story
with puzzled disapproval,
the children lacked understanding,
and yet, it was their vulnerable positions
that urged me on,
forward,
against tradition.

MAURICE STRANDGARD

The Letter

I am one of these suffering ghosts
knocking in cubicles, filled with white
horror, that is neither hope nor fear.

This afterlife is a series of events
off-stage, where the mathematician dreams,
calculates infinity/

a sequence of interlocking rectangles,
letterboxes to post shadows in,
flaps sealed flat, airmail velocity.

The postman discovers they're addressed to him
— these deaths, these victims.
Even now, as he rips them open;

the ice in the long glass melts in the sun,
the letter is a taper, the shadows rush away
from the candle/

No. There is no message.
Hope you're feeling . . . & everything is . . .

So flat & white to be so hungry.

ERIC BEACH

Winter Firesong

Talk is the region where friendship flowers
Swiftly and bright in the fertile hours
The roof and the chairs have graced us with.
We talk. The fire makes towers

Which glow like distant cities before they collapse.
Poetry, mankind, state of the world: perhaps
There'll be a renaissance though I doubt
That you or I will see it. The fire taps

An eloquent pause. If a popular syndicalism
Could be imbued with an unwritten clause
Enjoining both justice and tenderness . . .
The fire's ragtime, its many prisms

Make mock of this and just what kind of dance
A fire is nobody knows. And is it chance
When our conversation stutters into quiet
That new and more delicate flames begin to prance?

Notice how they cajole the word. It's much
Too early yet to go to bed, besides
The fire's still warm and it's glistening.
The fire would like to keep listening.

ROBERT HARRIS

swag

For a long time now mischievous people have been saying they want to see "Swag" restored to the pages of *Overland*. I'm not particularly keen. For a start, editors should disguise themselves, not display themselves. As A. G. Stephens used to say, justifying his Olympian detachment, "Only the unknown is terrible". Another reason not to have "Swag" is that in a quarterly *(sic)* magazine it's hard to ensure that it's up-to-date —weeks may intervene between the writing of a dreadful thing and the first reaction. Another is that it's just another editorial chore that tends to get more and more tedious in prospect the longer you contemplate it.

However, here it is for what it's worth. The one reason I'm pleased to see the institution revived is that so many who should know better have winced at the name "Swag". To them it smacks of bushwhackery and not of the trendiness that a modern major magazine should display in the cut of its uniform. So I hope at least this much continues to annoy them.

The Council for the Arts, I'm told, is making huffing noises designed to make the Literature Board move from Melbourne to Sydney. I'd love to know why all aspects of the arts must be centred in Sydney. I should have thought it highly desirable to have the different boards in different centres; indeed, I tend to share the growing view that the Council for the Arts should be dissolved and the individual boards left to get on with the job as before. *Overland* will shortly commence a series of articles on the Council for the Arts and its work. (Postscript: I hear the Literature Board has won its fight to stay in Melbourne, but that much bitterness has followed.)

Overland has more right than most to speak for the persecuted Soviet intellectuals. Over the years we have constantly stood for dialogue and friendship with the Soviet Union. "Friendship" of course is acceptable, provided it's bland and uncritical, but "dialogue", as I know from my own Moscow experiences, is a very dirty word indeed. We should like to express our disgust at the continuing persecution of ideas in the Soviet Union, and call for ideas from our readers as to how best to publicise this issue and to expose the barbaric treatment of the dissident thinkers of the USSR.

How is *Overland* run? I've been asked for details on several occasions lately. Take poems. We probably get about two hundred submissions a year, perhaps more. They go straight to our part-time secretary, Hilary Newton, who periodically has a conference with our poetry editor, Barrie Reid. Barrie accepts and rejects, Hilary does the book work and correspondence. Accepted poetry comes to me. I correct the spelling that Barrie hasn't corrected, mark up and get the copy to the printer. Of the galleys, one copy goes to Barrie for correction, the other to Vane Lindesay for the lay-out and paste-up.

But perhaps I'm ahead of myself. We had a meeting on 13 September at Ian Turner's place *(Overland* provides the claret and the Chinese food) where the form of this issue was agreed on after many bargains were struck, offensive things said to one another and ideas jotted down for future issues. Barrie Reid has unfortunately a strange delusion that his poets don't get a good run in *Overland*—that they sometimes have to wait for one or two issues to be published. (Some-

times our story and feature writers have to wait for five!) There were the usual hard words about the poetry and art work ("But what does it *mean*?" — "Don't pretend to be dumber than you are").

Back at the ranch (i.e. GPO Box 98a) stories have been coming at the rate of say a hundred a year. Hilary sends these to John McLaren in Toowoomba, who does a preliminary reading and sorting, and sends a selection to Gerry Engwerder in Kyabram for a detailed copytaster's report; the MS. is then returned to me with comments from John and Gerry, and I make the final decision. Meanwhile I have been teeing up reportage (like Alan Seymour's and Finola Moorhead's pieces here), writing or ringing people like Frank Moorhouse asking for stories and poetry, and trying hard to get people who have promised reviews actually to write them and send them in.

After galleys are received and corrected a copy goes to Vane, with general instructions on them. (For instance: "Give Moorhouse the lead in this issue, follow with Kiernan.") Vane spends several days on the design and paste-up, and returns the material to Bob Cugley (our printer), discussing blockmaking and other problems with him on the way. If someone hasn't thought of a cover at the editorial meeting or whatever, Vane will design one and watch its production through.

While all this is happening Hilary is keeping the subscribers' cards up to date, sending out reminder notices and statements, attending to orders and, if we can't find someone else to do it, addressing the envelopes and doing the Australian Post Office's work for it by sorting the envelopes into post code order. Finally on delivery day invoices, renewal slips, addressed envelopes and actual *Overlands* all have to come together at Central Data Services in South Melbourne, who do the mailing for us.

Wait for more instalments of this saga, only a tithe of which has been told. (We haven't, for instance, described Bob Cugley's magnificent old-time printery, in a former Lonsdale Street brothel.) To finish off on a note of dudgeon, it is because we feel we do quite enough frustrating and time-consuming work as it is that we resent so deeply the balls-up in the payment of our current grant. If it wasn't for Bob Cugley's insouciant attitude to payment, this issue could not have appeared. (See "Floating Fund".)

From this issue the price of *Overland* rises to $1 an issue. This is *in fact* considerably less than it costs to print (i.e. number of copies printed divided by cost of printer's bill, and excluding all overhead). We're sorry about this, but look on page 64 of our previous issue if you want to see why. We have held down costs too long—ridiculously too long. The last price rise was in 1965. Half-price subscriptions to students, pensioners and Nuiginians still apply.

This issue marks the completion of the seventh volume of *Overland*. Complete bound volumes of these eight numbers (49-56) will be available at $12. Readers may send in their own copies for binding at a cost of $8. All orders must be received by the end of November 1973.

A modest apology to Geoffrey Blainey, who on page 62 of the previous *Overland* is made to say "I've still got the tendency to start writing something when I'm sure what I want to say . . .". Of course a "not" has been left out.

STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH

DAVID MARTIN

Back from New Zealand

No wonder I like New Zealand!

When I arrived at the bus terminal in Dunedin, having travelled down from Manapouri, I went into a phone box and rang a few hotels. But it was Festival Week, a sort of Moomba, and rooms were hard to get.

I had made three or four calls when a man popped out from the parcels office and asked what I was doing. I told him, and he invited me to use his free phone. (In New Zealand calls from private extensions are not metered; the rental of the set takes care of that. But, just to confuse the stranger, the numerals on the dial-disk are reversed, with 0 at the top and 1 at the bottom.) After some refusals I was promised a room at the Harbour View Hotel in Ravensbourne: I like harbor views and was not to know that this was the wrong harbor. The parcels man wanted to know how I'd get there. By taxi. No, said he; if I cared to wait a bit he would drive me—in any case he was about to shut up shop. We climbed over a wall on to a railway siding, more or less as in a French film, and found his old bomb of a car. (A nice thing about New Zealand: because there's a shortage of locally assembled cars people drive about in ancient models — a very happy change from Australia.)

Half way to Ravensbourne he observed that my pub seemed a long way from the city. Why not spend the night at *his* place? I thanked him but refused. He delivered me to the hotel, where we parted in the friendliest fashion.

The Harbour View is a wharfies' pub, en route to Port Chalmers which, by the way, has the charm which Williamstown must have had sixty years ago. I had a large, pleasant room and, although it was well after hours the cook rustled up a decent meal. She was easily the prettiest cook in the southern hemisphere, looked barely twenty but turned out to have a grown-up family. . . . Her name was Gwen.

She inquired how I would get back to town. Now, in the evening, there were hardly any buses. Her husband would be fetching her in half an hour, they were going to the flicks, and did I want a lift? Her husband was Ken, a bricky and part-time wrestler; a huge, handsome, gentle fellow. They did not go to the flicks. They drove me all over Dunedin, showed me the colored fountain that dances to music at the Octagon, to the beaches and into the hills. We had supper in their home at midnight. The following Sunday I took them to hear an aria contest, and since you can't have a late supper anywhere in Dunedin on the Sabbath, except in a Chinese restaurant, we finished up guzzling dim-sims in the early hours.

Here is another example of the same spirit, and I could cite a dozen.

When I flew into Christchurch I went to book for myself a South Island round trip by rail and bus, which is amazingly cheap. (New Zealand can still be enjoyed by people with not much money to spend. A night's rest in a clean motor camp might cost a couple of dollars. There are not so many rip-off merchants down there.) The young ticket clerk asked whether I had secured accommodation in Arthur's Pass? It was, just then, pretty difficult to come by. I hadn't. Would I mind staying in a Tramping Club hut? Would I mind! Right—he was a member of such a club, and if I called back in ten minutes he would have the key for me.

So my first night in the mountains was spent in a Tramping Club hut. There I met a cheerful group of Aucklanders who taught me some of the things about New Zealand that really matter,

and who put me on to *their* friends. Like this it went on, for five weeks, from Milford Sound (where the gods live) to the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula, where there lives a hill farmer, a lover of books, a man in ten thousand, with a family to match, who looked after me like a long-lost father.

A civilised people, easy-going, quiet and generous. A nation shaped by a climate much blander than ours, by a land that lies narrow between two seas, lacking our pot-stirring Irish admixture, very homogeneous, not driven beyond its inner resources by our type of post-war economic boom and mass foreign influx. Their national hero, if you can call him that, is not at all a fellow like Ned Kelly. It is McKenzie the sheep-stealer, who was not violent but who was clever; clever enough to exploit an even cleverer dog. There are not our extremes, whether in floods or droughts or distances or vandalised phone boxes stinking of piss—but not our swagger either, not our sweep of land and sky, our loneliness, our low-roofed country pubs, our atheism, our drive, born of conflict. I think New Zealand is a more free country in many ways. It certainly looks much better after its poorer children. (Relatively cheap government life insurance, cheaper housing loans —that kind of thing. They appear to have problems very similar to ours in their schools, but, as in most other fields, the crisis is not quite so tragically acute.)

What New Zealanders share with us, above all else, is their lack of a sense of beauty. If they can put a square house against a round hill, by God! they'll do it. They have what they call "batches" (derived from bachelor and batching) which, in the main, are badly built weekenders. They scatter them everywhere, particularly along beaches whose beauty would otherwise take your breath away. At Whangamata I began to feel so desperate about these shockers that I nearly turned back, which would have been silly, for the next inlet can be completely unspoilt. In the South Island, Hokitika has the loveliest beaches and the most ramshackle, ill-painted houses you ever did see, but, in the north, Napier has risen from the devastation of its earthquake to prove that a corso, a marina, can be a place of flowers, of color, of rest and even of art. Perhaps one should not be too harsh? There's something to be said for the sense of beauty of a country which can produce the Christchurch botanical gardens, together with an electrically powered conveyance which takes visitors through its lanes and paths for a few cents in quiet, humorous comfort.

To be fair, there is something very attractive about some New Zealand coastal towns. Timaru, Gisborne, Tauranga: they all are resorts as well as busy ports. Sand meets the sky and the sea with the pale intensity of paintings by Manet. Ships and cranes and docks, long wharves and warehouses, modest homes strewn among glowing gardens, miles and miles of good spots to swim from. Here you might forget urban abominations like Palmerston North, like Upper Hutt, where, if the suicide rate is not high, it damned well ought to be.

A climate blander than Australia's? In more ways than one. Friends at the universities told me that their rat race is run, by comparison with ours, at a slow trot. Everybody seems to have time to do some pottery, a little propagating, or painting. But the students, they complain, are uninquisitive, not to say dull, because it is almost too easy to get to the university. On the other hand: barefoot young people everywhere, a migration of the teenaged tribes. They too complain of the blandness, but with much keener bitterness; what do you do in a country where "nothing happens" and where, even better than in England, the establishment knows how to take the wind out of the sails of protest? (It's not much use asking them, in turn: "What, actually, would you like to see happen?")

On that terrific seafront at Napier I saw policemen walk with wolfhounds on short leashes, trying to overawe the Saturday night youth gangs: a horrible sight. And there they sit in Christchurch, in the middle of the night, in the square surrounding the cathedral, and they tell you that the finest prospect in the world must be the view of King's Cross, in Sydney.

I recall something else about Napier's promenade. I was sitting there one evening, eating fish and chips, when three Maori girls, aged about fourteen, came skylarking by. They saw and smelled my dinner. One smacked her tummy. "Hmmm! Fish! Hmm, chips!" They were hungry. Had come from farther north, had been lent a house by a friend who was "off to a funeral somewhere", but they were broke. One, the prettiest, was carrying on a monologue-fantasy about well-fried bacon and beans. I shared my food with them and gave them my loose change to get more for themselves.

Ten minutes later, as I was strolling near the Post Office, they came running past, laughing and shouting, and behind them three boys, including

one Maori. "They've pinched our money, they've pinched our money"—and that was the last I saw of them.

I don't know very much about New Zealand "problems," whether they concern youth, or town-planning, or the Maoris. I hitch-hiked with a couple of Maori truckies, good blokes, and they agreed that what discrimination there was expressed itself chiefly in job terms: a Pakeha might need five days to find a new job, a Maori boy might look for one for a fortnight. Of course there is discrimination, if not nearly as vicious as that practised here.

Sailing out of Queenstown on a well-known old steamer, I got talking to a chap, half Pommy, half Kiwi, who was a retired army officer. Our talk got around to the color question. I could see what type he was, so I decided to have a bit of fun. "Well, I realize you have a liberal outlook, sir. But I dare say you wouldn't like your daughter to marry a Maori?" — "By George I wouldn't!" (In a loud voice.) At that moment his wife gave him a dig in the ribs which nearly hurled him into Lake Wakatipu. Not five steps from us stood—and I hadn't noticed him—the helmsman, a giant of a man, and he was the darkest Maori of them all.

In Auckland a lady I knew, a Maori, a leading personality, and one of the highest paid, in the cultural-artistic life of the city, was lately flat hunting. The estate agent mentioned that he had some expensive apartments on the North Shore, but no doubt she'd feel more at home in other surroundings. He let drop the name of a suburb that is practically a slum. When she told him what her work and position was, he laughed. "Yes, dearie, and I'm the Pope!"

One day, however, the joke was against me. Hitch-hiking down from Colville my driver, a woman with a Knightsbridge accent (that can happen in New Zealand) was slinging off about the Maoris and their lazy habits. I tried my usual crack on her, about the marriage color line. "Ah, no," she said. "I don't trust the Maoris; they're really getting above themselves, and I bet in ten years we'll have a civil war, but as to marrying . . . my son is just getting married to a nice Fijian girl."

A digression, for another aspect of New Zealand attitudes. Shortly after this conversation we picked up a hitch-hiker, a student. Rightly or wrongly, I believe I know something about hitch-hiking, so I took the liberty of offering unasked-for advice. "If you stand by the wayside like a forgotten umbrella, making small poofterish movements with your little finger"—or words to that effect—"you'll not stop many cars. Forceful does it! Step out into the road, grin, raise you arm as if you meant it, man, and really let the bastard know you want a lift!"

Whereupon he replied, in a quiet, calm but confident voice, "I suppose that's one way. But I like to give them at least a chance not to pick me up, if they don't want to."

One evening I was lying on a couch in a Whitianga motel, watching TV. On came a program which, I confess, rather touched me. (It probably wouldn't have, had I been a New Zealander.) It took us to Waitangi, in the Bay of Islands. There were speeches by the Governor General, by elderly Maori dignitaries, and there was the usual so-called Maori singing, and the poi. And then, in that fairylike bay, a New Zealand frigate suddenly took shape, under its lights, out of the darkness.

They were celebrating Waitangi Day, the day that commemorates the Treaty of Waitangi which, ending the Maori Wars, laid down terms for what was hoped would become amity and a lasting peace. From this year on it will become New Zealand's main national holiday.

One knows, of course, how much trickery there was in that compact; also how these celebrations have been mocked and rocked by militant Maoris in past years. But as I lay there, watching the screen, I thought that, at least, these people had something of which they did not have to be outright and permanently ashamed, these black and these white New Zealanders; at any rate they had a treaty, and one could speak of them as a nation, with certain reservations even as "one nation". We are so far behind them in this, there are no words to measure it. There is a terrible lot wrong in what happens in New Zealand to the Pacific Islanders and the Maoris: you only have to keep your eyes open to know it. But there are some good things too. I saw, for instance, Maori land reserves which are practically inalienable, simply by virtue of the fact that all Maoris who have a share in them, each individual, would have to agree to a sale.

But the biggest surprise came when, as part of the festivity, the Royal New Zealand Naval Band marched on Waitangi Beach. Would you believe it? The corps of drummers was made up of female ratings. Females, girls, women! Drummers! I guess the Australian fleet would

sooner scuttle itself than let its men march to the thud of drums carried by skirted persons; though I must say the skirts were hitched on the drum-side in a most novel and arresting manner.

Among the worst products of New Zealand (and there are some very bad ones, because of extreme economic protectionism) are its newspapers. Almost without exception they are parochial, stick-in-the-muddish and amateurishly written and got up. The pride and joy of Christchurch is a daily journal with the modest title of the *Press*. This rag, while I was there, one day printed, without apology, the identical page it had printed the day before. Still, if you look carefully you will sometimes discover a good story: good in what it tells you about the country.

"WHANGAREI. (P.A.). — To applause and farewell waves from about 250 spectators and the bon voyage hoots of a tug and pilot boat, the Taiwan junk Ming Poh ended its 20-day sojourn in Whangarei when it sailed for home at 4.05 p.m. yesterday."

And what's behind that?

The *Ming Poh* is a fishing junk which the R.N.Z.N. caught poaching off the tip of Northland (where entry is gained to the Maori underworld). Her catch and her gear was confiscated and her master fined a tidy sum. But the *Ming Poh* caught the imagination of the public because her skipper had sailed her across the wide Pacific and the Tasman with but a single antique chart and with engines to affright the naval personnel of the Boxer Rebellion. So, what did the public do? It got up a collection, paid the fine of the *Ming Poh* and commissioned the renovation of her engines. New charts were bought and presented. . . . Some of the newspapers fumed against such misplaced generosity, but this did not interfere with the liking the public felt for Captain J. K. Tan and his crew. While I, in John Manifold's words, felt a queer affection for the human race and wished it went in more often for unpatriotic behavior like this.

Allow me some random thoughts, observations. New Zealand's roads are simply littered with dead possums: the creature has thrived down there as the rabbit has up here. And on these alien roads it dies. Yes, and they have, in their forests, "deer cullers" whose job it is to cull deer, so they won't multiply like possums, and one rather well-known New Zealand writer was, not long since, a professional culler. A hunter, in short a Deer Slayer—*pace* Fenimore Cooper. And the rata tree burns like a red flowering gum. And one of the most stunning man-made objects to see in the world is a Maori war "canoe", put in quotation marks here because if that is a canoe, what would you call a Viking longboat? I never tired of walking round those magnificent craft, entirely held together by twined cords. And Maori wood sculpture, Maori carvings: what a strong art that is, and how little we know of it in this country—but then, for reasons that make sense but are still deplorable, how little is it we know about New Zealand in general, and how little New Zealanders know about us! (Cannot something be done about it, though, even in a small way? Couldn't one organise exchange courses at a couple of universities, or get some of our writers to work on New Zealand campuses, and vice versa? Australian books can rarely be bought in New Zealand, nor New Zealand books here. Tourism or no tourism, the impression prevails that we know less and less, not more and more, of each other's lives and hopes.) One odd thing to add: New Zealand is full of Aussie crims. Not a day when you don't read about some Australian had up for rape, murder, jury-squaring, or what-not.

But the most lasting memory is of the grandeur of the landscape, especially in the south. Imagine broad, swift, turbulent rivers, green like greenstone, rushing down mountain sides clad in rain forests, and capped with snow under a flower-blue sky. I did not know how Polynesian even the colder corners of New Zealand can look. No denying it, and no shame for it; I have added a new nationalism to my personal collection. Nevertheless when you have come back to Australia you are pleased with the larger, harsher dimensions, for all the roughness and the squalor.

Mine was no literary tour, but I did meet some writers and very much liked being with them. Robyn Dudding, of Christchurch, who now produces and edits *Islands*—a man who, with his family, had to live off his vegetable plots so that he might get this good work under way. Through him I met others: Charles Brasch, that fine poet, that refined man, who died the other day in Dunedin. At Charles' house I spent an evening—so friendly—in the company of Ian Billing, a Burns Fellow, a novelist and documentarist, and his talented wife. There too was O. E. Middleton, now almost blind, a short story writer whose work I cherish. Charles Brasch was reading to him a few hours each week; at that time from Nadezhda Mandelstam's searing memories. At Port Chalmers

I ate trout with Ian Wedde and his Rosemarie: Ian's another recent Burns Fellow, highly gifted in several fields. I saw Ian Cross in Wellington; he has served the welfare of New Zealand writers as no one else has, and is of course a splendid novelist. Noel and Kiriwai Hillyard and their kids (what a grand mixture of Maori and Pakeha!) fed me and talked to me (i.e., let me earbash them), and in Auckland, one night, I had the company of Maurice Shadbolt, and there also I had the help and hospitality of Gerd and Ian Free, well known to our own writers and publishers.

This tale of kindness could go on for ever, and I must stop it. But get yourself down to New Zealand and visit the glow worm caves at Te Anau, where subterranean rivers run and where the glow worms spangle the vault, glittering, greenish-blue, icy, awesome, like uncountable stars in a planetarium below earth. And sail out, if you are lucky in the blowing mist, on Milford Sound, which moved me as did only the isles of Greece, but make it soon, before the little sandflies have carried it away.

I say "get yourself down to New Zealand." Before I myself went there I had an idea that it clung to the very rim of the known world, and that New Zealanders must think of themselves as the rimdwellers: next stop the South Pole. Now I know that they do not think of themselves thus, at least not those of them who have already done some of the work they were born for. Yet it will take more than one journey of a few weeks to learn and understand how they do experience themselves, how this small nation in its lovely and temperate land, so near to ours but so utterly unlike, hangs the great globe from the hoist in its own fruitful garden.

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ROD SHAW

Dear Stephen

You will remember that just before you left on sabbatical leave some time ago I suggested writing a piece about *Outlook's* last Christmas Party. It seemed to be the end of an era to me, and the end of an independent socialist journal which had appeared continuously since the Krushchev Report at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. During the life of *Outlook* the Party throughout the world had splintered and deteriorated again and again, leaving so many communist intellectuals floundering about. It was an interesting and significant period, and perhaps a sad one.

So you agreed, and thought it was a good idea to record this last barbecue, and I put it down as a task for 1971. But in the meantime I have been thinking it over and have realised it is too complex a task for me to do properly. Admittedly, the visual impact of that occasion was interesting enough for an artist, and reminded me of the photographs taken at the turn of the century, with dandies in hard-hitters and tight pants, and ladies with mountains of hair and incredibly small waists above voluminous tents of skirts — and perhaps a picnic basket and a white cloth and one of the ladies in a neck-to-knee swimsuit about to step into the harbor. There is a wonderful quality about those photographs, modelled and rounded in nostalgic sepia, like the Holterman collection, just as if the characters were caught in the last act of a musical.

This is what I was reminded of in the dusk on that Saturday afternoon as the party swelled with people coming from above and below and grouping themselves inexorably into the textured picture of the beginning and the end of an era.

But as you know, when it comes to digging deeper, it is not just a question of describing groups and mentioning names — it is necessary to suggest the political groupings of then and now, the complex deviations from the hard old norms, the interlocking of all those groupings, the yeastiness of the individuals, how many still stood under the *Outlook* umbrella, and who stood in the rain or the sun according to ones' own viewpoint.

A politico-academic may consider it a run-of-the-mill reporting job — but for me it would not be such an easy task.

Take the setting — Sydney Harbor just between the nostrils of Longnose Point, where it slaps its oily waters onto the stone wall which retains a flat grassy area about twenty-five feet wide, spreading to the feet of cliffs and caves. Here the ubiquitous fig and banksia hold the rocks together in their timeless posture like a Lloyd Rees silverpoint. To the right, looking in from the harbor, a terrifying fifty-foot descent of steps drops to the boatshed and a slipway. To the left yawns the great mouth of a cave, with people in it like teeth, standing around a keg shining like an amalgam filling, while the flames of the barbecue tongue back and forth in the wind, anticipating the feast to come. Through this mouth pass the stream of assorted lefties with children and friends who stand, sit, group or play — attend to steak or sausages on the large metal-plate barbecue — juggling and gesticulating with red, beer, or thermos, as they grapple with someone about something, or drag up never-to-be-forgotten differences, or shout "Thank Christ I'm out of that one".

So you see the problem I would be facing if I tried to unravel *that* sort of tangle?

I surely felt that this gathering could mark the end of a period, or the end of a brand of socialist involvement in Australia — from the formation of the Communist Party fifty years

ago to the eventual splintering and perhaps the shattering of that party. But to feel is one thing — to communicate and expand that feeling with coherence is another — so instead I have decided to do a piece on something I know all about.

I think I know all about perch fishing in the feeder creeks of the Narrabeen Lagoon — South Creek, Middle Creek and Deep Creek — and I will write about this as soon as I can, so that it may be of some benefit to the masses before these creeks become the silted and polluted drainage systems for the earthworks higher up at Oxford Falls. Sewerage effuent, rubbish dumping, water-skiing and go-ahead developers are adding their slops too. I have had sixteen years' experience fishing these creeks, where I first went to contemplate nature after reading the Krushchev report on the Stalin era — rigging my own tackle, making my own cork floats and getting black crickets as bait from a public rubbish dump nearby (not actually a public dump, but they use it).

In sixteen years I have caught four perch. Perhaps because I caught them on the first day, in the same pool, on the one chopped-up centipede, I have persevered ever since. But unless I pass on my knowledge quickly I will be the last successful angler in this area. I may write more about this later. But the problem of dealing with *Outlook's* last party (OLP) is another kettle of fish.

Just consider the compost. Old party members or ex-members, party functionaries, left-overs, hacks and left-wing eggheads, left trade union men, new-lefties, university students seeing the light, anti-conscriptionists, hippies in opposition, journalists, actors, writers, artists, and some people who didn't seem to fit in at all with the others, like Bennelong and Bea Miles, Jack Lang and Santamaria.

It did not surprise me, at first, to see Bennelong, because I thought he was a member of New Theatre going on to a first- or last-night's party; it was not until I overheard him asking for Roland Robinson that I suddenly recognised him — and even then I was not surprised because he seemed to fit so well into the harborside landscape, even wearing his ridiculous London-trip costume. Yet he was naked when he melted back into the landscape, and I was sorry I couldn't find him again to say something.

So that is my problem.

If it was just a question of listing the unexpected people and the expected conversations and confrontations I would attempt it — because it is not hard to say Guido Barrachi held court;

Rupert Lockwood confounded somebody with facts and figures; Jack Blake, when he was not sprawled on the grass, stood above the crowd but not above Ted Wheelwright; Helen Palmer and Grace Bardsley spoke to everybody; Kemp Fowler seemed to be conducting some sort of test at the keg and relinquished his position only when Ken Buckley mentioned civil liberties . . . and so on.

But who can possibly want to know all this?

It would have been more interesting if I could have said that David Martin lumbered through the conversations snarling "balls" again, as he did at the party writers' conference just after 1956 when Laurie Aarons said there was no crisis in the socialist world; or if I could tell how I kept hearing J. B. Miles saying that he knew nothing about Art but he was not surprised when Zhdanov rubbished Paul Cezanne; and how Lance Sharkey was there tugging at the long-hairs; and Paul Mortier looking lost and beseeching, as if he was about to die; or how my friend Sonnie Glynn, the big wharfie, who once beat his chest in frustration in the art studio above the waterside workers' rooms in the Hungry Mile, was beating his chest as he cuddled his grandchild on the lawn, or . . . if I could tell these sort of things somebody might listen. But who wants to know that Dr. Bialawhiskey, as Ken Warren the actor used to call him, was *not* there with Petrov; or that my friend and co-founders of the Studio of Realist Art (SORA) weren't there — Jim Cant, who now doggedly paints in Adelaide with no legs left to speak of; Roy Dalgarno, in India drawing refugees; Nan Hortin, dead; and Hal Missingham, being reborn somewhere.

And where was gritty Frank bloody Hardy — did I see him that dusk loudly acting a part, or was it on TV sometime, loudly acting a humorist?

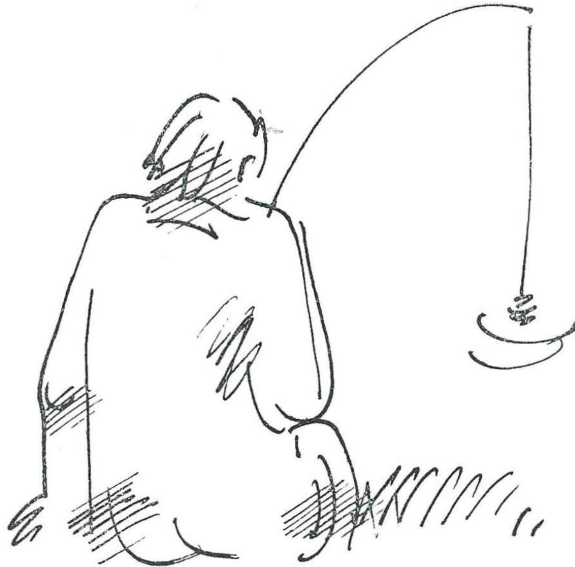
So, my memory is being dipped into some sort of acid bath.

Did I mount a rock to welcome everybody to the last party on behalf of . . . or am I dreaming of the day in 1954 when I opened SORA's last exhibition at David Jones' and then on behalf of the committee immediately closed the exhibition because the management had refused to hang a painting by John Nicholas containing a *red flag*, and had added insult to injury by refusing our request to have Jessie Street open the show? And would anybody believe me if I said that Joseph Stalin was not there — or Trotsky or Hitler?

Whether I write about it or not I will never forget that barbecue on the green bank of the river that comes quietly out of Parramatta Park and meanders down through mangrove swamps until it widens into the harbor that flows through Sydney Heads . . . and I don't think Bennelong will forget the day he stood with his people about two hundred years ago and marvelled at the great white swan gliding through those heads from the ocean to disturb his black paradise and coax him into his fancy-dress costume.

Oh, Bennelong, Bennelong!

So, Stephen, if you would like me to go on with the perch fishing piece, let me know — I could illustrate it.



DESMOND O'GRADY

Those Marvellous Blue Skies

Martin Boyd's seventeen years in Rome

I stood with Martin Boyd waiting for a bus in Rome's narrow central street, the Corso. Opposite us cars, motorbikes and buses poured into the corso from a side street. Their lights served to pierce the exhaust fumes as much as the dusk. All of a sudden, a horse-drawn carriage appeared. The horse, squeezed between a bus and a ratcheting motorbike, was tossing its head in terror. "Poor creature" said Martin, startled.

I saw him as a victim, like the horse, of a 'progress' he detested because it violated the link between man and nature. When he was in hospital in 1971 he remarked that all his family had missed out on the industrial revolution. But here, in the dusk on the Corso, it had caught up with him and he was as uneasy as the horse. It had taken over even in Rome where, as Martin wryly wrote in *Day of My Delight,* he had imagined he "would be entering a sort of Maurice Baring world of immense culture and distinction, or be like Mrs G. who spent her ten years here talking to princes".

How did he live in Rome where he arrived in 1957 at the age of 64? The San Silvestro Centre was the key to his social life. Situated behind the church of the same name which serves English-speaking Catholics, it provides English-speakers an opportunity to have a cup of tea, biscuits and a chat. Inevitably, a large proportion of its clients are seminarians, but there are also girls looking for work in Rome and older people who have settled there. Moving spirits of the Centre when Martin first arrived were Pam Charlesworth and Bernadette Morrissey, who were to become his close friends. Among other good English friends who attended the San Silvestro Centre were Lady Effie Millington-Drake, Glorney Bolton (a historian), and Gerard Shelley, a collateral descendant of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who likewise is a poet.

Indeed almost all his friends were English. In many cases, they had not read his books but considered him as one of them, appreciating his graciousness and interest in people. One of the deprivations during his last years was that there were so few who shared both the English and Australian sides of his experience. While Alfred Sterling and Walter Crocker were, successively, ambassadors in Rome, he was invited frequently to lunch at the Australian embassy. After Crocker returned to Australia, the contact ceased. No one in the embassy found time to visit him during his last weeks. When I informed the embassy that Martin Boyd had been taken to the Blue Sisters' hospital, one of the diplomatic staff asked whom he was. But that was towards the ungenerous end. His Roman years were happier than their conclusion, largely because of the San Silvestro Centre.

Martin not only attended the Centre regularly, he took afternoon tea with Pam Charlesworth, Bernadette Morrissey and Lady Millington-Drake at their homes each week for many years. He gave an account of this circle of Roman friends, the coterie as he called it, in the letters he wrote to Gerard Shelley while he was working as a Russian translator-revisor for the United Nations in Geneva.

Here, for example, is a passage from a 1966 letter about a convert priest who Martin nicknamed Oil Tank because of his unctuous manner and his addiction for people with titles: "Last Monday I was at Effie's. The oil-tank arrived with the most staggering 'blonde bombshell' or 'pin-up girl'. She was dressed as in illustration. I thought that I was hardened to endure most sights without flinching, but when they came into the room together, I think I must have blushed; and I thought that if one of the Holy Office spies had seen them together, that Father Oil Tank would be for it. However it turned out that she

did have a coat which she had left in the hall. She was a great grand-daughter of the duc de Tallyrand, or perhaps, she told me, of his famous uncle, who had a passion for the duc's wife, and was also descended from the sister of S. Francis Xavier, and also was the niece of principessa Aldobrandini who lives beyond the cottage we covetted. I suppose that is why O.T. cultivated her . . . Perhaps next Monday he'll bring a female royalty in a bikini-kaloi but only dubiously apathoi."

A constant round of tea-parties would not be everyone's idea of pleasure. But Martin relished them. Although he appreciated things Italian, he came to Rome too late to become fluent in the language or make close Italian friends. At the tea parties he found people whose outlook he more or less shared. They formed a cosy expatriate circle, a home away from home, which provided a font of gossip. And Martin had the pleasure of expounding his ideas when he could get a word in edgeways in competition with talkative females.

The coterie satisfied Martin's desire to find, as he wrote in the *Bulletin,* "a cosy region where I belong, and where I can live with possibly smug self-sufficiency among a few sympathetic friends." He complained regularly about the "absolute nonsense" some of his female friends talked and one suspected a few were reincarnations of Aunt Mildy in *Outbreak of Love.* But Martin's main objection was probably due to their dominating the conversation. His frustration was such one day with a former actress who talked nineteen to the dozen that he leapt out of his seat at the San Silvestro Centre. A vertical takeoff such as he had not achieved in the RAF during the first world war. It was so singular that it broke the flow of the actress's routine inanities. He had created a conversational opening.

When Gerard Shelley was not in Geneva, they met most days for lunch at the San Carlo coffee-bar in the Corso. Martin, who did not eat Italian-style, usually had a steak and salad. After buying the London *Daily Telegraph,* they climbed the Spanish steps to the Pincio gardens where they sat on a seat under the spreading chestnut trees in via dei Ippocastagni. Sometimes they were accompanied by Topolino (Mickey Mouse) as they nicknamed a small Sicilian young man who lived opposite the Trevi fountain. He had approached them asking if they would help with his English as he had insufficient money for lessons. Martin and Shelley, both six footers in their seventies, would correct the short young Sicilian's groping English and explain the language they handled in prose and poetry. The story has a happy ending: the Sicilian had great application, learnt quickly and, after obtaining a job with Alitalia, moved on to a good position with Bache, the American finance company.

After chatting in the Pincio, Martin would go to the San Silvestro Centre or a tea party. As they sat in the Pincio one day, a cat from the nearby Casina Valadier padded past with a piteously squawking blackbird in his mouth. Martin leapt up, clobbered the cat on the head with his walking stick, and resumed his place without losing the thread of the conversation. The cat released the bird and slunk home. Presumably that was an occasion when blackbirds sang.

With Shelley, he talked about public issues, the sad state of the world. Martin's interests were not particularly literary. They were cultural in the broadest sense, that is political. He underlined a cultural reading of *Lucinda Brayford.* He might express an admiration for D. H. Lawrence's religious concern but he was more prone to talk politics, especially English politics. He borrowed books from the British Council library, but they were more likely to be historical studies than novels. He had not read a word of Patrick White.

He wrote that ultramontane views are the last refuge of the leisured class and at times could sound like Paul Brayford, the reactionary aristocrat who nearly runs away with *Lucinda Brayford.* But he was not Paul and had not given him the last word, even though he uttered the most pungent ones, in that novel. Martin's dissatisfaction with the way of the world did not derive from a personal bitterness. He once said the worst thing about growing old was to see how many of those you know do not fulfil expectations. His conviction that people were duped and defrauded by their leaders not only turned him towards an earlier order but also to rebels and hippies as a hope for the future. One of his Rome acquaintances complained that he never wanted to hear a word against young people. He was drastic in his condemnation of injustice. He was fond of nominating a covey of criminals fit for hanging, ranging from Haig and the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the First World War to Winston Churchill, partly because of the bombing of Dresden. Although he liked to talk about the Irish landed gentry, he detested Cromwell, who established most of them, and was indignant about discrimination against Catholics in northern Ireland.

The tone of his comments is captured in his letters. Praising a poem Gerard Shelley had sent him, he wrote "it is a relief to read something forthright and direct. Everyone is so mealy-mouthed". When Shelley was working at the nuclear disarmament conference in Geneva, Martin wrote that he would refrain from comment on the international situation apart from saying the politicians seemed to be "stark, staring mad".

When a Scottish friend said he had to pay a tax, which was later reimbursed, on his farm laborers as non-productive, Martin exploded: "I'm finally convinced we're governed by lunatics". He wrote indignant letters to the London *Times* and *Daily Mail* about sonic bangs but received only a "humbug acknowledgement" from them because, he claimed, they "hate clarity of vision". In 1969, he saw a sour review of one of his books in the same context. He said the book was "not their cup of pigswill".

Martin, then, at the San Silvestro Centre, enjoying the scene: "It is filled with enchanting passionate young creatures in brilliant colour" he wrote on 17 July 1967. "There is also an influx of young English sailors clad in spotless white, like the virgins in paradise, but I gathered that was the only point of resemblance". Martin at the tea parties: "The Monday party was amusing. The duchessa M. was there, bursting with vitality, and she asked me to go to stay in Sicily in June to chaperone her". Martin holding forth, still a handsome man, tall and broadshouldered, with light blue eyes, a pink, clear complexion.

But where did the man live? It seemed to be a detail he had overlooked; the parties and the discussions were the important things. "I had a roof over my head in Australia and another in England" he once lamented, "but I've nothing here".

Most of the time he lived at the seaside suburb of Ostia. Brighton or Sandringham would have been preferable. The Ostia seafront is even flatter than that of Port Phillip Bay. Bathing establishments occupy most of the foreshore. There is a desolate air to the place which is well captured in Moravia's stories.

As Martin's financial circumstances were a well-kept secret, either something one did not talk about or a practical matter beneath consideration, it was never clear whether he stayed in Ostia because it was cheap or because he liked to swim. 'Bathe' rather was the word he adopted, in the same quaint diction as when he referred to a car as a 'motor'. He occupied an unprepossessing flat which he had to vacate in July and August each summer when the owners could extract an exorbitant rent for the holiday season. During these months, Martin usually went three times a week, and sometimes daily, from Rome to swim at Ostia. He swam as early as March and as late as November.

What did he do in Ostia which, although blessedly quiet in winter, is always tatty? Most days he caught a train to Rome, to lunch with Gerard Shelley, go to the San Silvestro Centre or a tea party. Sometimes, if he did not swim, he walked miles along the seafront. Sometimes friends came from Rome for lunch and he would bring out Boyd table silver which shone with a proud gleam in those humdum surroundings. At times he painted which, he said, was "good for my psyche". At other times he tried to write and fend-off those Australians who drop in even though at home they would not cross the street to give you the time of day: 20 May 1969 — "I am trying to get on with my book, but get awfully tired and my brain won't work. Also hordes of people who know my third cousins in Australia, or met me 25 years ago at a teaparty in Cambridge, are descending on Rome, and expect to be entertained. And Mrs B. is arriving on Friday (Oh my ears!) and a nephew on Saturday, and friends of friends I have never met on Sunday, and M. is coming back soon (Oh my ears!)".

But the plethora of wandering Australians could not save him from being lonely and often cold when fog blanketed Ostia in autumn or the piercing tramontana wind blew from the snow-covered Apennines. His Italian was adequate for shopping but only the grocer, who had been in America, was capable of exchanging elementary pleasantries in English. Apart from him, Martin had to rely on the twins. These were young boys, about nine, who broke the boredom when they came to play snaps: "The twins come in occasionally to earn a few lire playing snap, in the same way that Labouchere when he was hardup went to Monte Carlo". They also came for chocolates and nuts from Martin or stole them when his back was turned. He was not so happy when they asked for money. On Good Friday 1967 he wrote: "The twins have been very friendly when I have met them in the street this week and I am afraid that means that they will arrive on Easter morning for gifts." He added a postcriptum on Easter day: "The gemelli [he used the Italian word for twins] plus a friend and a sister have, as I feared, come and extracted immoderate sums from me . . ." Later he wrote: "I can't get any domestic help and it is tiring to have to go to Rome for any

conversation. The twins bring occasional incursions of life, but our range of common interest is limited. They have now taken to cleaning their shoes here".

Ostia went bad on him at the end. After it snowed in March 1971, he wrote to Shelley: "It was sheer hell, bitterly cold, and if one went out to buy the necessities of life, one's feet sank in a foot of slush . . . For the last 3 winters I have thought it mad to stay here. If you hear I have taken this place again next winter—please put a mental specialist on my tracks."

Sometimes he spent the summer months at the pensione Alleghe in piazza di Spagna, sometimes at the Bellavista hotel at Frascati in the hills behind Rome, and for several years he stayed in Rome with Pam Charlesworth and Bernadette Morrissey. He spent one whole year in the flat of Glorney Bolton and an Italian friend. It was here that he wrote *Day of My Delight,* often while sitting up in bed, and complained of the tight deadline he had been set.

Glorney Bolton, a very good friend of Martin's, had invited him on a share-and-share alike basis. But Martin was not a sharer. He was more a clubman, gregarious but jealous of his privacy. Although sociable, he shunned intimacy. He never ate in the kitchen with Glorney and his friend but prepared his own meals and wheeled them on a tea-trolley to his room. He was upset by the bills at the end of the month. Glorney Bolton felt Martin regarded himself as a guest.

He was a nomad moving from one distressing place to another without taking much note of his circumstances and with ever fewer belongings. After a major operation in August 1971, for nine months he went to his last residence, the Alto Adige pensione near the Trevi fountain.

For some months his condition improved. He was able to descend the steps from the pensione to sit in the sun at nearby coffee bars. He told the owner of the pensione, Signora Seebacher, that he had written about his family but that, as his books were not pornographic, the market for them had declined. He ate always in his room rather than with the other guests. Friends in the coterie came most days for afternoon tea in his room. He had a sweet tooth for chocolates, bonbons and biscuits. At night, when the other guests who he avoided had retired, he paced up and down the hallway before going to bed. While convalescing at the Alto Adige, he was consoled by the granting of a Commonwealth Literary Fund pension.

Although his spirits were generally good, his condition was deteriorating. He did not want to return to hospital as he hated the constrictions. He aged appreciably, his complexion became waxen. A blood transfusion at the beginning of 1972 gave him a new lease of life. However he became increasingly irascible. In his later years he was disputatious but now he was embarrassed by his rages. "They must have transfused the blood of an angry old man into me", he said with chagrin.

His hope was the sun. He was certain that if he could survive until the strong summer sun came he would revive. He used to sunbathe each sunny morning in the study of the proprietress who left the room to him. Painfully thin now, he rolled up his sleeves, opened his shirt and pulled up his trousers to let the healing sun do its work.

He was convinced he had taken a decisive turn for the worst from the moment the Americans had exploded an atomic bomb underground in Alaska. There had been a spectacular storm in Rome at that time. He dredged up a prewar forecast of Aldous Huxley that devils would be let loose in the world.

As on the previous occasion, he was in a desperate state before his friends managed to get him to the Blue Sisters hospital. He was no easy patient: he promised he would write "rude words" on all the walls before leaving the hospital. To a bossy nurse who said she was a sergeant, he replied that he was a lieutenant. His imagination was treacherous during his last days. He complained of frightening phantasies at night, with the nurses torturing him in the name of science. "They're the Eumenides" he said. Sleep was a relief. Apparently he was in some pain but was reticent about this. However he did not hide his impatience at being in hospital, obliged to take medicines he mistrusted.

He showed me a photograph of the view of his boyhood home at Yarra Glen. I recalled his account of his adolescent question to his father: "Why can't we go to live in Italy, where they have those marvellous blue skies?" "You won't find a better climate than this" his father had replied, standing in the Yarra Glen paddock, "anywhere else in the world". That photograph, with a diary, were almost his only possessions in the small suitcase, stamped M.a'B.B., which was on the chair beside his deathbed.

I gave little credence to the report that he had been converted to Catholicism in the last few days. Although Catholic, I attach small importance to most death-bed conversions, and they can have

ghoulish aspects as in the case of Curzio Malaparte. I thought Martin may have made some comment which had been interpreted as a desire to join the Church. However, later some of his friends said Martin told them he had entered the Church and was to receive extreme unction from an Irish Palottine Father, John Guidera, parish priest of San Silvestro. Father Guidera said Martin had affirmed that he believed what Guidera believed, had received Communion on the feast of Corpus Christi and extreme unction some days later, confessing himself extremely happy to have these comforts.

He was destined for the English Protestant cemetery but at the last minute it was discovered that he had become a Catholic. It ruined his chance of being buried in the section where Keats lies. But he is within a few feet of Percy Bysshe Shelley. His conversion meant that, characteristically, even in death he did not quite fit in.

The Years of Unleavened Bread

MANNING CLARK

Following 'The End of the Ice Age' articles in the Autumn and Winter issues, by Professor Russel Ward and Dr John Burton respectively, Professor Manning Clark in the Spring issue comments on political/intellectual Australia between December 1949 and December 1972.

Race Relations and Literature — H. Winston Rhodes; **Patrick White's 'The Ham Funeral'** — Andrew Taylor; **The Novels of Janet Frame** — Patrick Evans; **Erich Fromm: Socialist Humanist** — Allan Patience; **Ingmar Bergman's 'Cries and Whispers'** — Coral Lansbury; **Soundings** — Peter Steele; **George Steiner and Cambridge English** — John Carroll; **SF: Death and Transfiguration of a Genre** — George Turner; **Studies of Patrick White's Novels** — Alan Lawson; **Problems of Soviet Intellectuals** — David Lane; **Regional Studies by Keith Hancock and Ray Ericksen** — Marcel Aurousseau; **Getting the Idiot out of the (Television) Box** — A. A. Phillips; **Tributes to Charles Brasch and Jim Davidson** — H. Winston Rhodes and Peter Corris.

Fiction by Helen Wilson. **Poetry** by Robert D. FitzGerald, David Campbell, Dorothy Hewett, Graham Rowlands, John Griffin, Nicholas Hasluck, Fay Zwicky, Helen Jones . . .

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ALAN SEYMOUR

You Can Go Home Again

Two days before I left London for a brief return visit to the wide brown land Tony Buckley, an Australian film-maker in town to work on a Nureyev ballet film, rang me to say that he'd heard I was a little nervous about going back. I admitted that this was so, he laughed and said, "Relax. The natives are friendly."

How had this nervousness come about? In the eleven and a half years since I'd left Australia (to come to London for the production of *The One Day of the Year*) almost all my attempts to continue to write for an Australian audience had ended abortively and were, in my view, so mishandled by the authorities that I was left in each case feeling reduced and humiliated. Let us look at how the powerful ones in Australian television, film and journalism used to treat—perhaps still treat—their writers.

After I'd been in London about a year a visiting ABC man told me that he'd been briefed to talk to me about my writing one of those television serials they used to put out on Sunday evenings. The historical subjects had gone well and now they wanted a modern story. Of course they could pay no money for any outline or synopses I cared to submit. This was unprofessional enough, for a start, but when I found out that I was expected, even so, to draft for them not a general outline but a detailed breakdown of what would happen episode by episode over thirteen episodes, an assignment which would have taken considerable thought, energy and time, I signified that as a freelance writer I couldn't give up so much time on spec.

Finally, because of the friendly persuasion of the rep., I settled for writing a brief overall outline of the story, indicating where some of the main incidents and climaxes would come, and a fairly comprehensive description of the principal characters. These would be members of the family and inner circle of a somewhat larger-than-life Sydney newspaper tycoon, the idea being to use the popular serial form to explore the nature of economic and oblique political power in our great Australian democracy. The ABC's Sydney authorities dismissed the project out of hand and with a show of pious horror. "The characters seem unpleasant and the general emphasis sordid." This was galling enough, but, even more infuriating, within eighteen months what was the charts-topper on ABC television? A serialisation of Tony Morphett's study of a megalomaniac Australian newspaper tycoon and his use and abuse of power. . . .

In '65 the then Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust commissioned me to write a new stage play which they hoped might be of use in their first Jane Street Theatre season in Sydney. The result was an enormous five-hour epic entitled *Oh Grave Thy Victory* with a huge role for an actor, that of an Australian millionaire giving up his London life, and life in general, to return to Australia and to find a pattern, if possible, in his life and in death. Of course it was long and cumbersome, of course it was repetitive and wordy, of course it was full of difficulties. But the rejection, when it came, was handled so crudely, the play brushed off with so little detailed comment and reasoned criticism that I was left with no idea of what was thought to be really wrong with it or, more importantly, how to go about setting it to rights. When I wrote to register a complaint and to point out that I was asking for not less but for more criticism I was attacked in the press and told, to boot, that as an expatriate I had no relevance to the Australian theatre scene and had ceased,

in fact, to exist. (All of us connected with that silly squabble are now, I'm happy to say, on good terms again.)

In '67 I wrote an admittedly long article criticising the Australian involvement in Vietnam. No Australian newspaper, including the 'liberal' *Australian* would publish it or enter into discussion as to how it might be compressed into a more economical piece. The subject seemed unwelcome. My specific anger merged with a general disgust at Australian philistinism and political spinelessness and, from that time on—pausing only to tear off "To the Gutless Wonders", a short satirical piece on modern Australians written for *Meanjin*—I turned my back on Australia as an outlet for my thoughts and work and concentrated on relating to the decadent Old World.

Since 1970 Tony Buckley himself had had nothing but prevarication and evasion from the Australian Film Development Corporation in his attempts to get their backing for a film based on *The One Day of the Year*—his and his partner's idea, not mine; I feared the play might at this point show its age. All in all, it seemed that if there were one writer not welcome on the Australian scene, it was A. Seymour.

And so, when I received the invitation to attend as a guest the first Australian Playwrights' Conference to be held in Canberra in March this year I was less than enthusiastic. Then Robert Levis, a director who had done another play of mine, rang me, Sydney-to-London, to say he had found an old script of mine ("it's five hours long and I love it") and generated so much enthusiasm for the play and the whole project that, after some hasty rearrangement of BBC television commitments, I cabled my acceptance. And then had a few weeks to reconsider and to feel nervous, especially as, oh, irony, the very play chosen for workshop treatment at the Conference was that same contentious *Oh Grave Thy Victory*.

But Tony was right. The natives were friendly. In four weeks' stay which took in Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, I didn't once hear anyone use the term "expatriate" in a hostile manner, everyone was warm and welcoming, the conference proved hard work (in two reverberating weeks I boiled down the epic to a playing time of two-and-three-quarter hours) but very stimulating and exciting, and it became evident very soon that there was a new spirit abroad in the land.

For the visit had come at exactly the right time, just two months after Gough Whitlam had launched a new era. The excitement was almost palpable; from the first day the sense of movement and rediscovery of old Australian principles and ethics long buried under the rubble of conservative capitalism seemed to tingle on the very air. Even though a few people were taking out insurance — "Of course it may not last, things may lapse when the first momentum sags" — the feeling in general was that change was the essence of the new administration.

The conference was officially opened by Margaret Whitlam in an informal lunchtime ceremony at University House. Old friends now resident in Canberra talked of the general air of relaxation that was coming into official functions, the lack of starchiness, the new and friendly style, more appropriate to the Australian social climate. Pleasant enough in itself, this seemed symptomatic of a more important change, summed up in the trendy but apposite word: access. Theatre people — writers, critics, actors, Equity reps. — seemed to feel that for the first time in years, for the first time in their lives, the intelligentsia was not being automatically scoffed at, instead was listened to, precisely because its predilections were shared by the Whitlams themselves. "We feel," said a critic, "that we are not so isolated, not frustrated, not an impotent and irrelevant minority, but a group with views worth listening to. We can be effective. We've proved it. Our vote was effective." In the general euphoria can this be taken too far? Some actors, angry at the composition of the new Council for the Performing Arts, yelled at one of Mr Whitlam's liaison men: "We worked our guts out during the campaign to get you there, we got you there and you know damned well if you ignore us we can withdraw our support next time and get you out", a threat which seemed a shade premature in the early stages of a new government.

As our friend Germs has pointed out, Mr Whitlam cannot work miracles. He still has to operate within the framework of latter-day foreign-dominated capitalism. But already it is clear that he has done much to humanise that framework by using a small-'l' liberal and modern sensibility to get back, paradoxically, to some of the progressive socialist vigor which, around the turn of the century, made Australia a socially advanced society rather than the provincial arthritic and backward old Nellie it had become by the 1950s.

But my more personal reactions? Some pass-

ing impressions. Talking with university students I tried to find out where they were at by asking them to ask me questions about theatre. "Is there much psychodrama in England?" was the first, a challenging opening gambit, you will admit. "Is there much street theatre and how do you think it will develop?" "Don't you feel we need a more spontaneous theatre, centred on the actor and the performance and less on a rigid, written text?" "Isn't it the theatre's duty, given the world's problems, to shock the bourgeoisie rather than to reinforce their values with pleasant entertainment?" And these enlightened ones were in Brisbane, Australia's Deep North.

Talking late at night with some actors in Canberra, the great idiomatic directness I'd forgotten about. I ask an actor what he'd thought of a highly-praised Sydney production. Immediate answer: "Absolutely shitouse." I continue the conversation straight-faced for a few seconds and then collapse in helpless laughter.

Two and a half days of interviews on arrival in Sydney. I'm a great talker but this is ridiculous. I'm running hot anyway after a 36-hour jet flight and am excited at being back and saying anything that comes into my head. Weeks later in London the clippings turn up. "Why did you say that?" asks someone. "I didn't." Did I? One article goes on and on about prohibition in Saudi Arabia which I thought I'd touched on only in passing. Another has me making judgments such as "bad language"—not my terminology—in *Don's Party*, and it is interesting that the interviewer has somehow picked out the statements which seem to accord with her own (or her middle-aged middle-class readers' supposed) viewpoints.

First night in Sydney, still recovering from the flight and not a minute's rest all day, I'm taken to see *Don's Party*. Magnificent surge and power and humor in Williamson's writing. The scatalogical references finally a bit tiring. Actors milking every gag but this is a serious play and the director should have found a better balance. But an extraordinary sense of relationship between audience and stage, a feeling of necessity in the experience, of people coming because they want to discover and to note something about themselves, a more specific sense of excited rapport than I've experienced in any English theatre.

I fly to Brisbane, step out of the plane, am nearly knocked over by the heat. Isn't this supposed to be autumn? Am whisked to a motel, have a quick shower, go to St Lucia, meet the students. One of the most rewarding of all the experiences of those crammed four weeks. That night an academic dinner party in a very spacious, beautifully-designed penthouse apartment. I'd forgotten how well Australians live, especially Australian academics. Food imaginative and very good. About forty people, the women in exotic long flowing vaguely Eastern gowns, the men in short-sleeved open-necked sports shirts, you know you're back. One woman starts yacking and her voice, straight out of a Barry Humphries sketch, has you momentarily reacting — at least mentally — as people do to his capers. Then you realise that she is talking (of education and its needs) with great shrewdness and is clearly very intelligent. The famous, abused, loved and dreaded accent is not just a subject for caricature; that kind of condescension should be, by now, flapping back into the faces of the caricaturists who should be noting the sense inside her head. That night, back in the motel, I read the instructions for the Vibralax, a phenomenon I'd thought exclusively American, pop my ten-cent piece into the meter, listen suspiciously and sceptically to the slight rumbling sound, climb into bed, feel it move gently, almost imperceptibly, beneath me, think, "What a take, as though this contraption could get me to sleep" and, boom, I'm out like the proverbial light. I wake up a few moments later as soon as it stops, which seems counter-productive, but fall asleep again instantly.

Saturday. Back in Sydney and to Nimrod Street Theatre for a matinée performance of *President Wilson in Paris*, the only Australian-written play seen in my brief visit which made me feel I could have been sitting in any fringe theatre in London—this is a description, not a value judgment—then fried eggs in an old Darlinghurst house nearby with an actor friend and a girl who wanders about with her tits hanging out, or, to be specific, wears only a sarong. Why is it that those who have little to show always insist on showing it? Then to Newtown to the Australian Theatre for *A Stretch of the Imagination* which a few weeks before in London I'd tried to interest Leo McKern in doing. I find the transferred Melbourne production slow, static, boring and ruinous to a gloriously ebullient text. With my usual tact I tell Jack Hibberd so during the interval and get nowhere.

Coming to Katharine Brisbane's house one night I meet an ample lady with very long, improbably blonde, quite Wagnerian hair. It is

Dorothy Hewett. "Ah, the legendary lady," say I, remembering *Bobbin Up* and old Sydney gossip of the husbands in her life and tales told long ago by Perth University people who knew Dorothy in the late '40s. On the Sunday drive down to Canberra Dorothy and I (in Katharine's car) find something we have in common, a nostalgia for old American pop songs. As her committed-Left credentials are impeccable this devotion to the emanations of a decadent capitalist system is a pleasant paradox. She talks of how old songs are inextricably mixed with one's memories of old times and I tell her she should write a play on the secret inner life of an Australian left-wing girl growing up in the '40s. Says Katharine: "She has." (It's *Chapel Perilous*.) Why, we wonder, have Australian pop songs tended to sound so self-conscious? I recalled an early-'50s competition, run by the ABC, for songs based on Australian towns. And again we wondered why "Chicago, Chicago" or "Autumn in New York" or "April in Paris" sound natural enough but a song extolling the charms of Mildura or Wyalkatchem would seem forced. We compose some on the spot, "Who who who's from Woolloomoolloo?", "Let's Shove Along to Wollongong", "Your Shoes Won't Get Mildew in Mildura", and arrive in Canberra hoarse. German-born old China hand, long resident in Australia and now a drama lecturer at the University of NSW, Marlis Thiersch has never seen any of us in this mood and marvels anew at the stretchability of Australian humor. She also takes good-naturedly my running gag that she is the only woman I've yet met who broke her arm when she fell off her clogs.

The conference itself deserves a whole article or even a book. Inspired by a similar annual workout in Waterford, Connecticut (the American Connection again), it throws together for two frenzied weeks a gaggle of playwrights, actors, directors and administrators to work on half a dozen new scripts. (Interesting that all the 'temperament' comes from the administrators in the background, not from the creative people. Towards the end the technical director says to some of the actors, "I've never seen such harmony, for God's sake somebody start bitching, it's unnatural.") An intense, traumatic, sometimes painful, exciting and, ultimately, and this is the only word, beautiful experience in which, because of the sheer dedication and energy and warm affection of the whole team—but especially the actors and actresses—my decade-long bitterness and bile are finally washed away.

But a disconcerting sidelight. Halfway through the conference—which was really a workshop with its priorities right: a minimum of high-flown theorising talk and a maximum of hard, precise work—some of the big names in Australian theatre are wheeled on from Sydney and Melbourne to give the proceedings a touch of class. Actors' Equity reps and representatives of the Writers' Guild also sit on the platform and discuss perennial problems, the economics of theatre, films and television, the timidity—amounting virtually to censorship—of hidebound authorities who keep lively material away from possibly changing and accepting audiences. But the very low standard of public speaking surprises and appals me. I have never had much trouble ad-libbing and have spent the last decade in a society whose articulate middle-class are verbally orientated, can organize and express their thoughts and seem able to edit out before speaking the more platitudinous of those thoughts so that what is said is worth saying. But here . . . people with something vital to say mumble "Er—like—you see—well—I mean — um — sort of—you know . . ." And after all this labor they bring forth a mouse, some frozen commonplace of mind-numbing banality. For the first two hours hardly anything of any real worth is said, all is lost in these grunts and mutters, with a vocabulary (and these are writers speaking, people whose very tools of trade are words) stunted enough to make the Black Stump look like a giant karri.

One spin-off from the conference is that I meet Margaret Whitlam a few times. An agreeable and attractive personality, but I sense that, in the ongoing attempt to relate easily to the public, she possibly tends to play down her intelligence and sophistication. The old trick of the Australian intelligentsia on the defensive: "Look, we're not getting above ourselves, we're really just plain folks, like you." But, remembering some nasty—and incredibly foolish—accusations ("traitor", "subversive influence") made in federal parliament about me a few years back, it is a nice irony that on the last night of the conference Margaret invites a few of us back for a drink at the Lodge. Later I reflect that it has always been more honorable for writers to be disliked by the Establishment rather than, as the cliché has it, "absorbed" by them, although I assume it takes more than a couple of glasses of champagne to qualify for absorption. At home, you should

pardon the expression, she turns out to be a witty lady with a nice line in gentle, but sly, merciless gags. The Prime Minister comes home to find his house full of writers and actors. We meet, talk very briefly. How can one, unexpectedly finding oneself standing next to the boss and, surprised and impressed by some of his decisive actions—especially after a lifetime of suspicion towards bosses—say anything complimentary without sounding jejune?

Some of the new plays given rehearsed readings at the Conference impress me, as do the actors. Interestingly, only one other play besides my own has a specifically Australian setting. The range of subjects and styles takes in social satire, Pinteresque behaviorism, psychological exploration of fringe people, naturalistic family study and an essay in nineteenth-century biography fragmented and impressionistic rather than chronological. If this is an accurate indication, Australian theatre is breaking through to a world view expressed in a diversity of techniques. Yet I recall that the great local successes of recent years have still been the lunging, plunging idiomatic studies of contemporary Australian life done in a kind of extended, heightened naturalism. Is the public taste lagging or, as so often happens, are the entrepreneurs too conservative, or both? As a test, it will be interesting to see how many plays first tried at the first Australian Playwrights' Conference later surface in the commercial theatre; or, as that was not the object of the experimental work done at the conference, how many of the playwrights so encouraged there will be able to develop those techniques in a wider field.

After the conference's final morning discussion and before an emotional airport departure (the old laconic show-no-feelings attitude not in evidence, where is the Australia I knew and hated?) two of the players, Brendon Lunney and Barbara Ramsey, drive me way out of town so that I can walk a bit and smell the gum-trees. We climb a hill, look out through a slim tangle of eucalypts at a bumpy valley under a grey-blue wintry sky. Says Brendon, disappointed at finding no better place than this scruff of scrub, says, "Sorry, this stretch of country is ratshit." But it is typical, too. We gaze and try to find words without faking anything up for the occasion. "You can't say it's beautiful. It's not the least bit beautiful. And yet . . ." Can't find the words after all and let it go.

In Melbourne, an afternoon spent drinking and talking with David Williamson, Jack Hibberd and some actors who work at the Pram Factory, its new Back Theatre also glimpsed in rehearsal. They tell me of the innovative work of the last few years. The present Gay Lib, Women's Lib orientation comes through. Cracks David, "To be white, male and heterosexual here just now is hell."

My family in Perth (which, I realise, I haven't seen for twenty-three years, having left it for Sydney in 1950) reveal as much as anything about the state of our society. Half a generation ago I was aware of our obliging conformity to the sociological concept of social mobility. Between the '30s Depression and the '50s boom we had moved from average working-class to average middle-class. My father had been at sea all his life, then retired and worked as a lumper on the Fremantle wharves where he was killed in a loading accident. Our expectations were low, one reason, I'm convinced, why I've always been such a bad business-man in my profession, never expecting to get my hands on any big money because acceptance and resignation, even defeat, had been absorbed unconsciously during my childhood. My sisters, however, married men who were moving —by dint of study and hard work—out of a working-class milieu into the world of the professions, law, commerce.

On the domestic front there is an unexpected development. After years away I am, not surprisingly, given all the sordid details of family life. Not only relatives and now their married children but old friends and their children are breaking up, divorce or separation and general acrimony seem the rule. Clearly they are adjusting to it but it has been hard going. Just as clearly it has brought a greater tolerance and far less rigidity than of old. Couples whose marriages have collapsed are taking on other unofficial partners and this is accepted. For the first time the generalising of sociology is made real, more vividly because within one's own family circle, which suddenly seems a microcosm of that thing we've heard so much about, the disintegration of Western nuclear-family-based society.

What else? I'd forgotten how beautiful Sydney and Perth were. They remain so, despite the usual scurf of unimaginative new building. It's water, stretches of blue water under a blue sky, the Mediterranean feeling which one never gets in England. And space. The interiors of houses tend to have more space than in most British urban homes. The number of people who can take for

granted a certain measure of material comfort spreads farther down the social scale than in the U.K., and the social classes are still, despite the great embourgeoisement of Australian life, not so dissociated as in England.

Back in London I rattle through my head a marvellous mix of memories. Australia, land of —what? Sandwich lunches on the grass, students interested in psychodrama, scatological expressiveness, theatres with audiences alive, alert and almost throwing their response back to the stage, motels, Vibralax, subtle variations in the ubiquitous Australian 'accent', a girl and her tits blossoming over a plate of fried eggs, actors and directors and writers defying all the hoary traditions and working in intense, blessed harmony until someone starts complaining of the schmalz, inarticulateness of articulate people, "Um—I mean—sort of—you know", new friendships and the almost shocked realisation that friendship is too pale a word. that it is love and, so unexpected in undemonstrative Australia, a relationship of unstinted, warm intensity I've not encountered since leaving Turkey, good food, fine wines, playwrights—of all people—accorded a certain recognition, Paddington lace all tarted up but pretty and preferable to the larrikin look which used to characterise Sydney, intelligent, hard-driving women which the country has always had and has always needed to counter the blunt masculine denial of intelligence, Melbourne's Carlton somewhat changed in image since it figured in *The Doll*, families disintegrating, individuals struggling to establish respect for their own identity and succeeding, and talk and talk and talk. . . .

Certainly I feel excitement at a genuine change of atmosphere. Despite dangers that the "new nationalism", given an extra shove or two, could turn into the old chauvinism, there does seem to be a new and genuine maturity, a less nervous attitude to the rest of the world, less of the old embattled defiance and an acceptance of Australia as just one nation among a galaxy of nations each with its own character and interests. Many people I talked with are travelled, worldly in the nicest sense, and no longer defensive about their possible provincialism because they know they are not provincial. Students especially displayed a nicely balanced duality, an awareness of their own identity (including its problems) coupled with a casual curiosity about the world outside. Unsurprisingly I find myself taking out mental insurance too. "Of course it was only four weeks, of course everything looked great in that short time, living there would be something else." Would it?

Sometimes an old, familiar question was asked. Should Australian writers live and work abroad for a while, or possibly, if they feel unrecognised or under-appreciated at home, for good? As someone who believes that everyone on earth should travel if they possibly can, that one of the oddest pleasures is to find that the old saw is actually true and that travel does, or can, broaden the mind, I think writers certainly should experience cultures other than their own. (And to experience one has to be more than a tourist, has to live awhile and work in a strange environment.) But about staying away one cannot be dogmatic. Writers who have stayed on in Australia seem to have an identity established and a relationship with their own local audience, and this is arguably the most important social function a writer can have. If he can then break out beyond that and become known elsewhere, well and good.

On this subject — ultimately where anyone chooses to live and to work must be his or her own business—it is impossible to generalise. That living abroad can be aesthetically, as well as personally, useful, though, is certain. I did not know how Australian I was, or indeed what "Australian" was, until I found myself in an alien—British—society which often turned my own unspoken values upside down. This perspective on oneself and one's society can't be acquired without moving away, no matter how 'objective' one feels oneself to be. It is possibly the most valuable perspective for a writer to have and to use. And distance need not corrupt the response. The two plays of mine now most interesting to Australian entrepreneurs, because most expressive of Australian values, were written in London and Saudi Arabia.

FINOLA MOORHEAD

A Personal Experience

The Australian National Playwrights' Conference

I think they wanted to make playwrights. They were going to do it by giving full professional treatment to seven scripts that hadn't been judged worthy of commercial professional treatment. When I say full professional treatment, I mean the actors, the directors, the stage-manager and the lights man, were all full-time professionals. And they'd do a rehearsed reading like they know how to do their job. Stiff work for them—seven scripts in under fourteen days. They began to look tired by the end too.

But it had been advertised as the Australian National Playwrights' Conference. Everybody welcome.

Some came. That is, some came of their own accord at their own expense. It was to disappoint this unselfish lot. They had nothing to do but look, and talk when the members of the conference had time. Rarely. It wasn't a conference in that sense, it was a very busy workshop. A confusing workshop in ways, but boring if you weren't involved. But the middle of the two weeks was a conference, the attendance swelled that weekend, and the number of theatrical heavies there was impressive.

I wanted them to make me a playwright. I came with my body and soul intact, my mind and heart relatively secure. Eager as hell to learn. Naive and young, longing for the grey-green landscape to rise up and give me wisdom. You know what it's like in the plane that's taking you there.

You wouldn't believe it. The weather was perfect, smiling the affirmation of thc gods the whole time. The air was optimistic and idealistic—lots of creative people knowing that work alone can fertilize their abundant hope. The warmth of the sun was only rivalled by the warmth of egos communicating about their own things. University House was gentle round the green quadrangle and everybody had ample room and plenty of food. George White from America was a nice guy and said the quality was high and we were doing a fine job. Margaret Whitlam, patron, patronised three times. We thought: what an idyllic atmosphere to work in!

On the first Monday we were all champing at the bit. High color and happiness. To work. To work. For what?

For Alan Seymour's *Oh Grave, Thy Victory,* Stuart Dickson's *A New Mary Christmas,* Robert Lord's *It Isn't Cricket,* Alma de Groen's *The Afterlife of Arthur Cravan,* Ru Pullen's *Glass Curtain,* Mark O'Connor's *Overture* and my *Horses.*

My poor *Horses* embarrassed me. Even since I submitted the script in November I had learnt that there was much awfully wrong. Awful in the painful sense. All the same I couldn't bring myself to realise that the whole thing would have to be re-written. Actually written, typed, stencilled, duplicated, laboriously indicated to actors, ripped out and re-put in their folders. If I'd known *that* on the Monday I would have panicked, but I was hopeful of miracles. The actors were doing three or four parts each. The directors were directing two plays. The technical staff were whipping chairs and stages over here and over there. That was good, that was physical.

In all the whirl of warm communication I was actually to work over a lonely typewriter. (You understand that I hadn't swallowed many realisations about being a writer.) Inspiration is its own boss. If it comes to you on a peaceful sunny day, you leave the beach and go to your room. Immediately. Obediently. If it comes when people are around, in the middle of your work, you catch

the delicate thing and hold it carefully until you have the time, hoping it will last the distance. Or so I thought.

Each script had a dramaturg. That is, an informed, uninvolved observer, who was to commute ideas from the director to playwright. Not being either game enough or able to command Inspiration, I was eager to take the advice of my dramaturg and my director. The first reading was dismal and already made late and irritating by the re-writes I'd started. I re-wrote this scene and that scene. Made it naturalistic. Made it so the actors and actresses didn't think they were acting fools. Made motivations clear. Made arguments, or just plain dialogues, come to a point and fall away. The way all plays whether naturalistic or experimental, my director said, were phrased. Took out grotesque effects that wouldn't work. I could see the people putting themselves out for me. I could see sense in all the advice I received. I could see the actors handle the thing better. I could hear praise about how much better the new dialogues were. I could smile when some said, you're working hard, you're doing what the conference expects the writers to do. If the other playwrights had done the re-writing I did, the duplicating channels would have surely got blocked up. But they weren't expected to, the conference might have effects which couldn't alter the submitted scripts but enter into the future years of their writing. My eyes were punched with words. My heart got hardened against speedy surgical cuts of treasured phrases of poetry and bits of humor. Now and then I would be inspired by what someone said. But I lost sight of the play.

Eating whitebread tomato sandwiches in the sun, beside the crêche, we listened to guest speakers. During the first week these were from the Melbourne Theatre Company who were in Canberra with *The Ideal Husband* and *The Cherry Orchard*. The directors were often too busy to stay. Attendance at Happy Hour, a talktime between five and six each evening, fell off too as the work got intense. Most went home for a shower. Social evenings and drinks late at night. gave us, the members of the conference, those staying at University House, a chance to talk.

The playwrights didn't communicate much with each other. The plays, you see, were very different. We had little in common. Strangely. And individually we were in spotlights and found it hard to see the others. My empathy was most often with those playwrights whose scripts hadn't been chosen and who were sitting in the gloom watching the workshopping, silently, with hungry eyes. If they didn't resent me, I felt they should. And, for them, as I knew they were too generous, I heaped abuse on my own play.

During the rehearsed reading of *Horses* I was bored stiff.

A critics' forum followed the readings. The dramaturg, the director and the writer said something each. And for the rest of the very short half an hour the others asked questions, gave opinions and comments. That was good, I found out that my play shouldn't have been a naturalistic one at all. I walked out—relieved—because, like an enemy, my script had been destroyed. I was further made happy that day to discover that the thing wasn't dead. It was lying around in pieces inside me and some of them were breathing. That life gave me a cheeky, careless pride. A pride in spite of all the talent, energy, time and money spent on me, definitely not because of it.

I was alone again. Free?

The days remained beautiful, even if the sun of optimism and idealism had worn a bit. And Canberra lay undisturbed by the first Australian National Playwrights' Conference—and I loved her for that. My capital and I met bone to bone —I was an Australian. Proud and worthy.

That didn't last. It was the joy of rawness that soon must open out into pain. *Horses* ached inside me, as it did in its torn, untidy state in the dirty pink folder. Any talent I had was exposed, and it wasn't supreme. Without that I am weak and undeserving.

But I'm tougher than I think—the conference taught me that. Was it meant to? Did it really care about me? Did it really care about those scripts—the seven of them? Was the lame ending because idealism once again had stumbled against practicality and got hurt? I hope the future conferences embrace more playwrights and give each less.

I didn't ask anything of the landscape coming home. I felt like an ordinary old tree in the middle of the bush. Slightly afraid that I'd have to play a part. Not quite sure how my life had changed though I knew it had. I was uncomfortably selfish, uncontrollably emotional. I clung to one thing—the living parts of *Horses.* They live as a whole now. I worked all night day after day and all that. It won't embarrass me. It is written by no one else.

LAUREL CUNNINGHAM

Good-Night, Cheppie Love

The white rooster has got away. With what a raucous to-dooing, what flapping of tail feathers on the grey paling fence, what sideways glaring at the sleety sky, and then what a scuffle and a scatter of imaginary hens on the other side of the fence! The ginger kitten arches herself, askance, against a tree before she bounces sideways and scampers away. The old lady is calling: "Cheppie! 'E's gone again! Go round and git 'im, will you, love?"

The man who is waiting in the long grass is small-made, like a rabbit, and black-haired. He hears a muffled honking from Cheppie, and the scrape of a chair. The rooster flaps about him, but he doesn't move; his eyes are on the corner of the fence. The gate clicks and feet slap the ground. He grins in taut anticipation.

The old lady doesn't know he is there, of course. Wouldn't be sending Cheppie if she did. Come herself, the old bitch, creaking bucket legs and all, moaning and panting and having heart attacks all the way. It would be just his luck to spring the rooster and get the old girl for his trouble.

But it is Cheppie herself who appears around the corner of the fence. She comes with a rush, an awkward lump of a girl, heavy-footed and clumsy, with a face flattened by dull eyes and a lazy mouth.

"Hurry up," she hrrnfffs at him, and he feels the urgency in her tone, without understanding the words.

It is over very quickly; he does not waste time with preliminaries. And when it is finished, she gathers up the white rooster almost casually, and turns toward the house.

"Tomorrow?" he asks her from where he lies, and she nods without looking back. For the old lady is calling again: "Cheppie! Cheppie! Where are you?"

And the shapeless body with its bundle of scorn trudges back, around the corner, into the yard where Somers has planted cauliflowers and string beans and a choko vine whose tendrils possess the house.

It is a patchwork quilt, this house, an old one thrown on the rubbish heap. On the very next fine day it should be burnt, because it is so full of holes and faded. But there is still plenty of warmth left in it, and until the spring comes the ginger kitten will want it to sleep in.

It is really three houses put together. The first one was built here, on the spot, of wood, long ago—in another life, when the old lady was first a bride. The kitchen section, with its brick chimney, came much later; there is a sloping tin roof to join the two. The third, a corrugated iron hut, was carried here in pieces on a cart when the old man brought his boys to live. Three boys, already coming men when the old man moved in . . . was it thirty years ago? One to get married, one to die, and one—Somers—to coarsen into middle age that only deepened when the old man had wheezed his life away. The pouches of his face hang slackly on the bone; he talks in grunts or gestures; and his hands are flaccid things without grace or sensitivity. The old woman's daughters despise him, much as they pretended to despise her, especially after the old man came. But they have gone, and Somers has stayed, burrowed in the patchwork house, sleeping mysteriously in some corner of the old man's hut, on a kapok bed, or a pile of sacks, or on the damp black earth that fills up the cracks in walls and floor and is part of the house and of the people.

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and the old woman's birthday—there is a line of gleaming cars outside the fence. Then the lounge room is drenched with light, which is cruel to the shabby furniture, as the daughters fling up the brittled blinds to reveal the gilded oval pictures heavy with dust. At these times Somers is away trapping rabbits on the pock-marked hills.

The old woman's heart taps in Morse code. At any moment she may drop dead. She knows this. She has known it for years, and every morning is a fresh amazement to her. She will soon begin to think she is immortal, and that will be the end of her. Perhaps she knows this, too, and coddles her fear along in her vast blotched body so that she will have her suffering to keep her alive. For she mustn't die—not yet.

She must watch. With opaque eyes that catch shadows and movements, but cannot see the number on the pension card. She is watching now, with her ears and her fingers and the soles of her feet. She knows when Cheppie yawns, wakes, bathes, eats, plays, cries, sleeps.

Even when they stand together, every afternoon, under the green verandah roof that overhangs the footpath, with their arms resting on the rail, and gaze for hours at the hills and the train-line and the washing-suds sky, thinking of nothing at all—even then the old woman is watching. In her bed she watches, troubling her sleep with searching hands that identify and pat the lumps in the mattress. This one the money wrapped up in a stocking, that one the box with the funeral papers, over there the ridge made by Cheppie, who lies sleeping loudly on her back.

In her dreams the old woman's fears parade, like spectres, preening and posing for the fun of it, till the grey dawn chases them away. Then there is a waking to the smell of the lighted stove, and everything is as it was yesterday.

Sometimes the spectres have the faces of people she knows. One in particular haunts her often. He is a tall, loose man with Somer's graceless walk, and Somers' drooping shoulders. Then she must reach out and feel the comfort of the lumpish form beside her.

"Cheppie? Are you there, love? Were you asleep?"

There is another, who comes less often, but frightens her much more. This one is miserable and dark, and he sees everything out of the corners of his rabbit-eyes even when he is looking straight ahead. He sits quietly enough at the table, eating carrot stew or tapioca, and always goes straight away afterwards, instead of stopping to talk, like some do. She thinks he and Somers have had an argument, and she is glad he doesn't stay. But she cannot send him away hungry—the old man would never forgive her for that. (Even though once he came drunk, and Somers stood and glared over him all the time he was eating; and he never came again in that condition.)

There are others—some who remember the old man, and will gossip about him until the old lady's eyes are shining with remembered happiness. For these she heaps the plates high with onions and liver and gravy—second helpings too —and afterwards there are affectionate goodbyes on the verandah. She will stand there, looking after them as the road pulls them from her, until they disappear, and widowhood closes in on her once more, no less bitter for being her second experience of it.

Then she will fiddle unnecessarily for a while with the row of geranium plants in their shiny ice-cream tins before going back into the chaos that is her house. Everywhere there are bundles of clothing, glass jars for jam, plastic bottles of every shape and color, calendars, cardboard boxes, paper bags, string, rolled-up bits of carpet, suitcases full of shoes, all hoarded with the careful husbandry of the poor.

Somewhere in the middle, a space has been cleared for living. This space has been swept very clean. Here the table is spread with newspaper, and bread and butter and plates live under a permanent dust-sheet of green muslin. Wood is stacked meticulously beside the fuel stove, and huge tins of dripping repose along a shelf. They seem to cook everything in this, waiting for the smoke to rise before popping in the potato chips, or bread, or onion rings, or dumplings. . .

When Cheppie is not chasing the rooster or standing on the verandah she is eating, and her face loses that strange, empty look and becomes quietly content. When Cheppie goes to heaven she will be allowed to eat all day long without becoming fat and hideous; or if she does become fat and hideous it will not matter. Somewhere else Cheppie would be a half-wit bastard. Here she is Cheppie, whose mother dropped her on a footpath when she was a baby, and then drowned herself soon afterwards, so that there was nowhere for the child to go but to her grandmother. Cheppie is twenty-four, and that is as high as she can count. She has twenty-four hens, twenty-four dolls, twenty-four pin-cushions full of pins, all sizes of pins, long, short, shiny, rusty, pins with

big white knobs on the end, pins with bright sharp points. At night she will sit at the kitchen table with a picture magazine, sticking her pins into society ladies with long necks and skinny eyebrows. She will sit there sometimes for hours. . .

Now she comes heavily in, the rooster under one arm. She is scolding it, hrrnnfffing half-heartedly for appearance's sake. The old lady is wary, suspicious. No sooner is the rooster back in the yard again, strutting about the wire cage that Somers has made from old bedsteads, than Somers himself appears, his empty lunchbox in his hand, and the old lady's heart is squeezed in her chest.

In her apron pocket the pills are rattling. "Take one! Take one!" they cry out. "Take one under the tongue when required." One flat white disc is slipped under the lollypop tongue. "Repeat when necessary." When is necessary? It is a dreadful thing to be old and not to know. It is so dark in the evenings now. And the fat is ready.

On the table the lunch box is open. Somers takes out the crumpled paper and throws it into the stove. No butterscotch for Cheppie? And it's Friday! He has forgotten! How mean he is! How hateful! And the old one, too, standing so queerly still beside the stove.

He has closed the stove door now, and straightens under the stares of the women. To their separate unspoken questions he gives the briefest shake of his head, then ambles quietly away to fetch more wood.

Soon the fat is full of rissoles, and Cheppie is in the bedroom, grudgingly feeding her dolls. She does this first because they are naughty children and will run all over the kitchen, snatching food from the table if they are not satisfied. Some of them are worse than others. The two pipe-cleaner ones are full before the rest. The china one without teeth is sloppy and greedy, but you can put up with her. The really bad one is Katy, who has white nylon hair in a little net, and a dress that is held together with safety pins. She cries more loudly than the rest, and is bossy, and one day Cheppie will throw her down a hole, to punish her for being so bad. Now she is insisting on a second helping, when there is scarcely enough to go round once! The selfish, white-haired thing! Just to take her and shake her makes Cheppie feel better. Better still to bang her stupid head against the wall. Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Cheppie! What are you doing!" calls the old lady from the kitchen.

"She's being cruel to me! Stop her!" cries the little doll.

So, just to show her, once and for all, and also because — because — because all sorts of things, Cheppie marches her out to the stove and thrusts her chewed little hand in the boiling fat.

It is nearly Christmas again. Duty day. The house is hostile to the intruders, who have left it because it is so poor. It is comfortable to be dusty and cluttered and piebald, and it is cool of an evening in the kitchen, where the windows, seeming to be so awkwardly placed, are in reality just where they should be to catch the breeze. For Cheppie the breeze brings a promise of sleep after the day. Too nauseated to eat, she nevertheless watches in wonder as her body swells beneath her dress. She is clumsier than ever, and spends most days slumped in a cane chair with the sweat running down her forehead into her eyes. The dolls are forgotten—they have probably starved to death by now. And no, she doesn't care, she feels too hot, take them away, go away yourself, she is sick, something is wrong with her, honk, honk, leave her alone.

Somers is putting down bricks at the back door. He has dug up a strip of ground, carefully with a shovel, and will soon stamp it down evenly as a base for the bricks. Then there will be cement to fill the spaces, and the choko vine will trail itself across a wire and cast a beautiful shade. That is how he sees it. He has thought it out very thoroughly. He has decided it will be done by Christmas. So he works at it each night, putting down a few bricks at a time, exactly right, and during the day they step over the piles and dodge the holes as they walk in and out.

They do not talk about it. And their eyes never meet as they lift their legs. They will go on pretending for as long as they can. The old lady plumps a cushion for Cheppie, keeping her eyes on the washing that tugs at the clothes-line and sets the prop swinging. Somers is emptying the tub with a dipper that he sloshes over the fence. Cheppie lolls in her chair, retching now and then into a bowl. None of it is really happening. They will all wake up in the morning and find it was a dream. It is a no-time time. They can go on for ever like this. They can make a day last for a year if they really try. Christmas need never come.

One evening, as he squats there, balancing himself on the balls of his feet, Somers is aware that the ginger kitten has unconfined herself from

under the house. Head and shoulders first, nose jabbing the air to locate ribbons of smell; then, reassured, the rest of her follows, in one quick movement that lands her, surprisingly, on the bricks. But she is too hungry to spare more than a glance for them. She is demanding to be fed, and her belly hangs in slack folds like an empty udder. She drinks ravenously from the saucer that Somers brings. Even the ridge of cream around the edge she sweeps with her tongue. Then, satisfied for the present, she wriggles back into her hole.

His shoulders more stooped than ever under their new burden, Somers has almost forgotten her, until she struggles up through the hole with a bundle in her mouth. This she lays carefully on the ground and disappears again, only to return with another. Three times she repeats this ritual before he realizes he is being honored. These are her babies she is showing him.

She is inviting him to admire them, if he cares to. But, cat-like, she will not be hurt if he doesn't —merely offended. At another time he might be amused. He observes that Cheppie has been watching, half-interested, from under sluggish lids. Her face bears the faintest suggestion of a smile.

Time stops altogether. Perhaps after all it will begin to go backwards.

For there is the smallest glimmer of hope to be seen in that smile, the merest hint of release, the remotest chance that guilt may not need to be compounded. For the first time in twenty-five years, he dares to hope that God may be merciful.

His hands are unusually gentle as they put the fluffy bundles on her knees. Mottled, blind, and silently mewing, she lets them tumble into the furrow between her legs. He takes one of her fingers and draws it slowly along a shivering flank. She allows this to happen. He does it again. And again. He is teaching her. Slowly. Lightly. He is teaching her to stroke, wanting her to be tender, entreating her with his fingers to be kind. The effort of will shows in the long tight sinews of his neck.

The whole world is stopped in mid-spin. Halfway across the sky a magpie is suspended. The hens are grotesque statues caught with one foot in the air. The dish-cloth the old lady is hanging on a pear tree stays billowed by a captive gust of wind.

It is the ginger kitten who decides that the world will go on. At the top of those fat white legs, her babies are being outraged. There is a growl and a hiss and a spring, and blood and a honk of pain. The world is full of babies that are brushed aside. thrown down, trampled. There is nothing anyone can do about it. The no-time time is over. Christmas will soon be here.

The opacity has gone from the old lady's eyes. But, curiously, there is no more watching. She perceives, because at last she must, not obliquely, muddled and muddling, but sharply, in painful detail, the things that have been comfortably blurred. The man who is called Somers goes from woodheap to chookyard, to vegetable garden, to vine. And she sees that these things are the years of his life patiently linked to hers, his guardianship, his voluntary forfeit. There is no need for him to tell her what has been, and what must come, and why.

"Goodnight, Cheppie love. Are you comfy? Do you want a cup of tea? Or some butterscotch?"

The bed is lumpy, the nighty is too tight, open the window, it is too hot to sleep, honk, honk, honk.

Yes, yes, my little one. Close your eyes. Try to sleep. It will not be long now.

The old lady knows. Many times before it happens, she hears the rooster call in the sultry night, feels the bed heave as Cheppie rolls obediently out of it, sees the choko tendrils reaching out. They twine themselves around wrists and ankles, tug at hair, getting tighter the harder they are pulled. They wait till they are sure, and then they flip her upside down. She is a flour sack, white and fat in the moonlight, and when she comes down she bursts open without a sound, spilling the flour all over the bricks and staining them the color of the rooster's comb.

The daughters cannot come for the funeral. There are so many things to do, shopping, holidays, everyone is so rushed at Christmas. But we'll be home on the Day, Mom, don't you worry.

"Sorry about the funeral, Mom," they say as they moistly kiss her. "Poor little Cheppie; but perhaps it was better this way."

She looks at them in a way they take to be uncomprehending. They explain patiently. "Well, it wasn't much of a life she had, really. And then, being pregnant—she was, wasn't she?—well, I mean, what sort of a chance would the baby have had? And who would have looked after it? You?"

The squeeze is there again. It is never far away.

When it goes she says "Yes" rather dully, and they look at each other knowingly, their eyes

saying: "She's wandering. She's getting on. Poor old Mom. She's failing now."

And later, driving home along Christmas roads, they console themselves for the cloud that has fallen on their day, saying: "Really, I don't think she's all that cut up over Cheppie. Old people are funny. Their horizons contract, you know. They don't feel things nearly as much as we do. And of course, as for that oaf Somers . . ." they snigger at the very idea ". . . one doesn't suppose he could care less, one way or the other."

floating fund

STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH writes: With friends like this who needs enemies? I write this at the end of September, two months after the previous *Overland* was published. For those whole two months I have been trying to get our $2000 grant out of the Council for the Arts. The Literature Board of that Council washes its hand of the whole affair, and says it can get no help or satisfaction. The Council says it's the Board's fault. In the meantime cheques I have sent out are being bounced, and I have had to borrow money from friends to pay some insistent creditors. In the bad old days we got our Commonwealth Literary Fund grant within a week or so of the publication of each issue—but of course that was when there were only two or three people running the show.

We'd be in an even more bloody mess except for:

$100—PP/L; $20—RM; $10—CC; $8—PA, AGS, CM, ML, JS; $6—RS, CS; $5—JD, JW, MA; $4—JC, RG; $3—PMcK, VB, MJO, DMcL, NDM, JM, EC, JP, JB, EF, JZ, RC, DM, DF, DB, DR, JJ, TIM, FB, JB, JM, MP, CTS, GH, PP, JB, HF, JE, AE, RN, GG, PW, RM, AF, WK, LR, BR; $2—RB, NW, NO'C, IM, PO'C, RR, KB, BW, GP, LF, AH, FW, RSS, TB, EP, RT, C, CE, MC, DC, GS, WA, FJ, GL; $1.62—LJ; $1.50—SD; $1—EW, WJA, MD. RZ, ER, TMcK, MM, LB, RW, PF, RC, AK, DA, TP, LP, WW, RC, RGE, LR, MO'D, HMcK, BM, EH, PT, DG, CG, PF, RG, NA, NN, DG, BA, BE, RdL, MD, LK, JS, JC, EH, KMcE; 87c—JC; 50c—MBN, DW, MP, GA, WG, FS, KH, AB, GB.
TOTAL—$412.49.

JIM GRIFFIN

A Reply to a Retort

Ronald Conway's "Retort" (*Overland* 53) to my "Psycho-Historical Arse-Grass" (52) is such a startling piece of self-exposure that it may seem like obsessive voyeurism to take the matter further. However, I did, in fact, write a lengthy reply dealing in detail with Conway's allegations because the reception of *The Great Australian Stupor* makes it seem likely that many people will take this formidable bombast seriously. The editor declined to publish this reply on the grounds that readers had complained that the controversy has taken up too much space. I can only say that, from the readers I know, I did not get the impression that the exchange had been otiose but, if it was, then I apologise for the relish with which I began it. However, I do find it somewhat disabling that Conway has been allowed to use *ad hominems* in a defamatory way without being myself offered as much space as necessary to deal with them. Still I accept the ruling.

Conway's general unreliability can be best exposed by the fact that he claims that the "scholar of distinction", Geoffrey Blainey, had praised his book. Blainey has told me that not only has he never said anything about the book in public or private, but he has not even read it!

Conway tries to destroy my critique by asserting that it "is founded on a one-sided paranoid personal animus extending back over twenty years", and implies the existence of extraneous and allegedly self-incriminating material. No such *documentation* exists, even if Conway thinks that private (and privileged) letters are *documents*—and I gather from the *Advocate* (16 November 1972) that he does not. To put the matter as briefly as possible, I met Conway occasionally between 1948 and 1951 but, for fairly obvious reasons, took no further notice of him until I opened the *Advocate* on New Year's Day (1970) to find myself gratuitously associated with "Leftists" who had supported "mass murder and the suffocation of dissent"; presumably because I had, in a polemical review, called B. A. Santamaria "that perpetual altar-boy" (*Catholic Worker*, November 1969). During the correspondence which followed Conway truly wrote: "I know him [i.e. 'the improbable' Griffin—J.G.] only slightly . . ." (5 February 1970). He then publicly invited me to write to him privately.

His letters will, I am sure, be the most curious item of my literary relics, but I am prepared to show them to his psycho-analyst who may judge whose "absurd personal secrets" should be kept from public display. But they are *private* letters and I hope its does me a little credit that I did not use them, nor have I said anything about Conway that he himself has not publicly provided in self-advertisement. If any reader can "sniff the gamey scent of vendetta", then the odor emanates from Conway. One may well wonder how an allegedly responsible writer, let alone a clinical psychologist, can so recklessly use words like "paranoid"—and be allowed to do so. The trouble with Conway is that he cannot *inform* anyone of his alleged hang-ups in a scholarly fashion (e.g. the Australian male and his supposed "latent homosexuality"). Rather he has to *threaten* people insensately with them.

He quite scandalously accuses me of reviling his family and of misreporting Claudia Wright. I did nothing of the kind. Readers should look at the *Herald* (11 November 1971), Conway's book (pp. 32-3) and my remarks in *Overland* where I said that his "embarrassing" grand-parental story was tasteless and unfair to himself. I did not use

it against him personally except to show up his absurd misuse of historical sources.

Conway also accuses me of "nagging calumnies" against B. A. Santamaria. Calumny means telling deliberate lies about a person to damage his reputation. I have pointed out to Conway before in a private letter that I have never "calumniated" Santamaria. Neither he, nor anyone else has ever tried to demonstrate that I have. His remark that I have "shrewdly ducked any opportunity" of meeting Santamaria is marvellously mystifying to a person who has tried to engage the great man in controversy in the *Age*, the *Australian*, *New Guinea* quarterly, *Catholic Worker*, the *Advocate*—but to no avail. It is childish to expect me to seek him out personally.

Conway accuses me of "hearty lies" in characterising his *Advocate* column but refuses to specify one of them. He worries about the time I spent compiling my *Overland* piece (which, really, wasn't all that difficult), but what would he have said if I had been as slipshod as he is himself? How do you win? If the reader wants some recent Conway ("since I have struck form", he says) let him look to the review of Niall Brennan's *The Politics of Catholics* (16 November 1972) which even the editorial board of the *Advocate* had to "regret" (23 November 1972) and then to Conway's mealy-mouthed self-justification (30 November 1972).

On the history chapters Conway says that I deploy my "very few guns cunningly enough to suggest dozens of possible hits at 'errors' which in fact do not exist". Lamentably this is not true. The reader need only compare Conway's references and the text. Look up the quotation from Stephen Roberts' *Squatting Age* in *Stupor* (p. 21). It is incorrectly cited. Then compare Roberts' *Squatting Age* (pp. 304-5) and Roberts' *Land Settlement* (first edition, pp. 171-2) with Conway's interpretation of what Roberts said and with his own later remarks on the squatters (p. 24, 27). Conway would be better off boning up on dyslexia than playing the sorcerer's apprentice to psycho-analysts. And I insist that he does not know his Jeremy Bentham either. I dealt with Conway on the most rudimentary ground, i.e. of his ability to read, but if anyone (e.g. Peter Coleman) thinks Conway's guru, Gordon Rattray Taylor, is worthy of any serious consideration, let him look up *Sex in History* (pp. 53-4, 132) for Taylor's judgement on the totality of medieval history.

Poor Conway tries to bully his way out of every embarrassment. My succinct but accurate correction of the serious error about Kinsey and homosexuality becomes an "idiotic oversimplification", when Conway should be asking himself the reason for the *lapsus* whereby two key words of his MS. were omitted.

It is possible that 67 per cent. of the people Conway "encounters" at St. Vincent's are not Catholics, but this is meaningless. I would wonder what percentage of the cases he intensively "processed" (which seems a more appropriate word for a psychologist than "treated", which belongs more to the psychiatrist) are Catholic. People in a position to make an informed guess have told me that my instinct is right. I need hardly point out again how difficult it is for Conway to report the simplest things accurately.

It is not necessary to be a trained psychologist to spot the dubious assumptions and the bumptious assertions even in areas where Conway is supposed to have current expertise, or to acknowledge that in relation to, say, child-rearing or sex education, he can write masterfully about the obvious. It does not seem necessary to withdraw or seriously qualify any point I made in my previous article.

[Ronald Conway states that his reference to Geoffrey Blainey was due to a misunderstanding of a comment made to him by a third party.—Ed.]

LAURIE HERGENHAN writes:

A lapse in proofreading—or **"POOFREADING"**—as a pamphlet on the art was modestly entitled—may have led to a curious error in Xavier Herbert's "The Agony and the Joy" in *Overland* 50/51. It is simply corrected: on p. 67, read "Sod" instead of "God"—to give Xavier's reference to me as: "The One Just Sod in Sodom". Whether *Overland* was trying to protect my reputation, or whether my handwritten correction on the typescript was misread, the joke was missed and some blasphemy added: the original "Man" became "Sod" only to be transformed into "God".

books

INSIGHT AND INTEGRITY

C. H. B. Priestley

Rohan Rivett: *David Rivett: Fighter for Australian Science* (Rivett, $5.95).

Fighter is too small a word for Rivett's role in Australian science, for he was also architect, builder, visionary leader. Son of a Congregational minister in rural Victoria, 'Bert' Rivett the boy grew up steeped in an atmosphere of public service, questioning attitudes, and unbroken competitive study. Melbourne and Oxford Universities, the Nobel Institute, marriage to a daughter of Alfred Deakin, and a lifelong association with Professor David Masson rounded out David Rivett the man, as well as his research philosophy.

The mid-1920s saw the end of governmental flirting with the need for national initiatives in science, in the creation by S. M. Bruce of the CSIR. The initial problems were seen as those of plant and animal pests and diseases, food preservation, forest products and fuel. Rivett was appointed Chief Executive Officer and imbued the infant with a structure and philosophy to which its later successes—and almost unique public reputation—could be largely attributed. The program was progressively expanded into work on soils, crop and animal husbandry, fertilisers, animal nutrition, fisheries. Aeronautics and industrial chemistry, the first major moves towards secondary industry, were established in the late thirties; national standards, radio propagation and other defence applications during the war; and then came a start on problems of the environment, with research on buildings, meteorology, oceanography, integrated land survey.

The book emphasizes how far Rivett's approach lay from the whole system on which the Commonwealth public service had been built. He spurned the luxury, even many of the comforts, of the top brass. Such expenses and, more significantly, all administrative costs must be trimmed to the bone, to ensure the greatest possible financial support and flexibility for the man on the bench. The researcher, always the best available, should be given rather general terms of reference and then allowed to tackle his job in his own fashion. Promotion would be on scientific merit, not seniority or dead men's shoes. Fundamental research must hold its own with more specific project work, for problem-solving capacity would thereby follow on a far wider and more comprehensive basis. Each broad area would have its chief. These would be the real scientific directors whom the administration should be designed to serve, and in whom must lie the trust and test of the whole structure.

Rivett himself found it hard to delegate responsibility, so it was a triumphant fusion of the man into his own system which gave CSIR its most vital attribute—a minimal number of steps between the research and the policy-making level.

The high ride of science in the public image has now become less secure because of the destruction and pollution wrought by some of its applications. But science does not set goals: it is a method of study, one which often provides the best route towards goals otherwise determined by the community at large. Though Rivett looked wider, the main objective of his generation was a greater productivity from primary and secondary industry. Balance with natural resources and quality of life and environment are now seen as strongly competitive objectives. But such changes in the goals affect neither the essence nor the merit of the scientific method; the ideal conditions under which research can best prosper are likewise unchanged.

With the opportunity in 1946 to come to Australia, to start a new activity in environmental science, it took but a single interview with Rivett to swing my own hesitation. Here surely was something altogether better than the bureaucratic satiation experienced in U.K. and North America. And so it proved. Men atop the administration bent backwards to help the new chum adjust: White, Gresford, Grace, and others, to all of whom the early CSIRO some two years later was

so greatly indebted, for they saw to it that as little as possible was subtracted when 'O' was added to CSIR.

This reorganisation, aimed to bring the body more directly under the control of Government and Public Service Board, was the issue over which Rivett, now Chairman, and his Chief Executive Officer, Dr Richardson, resigned. His resistance against Chifley and Dedman over the new measures was at its height when the *coup de grace* came from an unexpected direction. Rivett's public stand for freedom of communication between scientists gave the pretext for Liberal and Country Party front-benchers to smear him as a security risk. Though comforted by the knowledge of support from almost the whole scientific community, he knew then that his last battle was lost.

Not so the earlier ones. His principles had been adopted, and most were to be carried on in spirit even if obscured by regulation. His chiefs had been protected from short-term political and economic buffetings. In large measure the confidence of leaders of industry and government had been gained, levels of collaboration with State departments established. The more subtle fight against territorial attitudes, resentment, and jealousy of success can never be totally won, but Rivett's complete integrity had taken him close.

The biography deals well with the formative years of both the man and the institution. But we are never shown the mature man through the son's eyes, nor given a critical evaluation of what the whole thing amounted to in terms of scientific and industrial advances. This is what is wanted if the fullness of Rivett's achievement is to be properly remembered, for criticism is the essence of science and a scrapbook of testimonials does nothing to fill the deficiency.

On the other hand, all praise for the selection from Rivett's own letters: magnificent writing revealing, in intimate self-portraiture, all his warmth and wisdom, devotion and complete lack of pretentiousness. Oddly, though, the excitement of the chase and the ecstasy of the discovery do not show through. Rivett had sacrificed his personal research prospects with regret, but surely the greater administrators must still experience these joys at second hand.

Actions show him ahead of his time: advocating, in the depression years, a national effort in the search for minerals; as President of the Royal Australian Chemical Institute, choosing 'State Endowment for Motherhood' as the topic of his address; in his writings too, in suggesting fresh targets for science, "could we not exchange material goods for the other products of human ability which make no appeal to stomachs and are not wanted to cover bodies or to move them about . . . art in all its forms, music, sculpture, painting . . . beautification of landscape and of city and of home . . . the cultivation and spread of pure knowledge and beauty, the opportunity for creative work of the most satisfying kind."

And will this from 1949 prove a more distant prescience?: "Like you I am unhappy about the future. The main danger as I see it is that people will knuckle under to the bureaucratic regime and, by avoiding fight and seeking comfort, they will gradually reach a condition of tolerant acquiescence in what they formerly knew to be wrong. A generation will arise that knows not freedom and will be content to do without it. Then some day an old battle will be fought over again." All of science is now under critical scrutiny by a growing, but not always better informed, political and public consciousness. Within the organisation which his principles made great, there are those who feel that some of them are outmoded. Others who knew him many wish he were still here, ready to don the boxing gloves which we presented to him on his retirement.

PECULIARLY AUSTRALIAN

Leonie Kramer

Geoffrey Serle: *The Creative Spirit in Australia* (Heinemann, $8.50 and $2.95).

In attempting a cultural history of Australia Geoffrey Serle deserves the admiration, and has probably already earned the envy, of his colleagues. This is the kind of book that most of us would like to have written, because it is an exceptionally difficult one to write. To draw together the main events of 180-odd years of political, social and cultural history into a continuous, orderly and objective narrative is a discouraging task in prospect, and a notable achievement—one for which teachers and students will be grateful.

Yet, having admired the easy stride of the writing, paid tribute to Geoffrey Serle's stern (though not always successful) attempt to exclude himself from the narrative, and acknowledged the immense labor that has gone into the search for and ordering of material from a wide variety of sources, I must confess to considerable uneasiness about his method. My problem begins with the question of who should write cultural history.

The historian has obvious qualifications for the task, but unless he is a man of quite remarkable capacities and tastes, his knowledge and understanding of the arts will not match his knowledge of political and social history. So he will have to rely on secondary sources for much of his essential material.

This is Geoffrey Serle's first obstacle, and it is to his credit that he acknowledges it unashamedly by confessing "I cannot claim expert knowledge in any of the major cultural fields (except, perhaps, to a limited extent in literature)". That word "expert" is a difficult one, and it might well be a modest disclaimer. But the evidence points the other way, since, whether he needed to or not, Serle, in his own words, offers "a summary presentation" of standard reference books on art, music, literature and architecture. That they are good books in themselves is not in question; whether they are all (or equally) good for his purpose is another matter. The use he makes of them is, I would think, indefensible, especially in a work which seems to be directed largely at students.

I have two main criticisms of this aspect of the book. Most of the chapters have a short introduction, followed by a summary of the main achievements in painting, literature, drama and music, these sections varying in length, of course, according to the period under consideration. Critical description of the main trends in the arts is central to Serle's design. Whatever conclusions he might draw from his material, whatever validity his "rudimentary attempt at a theory of cultural growth" might have, are dependent on his insight into the significance of shifts in artistic aims and intentions. Yet he places himself entirely at the mercy of critics, who, whatever their individual merits, can give him only their opinions for transmission to his readers. The result (and here, to be fair, I must concentrate on my own special area) is an unacceptable (and often alarmingly inaccurate) offering of pre-digested opinions and statements from which, in many cases, one could hardly attempt to rescue the actual writer. Take, for example, the section on poets in the fifties—poets, we are firmly told, of "the second rank":

> David Campbell, for example, wrote poetry of landscape and rural folk with unselfconscious ease and delight; Harold Stewart was exotic in his use of Oriental themes and symbols; Rosemary Dobson, a detached, polished craftsman, used painting as an inspiration; John Manifold was a balladist, wry satirist and left-wing propagandist; and Francis Webb (b. 1925), who was to influence some of the rising poets of the sixties, displayed brilliant but bewildering talent in his narratives.

I am sure that Geoffrey Serle has read the work of many of the writers to whom he refers. But what he writes about them could easily have been written by someone who had not read them at all. He accepts the critical pronouncements of others uncritically. These tabloid judgments are inaccurate, misleading, and, worst of all, dull.

There is, however, a less obvious, though possibly more serious weakness in Serle's use of secondary material. He does not seem to allow for the fact—though surely he must be aware of it—that critical books such as those by Bernard Smith, H. M. Green, Judith Wright, Roger Covell and Robin Boyd are themselves part of his *primary* material. In other words, they themselves are evidence in the case he is presenting, and their attitudes towards the arts are affected by the kinds of influences Serle traces. In taking over their statements as though they were merely descriptive he distorts his own picture. Judith Wright's *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* is a case in point. It is a very idiosyncratic, highly personal account of its subject, which says at least as much about Judith Wright's preoccupations as it does about Australian poetry. As a *primary* source for cultural history it is extremely interesting, and for this reason its judgments need to be treated with great caution. They cannot be adopted as statements of fact, and they certainly cannot be credited with the kind of objectivity Serle seeks to confer upon his narrative.

I say "seeks", because objectivity, for the historian as for the critic, is, no doubt, greatly to be desired, but hardly to be achieved. Serle's own attitudes show through in his criticism of the "mystique of practicality", his (to me) rather simplistic notions about Australian independence, conservatism, nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and what he calls "a true sense of regional consciousness". I am not objecting to this. On the contrary, I think this would have been in some ways a better book if Serle had allowed his imagination more scope, and restrained his habit of bland generalisation. It does not help to be told that between the forties and sixties "in the arts there was on the whole a harmonious reconciliation of Australian traditional approaches and natural use of Australian subject-matter with international techniques and world views". It would be interesting though to hear Serle speculate, however tentatively, on the causes of some

of the phenomena he records; or to raise questions, even if they cannot be answered, about the kinds of connections that can be discovered between a nation's history and its artistic efforts, or about the assimilation of political and social fact into art. How accurately do the arts reflect their environment? What influence do they have upon a country's view of itself? There are many such questions central to the understanding of the creative spirit. But they are not raised, and one is left to wonder why Australia produced talents so various as Furphy, Norman Lindsay, Brennan and John Shaw Neilson within the same half century.

It is idle to take a book to task for not being something else; but there are disappointments and missed opportunities here. And in the end, I can't help feeling that Serle is reluctant to claim too much for his compatriots' creativity, even in literature. This may be a product of his tabloid method, which successfully drains its subject-matter of vitality, and reduces even the liveliest author to an entry on a filing card. But he also seems to be on the defensive, as though afraid that, if he expresses his own enthusiasm for his country's creative spirit, the "chatter of cultured apes" might proclaim him a barbarian after all.

In spite of these criticisms, though, the book stands as a real contribution to the study of Australian culture, and as a rebuke to those of us who have said that it's time somebody wrote it, but who haven't had the courage to try. It's also, of course, itself a primary source for the future historian of our culture. He will no doubt speculate on it as a phenomenon of the 1970s; and perhaps in exploring the connection between what it says, and what it is, he will see as peculiarly Australian its avoidance of speculation, its cautious approach to the arts, its respect for authority (and its simultaneous championing of indepen-

POETS

Dennis Douglas

Leon Slade: *Slade's Anatomy of the Horse* (U.Q.P., $1).
Richard Tipping: *Soft Riots* (U.Q.P., $1).
Thomas Shapcott: *Start with Walking* (U.Q.P., $1).

There is a poem of Leon Slade's in which a barefooted, unshaven vagrant, run down by a semi-trailer, dies on a bed of smashed spectacles whispering "Kryptonite, bloody kryptonite."

How funny, or tragic, is a dying schizophrenic's belief that he is Superman? The concept has the frivolousness of surrealism, but in a fragment of Apollinaire or a Cocteau film the suffering would not count. In surrealism illusion unfolds into further illusion.

In Leon Slade's world the suffering counts. Beyond the illusion is an inescapable note of black despair.

So a gesture of affection becomes an appeal against the waste of unredeemed time:

> Dutch, Dutch, you may have forgotten,
> but I have not, those winter days
> in the long dry summer that hung
> on endlessly.

And remembered fulfilment is as exasperating in its futility as decay:

> . . . dead flowers drooping in dried out preserve
> bottles. Like love, they were once fresh
> but they fade and fall away, naturally.

Or idealisation twists into calculated obscenity:

> Eyes close to watch Aphrodite wading from
> the sea of flowers, impatient for the cress
> to fall from her hips, to watch the plunging
> thighs lift and show me the strange black flower.

Or an ultranormal morning glimpse of Melbourne disintegrates into nightmare:

> I can't concentrate. From my window
> I see a disemchymneyed afterthought of smoke
> listing over the docks, an empty chain
> of cattle trucks rattling over the stretched giraffe,
> Rachel stepping on the gas, getting the works.

Or a bright paradox turns the experience of a lifetime upside down:

> Death's
> an acceptable separation, not like birth
> or loved ones slipping away into the crowd.

The clipped, incisive diction is the language of a retreat from feeling, as though the voice speaking through the poem were the voice of a more impassive alter ego. The basic strategies of the performance are evasive, self-concealing. The quest for a style is the quest for the capacity to ignore what the poetry is pointing to:

> By the stonewalled creek,
> a ragged boy avoids the claws
> of a yabby that he'd caught.

There are lighter poems in *Slade's Anatomy of the Horse*, and many that I do not fully understand, but the best things have the taut ironic bite of a news photograph I remember seeing years ago, of a semi-trailer at a suburban intersection, with a Morris Minor under its front wheels, and a legend over its windscreen reading Lonely Boy.

The obscurity of much of the verse in the book is linked with a wish to employ indirectness of expression as a distancing technique, to challenge comprehension, to tease the reader's sense of normality. Leon Slade's great asset, it seems to me, is a rhetoric of emotion that overrides obscurity, and communicates a sharp feeling for the discontinuities that hedge about our lives, and call into question our wish for the harmony and coherence reality always seems on the point of achieving.

Richard Tipping, who co-edited one of the 'little magazines' of the late sixties, has released a collection which includes many poems representative of the new rhetoric of the period 1968-70.

Looking at a poem like "Captain Cook Considers His Fete", the brilliance of the humor, the verbal imagination, the sensitivity to effects of tonal reversals, the use of double and triple levels of contextual reference, the playing-off of self-images against externalised concepts of identity, are all credits. The debits relate to the weight of the images and situations evoked:

> When he sailed in, (his head filled with his mother's warnings, tensing his sealegs, his worrybeads worrying, screwing and unscrewing his shining telescope, watching the Natives watching his ship), the full significance of his present reactions escaped him completely.

Bringing together the nagging ambitions of suburbia, the anxieties of the nursery, and the dubious achievements of historical heroes, involves a certain kind of humor but not wit.

What is fascinating is the extension of personality into things, the sealegs turning into instruments, the worrybeads into fragments of sensibility, the telescope into a semi-phallic, semi-erotic, semi-infantile status symbol. Objects, in this context, are no longer objects, nor consciousness unified. Captain Cook is really a collage.

The final point parodies the procedures of the historian, stressing the clash between action and hindsight, the demands of situation, and the patterns imposed by later commentators on processes which had their own logic, and little self-consciousness to impede their working-out.

In a limited kind of way, that poem enlarges the reader's sense of what a poem can be and do, and one might expect, as becomes apparent, that Tipping's use of the techniques of the new rhetoric was characterised by a certain formal alertness.

"Soft Riots/TV News", for example, had more to do with communication in a media-oriented world than with the necessity of certain kinds of political action. The meaninglessness of the packaged news is of a piece with the imagination's revolutionary posturings, and the firing-squad sequence is punctuated by Goon Show lines and instructions to the cameraman.

All good clean fun, and I suppose humor was a saving grace for Richard Tipping at that stage. It certainly lent itself to poetic ends more sophisticated than most other writers under twenty proposed for themselves.

But what happens after the revolution? What happens when the movement collapses and the new rhetoric loses its novelty, when the new poets stop writing and the magazines have gone, or changed?

I see no evidence that Richard Tipping has developed a firm sense of where he can go, and in some ways the weaker traits of his poetic persona are gaining over his talent. A poet who derives stimulus from his *milieu*, as Richard Tipping once did, is vulnerable to long periods of sterility and to the complete loss of inspiration, as has happened to a large number of young writers of late. It would be a pity if he failed to keep his talent alive; but then, keeping talent alive is not the easisest thing to do in a cultural climate such as Australia's today.

The recent work in *Soft Riots* is the work of a poet marking time. I think he might have done well to stay out of print until something more solid had crystallised.

Only in the descriptive passage in "Anzac Day" is there evidence of renewal, and the overt theme of that poem does not share the sharpness of focus of the natural imagery.

Thomas Shapcott has benefitted enormously from lessons learnt over the last five years. Much of the stodginess that had weakened his verse has now been leached out of it, and although his title poem for this new collection seems wooden in execution and only apparently inventive in conception, the travel sketches, at the other end of the scale (who has not brought home etchings of

gondolas?) have the lucidity and technical freedom many a poetaster dreams of.

The dramatic monologues, notably "The Ghost Cave" and "Miss Norah Kerrin Writes to her Betrothed", represent the strongest development on a form already marked out by Shapcott as his special territory among Australian poets today. It is as though he needed the special enigma of another identity, the special challenge of interpreting an inner life not his own, to form the structural nucleus of his best poems.

Even "92nd St. Dialogue" is composed about the mystery of the reality and unreality of emotions which are not one's own, and part of another distant human being's soul, as the last six lines perhaps indicate:

> "One does endure suffering." "Yes."
> "It is like trapped in network of subways
> and trains always passing." "I will have one slice
> I shouldn't." "Above, on the sidewalk, one does not
> believe
> such agony possible." "I'm sorry to burden you."
> "Impossible." "Impossible."

"Miss Norah Kerrin" involves a lyricism of objects, in which the forsaken maiden dreams of an identity defined only in relation to things, circumscribed by realities as tangible as the walls of her summerhouse, and as dual in nature, partaking both of the world of the garden and the world of the drawing room:

> I am as I always was, intruder. But they call it mine,
> mad auntie's summerhouse. My walls, the hostile
> fragrant trees;
> my lattice, only leaves slanted upon the sun.
> I thought this place outside me, then within:
> but it is beyond. Always change, never true change.
> I did not answer when they wrote news of your
> death:
> Your body so young then.
> Belief is never physical.

The poem goes on to suggest the horror of the violation on which artificiality depends, establishing in the brutalities of imperialism and the unending trill of the cicada a norm of reality as against the fragile and contrived, so that in the end pillage and Empire take on the remoteness of the mad aunt's quaint gifts:

> The Empress' lacquer jewel casket,
> pillage and empire; crystal so fragile but too precious
> to splinter. We are each so far away. Summer.
> The children speak with strange barbaric voices.
> They laugh again. Pierce of cicada.
> I offer them candied peel.

These are the images which were used to very different effect in the picture of High Victorian realities and responses at the poem's opening:

> Today we were talking of Empire
> and Commerce. I mentioned the Crystal Palace,
> still dazzling, floating in its hive of light,
> my very first vision. Someone—Uncle Edmund—said
> how India had been a jewel-cask looted and opened;
> this country, Australia, is less still: a quarry, a mine.
> My dear, my dear I weep for anonymous old men
> shaping coarse metal to jewellery, I grieve
> for the remoteness of crystal.

The virgin's aloofness, the cracked aunt's remoteness from reality, correspond to an outer aloofness equally arrogant, equally destructive, equally bent on seeking justification in symbols of the beauty of purity. The dramatic monologues in Thomas Shapcott's earlier poetry did not yoke inner and outer worlds together so firmly.

Even a poem like "Switching on the Light", weakly titled, conceived in terms of an empty grandiloquent gesture affirming something lofty about electronics, opening on a re-working of a famous but thoroughly outdated remark made by an American poet in the late fifties (when concentration camps enjoyed a mercifully brief vogue as poetic images), and thus—one might feel—doomed as a poem, nevertheless suddenly takes on life in the concrete metaphor that comes at the end:

> Anonymity. My cents are the same
> as yours, my vision your skeleton grin. Why, why
> must the crying, wrenching man scream so loudly
> to identify his own individual patterns,
> those giant finger-prints blown up around him
> enlarged in shadow onto a barracks wall?

POLITICS OF CATHOLICS

James K. Ross

Niall Brennan: *The Politics of Catholics*
(Hill Publishing, $1.95)

There is much to critisise in Niall Brennan's latest book—the rehashing of old ground, the inevitable Irish-Catholic basis of analysis, some sweeping generalizations a few minor errors of fact and a slight taint of snobbishness. But these are trivia. The importance of the book is threefold, namely that Brennan endeavors to clarify the political dilemma of Catholics, he appeals to Catholics to examine their political attitudes in the light of their Christian beliefs, and he reveals in himself a prototype of the inner struggles of many Catholics today, who are in the process of

pausing in their movement to the Right or taking their first hesitant steps back to the Labor Party.

To a large extent man's attitudes are a product of his information and experiences. As I am in full agreement with much of what Brennan says yet diverge considerably in emphasis in other areas, it may be as well to clarify briefly the source of my information and the nature of my experiences. At the completion of my term in 1960 as national secretary of the Young Christian Workers, I joined with several others to found the Adult Christian Workers' Movement in the Ballarat diocese. However the Bishop of Ballarat, apparently disturbed at our militant efforts to separate Catholic Action from Santamaria and the National Civic Council, withdrew our mandate to work within the framework of the Church, and the organization became stillborn.

Ever since 1945, when Fr Lombard successfully opposed Santamaria's attempt to turn the Y.C.W. into a junior "Movement", its members had harbored a deep animosity towards the N.C.C. Our personal experiences intensified this resentment but, as we were denied legitimate expression of our convictions, a few of us made the pragmatic judgement to join the N.C.C. and to change its nature. While I had never attended an N.C.C. meeting, the propaganda value of an ex-national secretary of the Y.C.W. was readily seen, and my offer to work full time for the N.C.C. in the Ballarat Diocese was accepted. It is enough to say that, over the next three years, I became fully acquainted with the N.C.C. including the activities of the national executive whose meetings I attended regularly. Finally the division between our commitment to the development of people and Santamaria's concept of pressure group action became so apparent that Santamaria suggested to Bishop O'Collins that it would be best if we were to separate from the N.C.C. and to become a strictly-defined lay apostolate movement. Thus we parted company, each taking about half of the membership. Today the adult lay apostolate movement in Ballarat has developed a new membership and is confined to adult education. None of those involved in the decisions which brought it into existence remain within its ranks.

The central concern of Mr Brennan is that the N.C.C., aided by the Irish ghetto mentality of Australian Catholics and by their formation in the Denys Jackson mould, dominates both the Church and the D.L.P. in Victoria. The result of this influence is that the N.C.C. has gained control of the moral judgements of Catholics, such that almost half the Catholics in the community are acting in a way opposed to their religion and are responsible for the perpetration of many evils in Australian life. He substantiates this viewpoint with informative and personal details which not only make good reading but will no doubt achieve his objective to stimulate reflection by many Catholics. One may share his identification of the D.L.P. both as the symptom and the instrument of spiritual decay. Nevertheless I think his analysis involves two fundamental errors which stem perhaps from his deep involvement in the situation and his personal association with some key people. Santamaria (or even Jackson from another standpoint) is not responsible for the attitudes of the Australian Church—he is the inevitable product of it. Why so many Catholics support the D.L.P. is not because they have been "educated" by Santamaria but rather because they identify in the D.L.P. elements of conservatism, intolerance and self-interest which unfortunately are so much part of what the Church is for them. Consequently they do not act in opposition to their religious principles — they merely act out the deformities which have been masquerading as religious and which "renewal" has so far failed to eradicate. It is this judgement which, in my view, offers a reasonable explanation for the apparent inordinate influence of Santamaria and the several hundred men which make up the N.C.C.

Brennan continually confines opposition to the N.C.C.-D.L.P. group within the Church to the better educated. While one cannot overlook the long-standing and articulate denunciations by those connected with the *Catholic Worker*, there is also another side to the story. Few Catholics would deny that the Church organization which is the most acceptable, the best developed philosophically and the most extensive in Australia is the Y.C.W. Its worker orientation and its progressive spirit—"we are not here to bring the revolution, we are the revolution"—contrasts dramatically with the N.C.C.-D.L.P. While the Y.C.W. is non-political, its emphasis on encouraging young people to accept their responsibilities as workers facilitates the natural gravitation of its members towards the labor movement. I retained contact with the Y.C.W. for at least six years after leaving it. In that time all three national presidents joined the Labor Party in Victoria after their term; the national secretary who succeeded me is a member of the A.L.P.; to my certain

knowledge so too are five ex-full time organizers as well as two editors of its national paper; likewise numerous members of national, state and diocesan executives have become committed in the political arena to the Labor Party. Even in the Ballarat Diocese — which Brennan rightly labels as conservative—two A.L.P. candidates for the 1973 State elections are former full-time workers of the Y.C.W. In contrast I know of only one full-time worker who joined the Liberal Party (from which he subsequently resigned) and I have never heard of any joining the D.L.P. I have dealt with this aspect at some length because it is vital to the overall perspective and is therefore a serious omission from *The Politics of Catholics.*

Mr Brennan is less concerned with the details of the 1954-55 Labor split than with the enormity of two mistakes—firstly that the Catholic Action secretariat should concern itself with politics at all, and secondly that those involved did not know when to stop. While this judgement is beyond dispute, a large number of Catholics still caught up in this tragic melodrama fail to appreciate the implications of his conclusion that Catholic influence has been destroyed in politics because it over-reached itself. Perhaps the recent Labor victory, coupled with the possible return of a Labor Government to Victoria, will highlight this factor. How can the Church demand with dignity educational justice from a party which for almost two decades it has treated with gross injustice?

The anti-labor character of the D.L.P. is self-evident. With admirable courage Mr Brennan is prepared to attack its primary facade by claiming it is anti-Christian. He denounces the D.L.P. as sensationalist in propaganda, unscrupulous in method and vindictive in debate. He points out that intolerance, hatred, bigotry and scandal-mongering are bad for democracy but worse for Christianity, and claims that the whole D.L.P.-N.C.C. alliance is based on religious hypocrisy. It is in this area that Brennan reveals the core motivation of his book—the D.L.P. is not merely an instrument which divides Catholics, it is the central element in a new crisis of conscience for Catholics today. Brennan does not question the right of the D.L.P. to exist. He is more concerned with its alliance with the N.C.C. and through it with its special relationship to the Catholic Church. While Mr Brennan finds the connection between the N.C.C. and the D.L.P. obscure, he provides ample evidence to conclude that the N.C.C. is the powerhouse of the D.L.P. While I have never attended any D.L.P. meeting, my own experiences confirm the view that the D.L.P. is merely the political front of the N.C.C. This is based not only on knowledge of dual membership, unity in policy and organizational interdependence, but also on the fact that my recollections of the monthly meetings of the N.C.C.-D.L.P. "holding company" (which is composed of officials of both bodies) are that it was much more a briefing session by Santamaria than a discussion amongst equals.

The two most serious charges which Brennan levels against the N.C.C. is its absence of Christian charity and its manipulation of truth. While this theme runs throughout the book it is especially emphasised in the chapter "Posturing Christians". Here Brennan's clarity of argument is fortified by a depth of indignation which only personal experience makes possible. However, I am somewhat puzzled by his preoccupation with the 1957 Roman Directive and his concern that the N.C.C. may still be an organization concerned with training and formation. As one who tried to move the N.C.C. towards these concepts, I can assure him that his fears are unfounded. The N.C.C. has no commitment to the development of the human personality. Its total concern is with the mobilization of people and the manipulation of them to serve as functionaries to carry out its policies, to sell *News Weekly* and especially to raise finance. I remember the first meeting I attended—a briefing session by Santamaria. After his twenty minute talk a person questioned one of his points only to be put in his place by Santamaria's remark: "What do you think this is—a debating society?" Likewise, Brennan's distinction between Santamaria and his henchmen leans too heavily on an old personal friendship—"he had been left with a following of Irish Catholic louts ever ready to serve God by punching a heathen nose". I too would draw a distinction between Santamaria and the N.C.C.'s membership, but from a different point of view. It is my experience that the vast majority of N.C.C. members are neither Irish nor louts. Instead they are mainly honest, well-meaning people whose problem is the lack of personal involvement in the industrial or political field. In their ignorance of the real situation they accept Santamaria as an agent of the Church, they are overcome by his statistical arguments and are incapable of appreciating the child-like deviousness of his mind. Let us take an example. After listening to Santamaria's talk at a conference, a friend of mine remarked that it was a complete change

from an article of Santamaria's that he had read in *Rural Life*. On my next visit to the Melbourne office I went to where the back copies were stored to read this article. To my astonishment every copy had the two pertinent pages cut out. George Orwell has indicated in *1984* the difficulties of the ordinary person in searching for truth in the realm of Big Brother.

Not content with probing the historical basis for the Catholic political dilemma or illuminating the nature of the "monkey on the back" of the Church, Brennan provides a much needed practical reflection on the whole issue. He develops in detail seven main policy planks or attitudes fostered by the D.L.P.-N.C.C. which have been supported by members and groups within the Church—these concern militarism, conscientious objection, nuclear "deterrents", United Nations, guilt by label, selective moral indignation and the problems of priests — and asks realistically whether a person can call himself a Christian and believe in the barbaric nonsense presented. Although space does not permit an analysis of each of his arguments, the recent federal election emphasizes the practice of selective moral indignation. Surely it is obvious to all that there is some incongruity, when in the same year that the D.L.P.-N.C.C. mount a political campaign on pornography, their party leader proposes that the atomic bomb should be used on North Vietnam.

The Politics of Catholics is an important book. Its value lies not so much in historical analysis—although historians may acclaim parts of it—but rather in the fact that Brennan has captured a spirit of the times. Many Catholics will recognize in its pages the same questioning or restlessness with the status quo that has begun to preoccupy them or their friends. It is simultaneously an interesting, inspiring, frustrating and annoying book. It invites Catholics to sit back and laugh at themselves, or alternatively to weep at the tragedy of which they are a part. Above all it will stimulate further the spirit that is abroad. Many will find in it new fuel to stoke up the fires of their own thoughts, while others may be moved to take up the issues themselves. Brennan has directed his message more towards the Catholic laity. Yet implicitly *The Politics of Catholics* is both a severe indictment of the Catholic bishops—of Victoria in particular—and an earnest appeal by one of their flock to examine their leadership, not only in the light of political realities, but also in the spirit of the Gospel. For these reasons alone Brennan's labors have not been in vain.

Yet this is an important book too for those who are not Catholics. It delineates the factors which have generated the Catholic political dilemma; it offers to them an insight into the nature of a Catholic crisis of conscience, and it shares with them the anguish of one Catholic who has made his judgement on the action that must be taken. All concerned with political life in Australia both now and in the future, will profit considerably from *The Politics of Catholics.*

THE RISE OF PERSONAL POLITICS

G. J. Engwerder

Graham Little: *Politics and Personal Style* (Nelson, $4.95).

This book has arrived at an appropriate moment. The political mood of the country is obviously in the process of change. Not only are we now concerned with issues that once would have been considered to be outside the proper sphere of political interest, but we are approaching these issuse in a different way. We are re-examining our priorities. This book has stepped into the breach, seeking to provide answers to such things as the politics of ecology, conservation, the rights of women. It seeks to explain the growing complexity and range of political issues and their causes. It seeks to define that qualitative change that prompted Mr Hamer to speak of "the gross national well being" and be taken seriously.

It also has particular relevance for those like myself who are intrigued by the rise of the Australia Party. Has there been a shift in the popular attitude towards politics? The answers are to be found in the three case studies of university students. The first is called Compton, a radical, who is described as a cynic, a nervously aggressive type and a rationalist. The study holds all the fascination of a talk-back program, and indeed you could buy this book for its case studies alone—they take up about half of the book. Compton is a prickly subject for an interview, in that he appears to be continually mocking, on the defensive, engaging in a little sabotage. He starts up the arguments and throws questions back. In other words he is not one to stick to a schedule. He is, generally speaking, anti-institutional and anti-party politics, and tends to see politics in the broad sweep rather than in terms of party machinations. He stresses individual initiative and makes a creed of self reliance and scepticism.

"This energetic sceptic" as Little calls him, depends on three things to support his outlook. One, his self reliance principle. Two, his radicalism. Three, his belief in the benefits of applied intelligence or rationalism. His brimming self confidence gives support to all three traits, yet at bottom it is a precarious self confidence. Academically, his sense of his own "cleverness" does not appear justified; his results are poor, largely as a result of the routine and boredom of his course. As compensation he took up some Arts subjects, and it is the Arts students who are his closest friends and who support his own idea of his "cleverness". So, while his friends think him witty and intelligent, he still finds it impossible to ignore the actual academic results.

Self reliance and independence are the cornerstones of his life style. He stresses his independence from his family and distances himself further still by denying any emotional link with them. Yet it is in the family that we find the source of his rationalism and self reliance. He remains antagonistic towards his father and he regards his mother as a fussy "religieuse". His self reliance means doing without father, who himself is very self reliant and self contained. It is from his father that he gets his rationalism and his exaggerated male characteristics. He attempts to imitate him and fears that his brand of independence may be inferior to that of his father's. Hence he rejects the crowding intimacy of his mother. His rebellion against father however also creates guilt, a guilt that can only be removed by punishment. Compton, in the final analysis, is a super rationalist who misses out on much of the human and the felt.

Little's second profile is that of Bond, the professional student politician. He is the conservative, deferential towards authority and perfectly charming towards his interviewer. Unlike Compton he aims at "perfect customer satisfaction"—the trait of the politician. Bond is very attentive to majorities or the "numbers" and aims to be as representative as possible. He therefore, not surprisingly, reacts strongly to suggestions of being type-cast. That would destroy this representativeness. He is a leader and a bureaucrat, having joined several committees in the belief that "you get nowhere without them". He lays great store by good organisation and reserves his sparsely used criticism for those who don't.

This is not to suggest that Bond is not flexible. He is. How else could he be truly representative? He aims to represent the "backbone" or the common people. He takes note of some minorities and is paternalistic towards the rest or the "unfortunates", as he calls them. He comes from an achievement-oriented family in which the mother is the "brighter of the two", and it is she with whom he discusses matters. He is now leaning more towards his father's tolerance, but nevertheless it is the mother who provides the conservative impetus and from whom he derives the politics of morality. Bond has a radical sister, the black sheep of the family (she also failed a year at uni.) and he is determined that he will not be the trouble to his family that his sister was. He is studying Law. In a sense then he fears becoming symbolically orphaned, both from his parents and the authorities from whom he derives an identity and security.

The third profile is that of Abbott, the Apathetic. He is the control experiment. An Arts student majoring in philosophy, he is both able and responsible. He stresses privacy, hates crowds and committees, and refuses to judge anyone or anything. A laissez faire attitude prompts a low profile. Abbott seems deliberately common in his language, reminding Little of "a grazier leaning on a fence talking to an ABC reporter". He is unassuming and parries intrusive questioning. His privacy is important. He defends it further by being a pluralist and tolerating all things. Once again the reasons for this are to be found in the family. His father has a science/engineering background. He was disappointed in his son's choice of an Arts course, and his son obviously worries about the shapelessness of this course. It is no wonder that Abbott identifies with the powerless against the Mogul type father. His father is too powerful to challenge; the only option is to withdraw into his own world. Hence apathy.

The special feature of this book, as the cover tells us, is its non-statistical presentation. So there are no questionnaires, tables or tests; instead we have the case studies and commentary—what a relief from the 'heavies'!

Right from the outset Little makes it clear that he wants to correct the over-socialised model of man long held by the social sciences. As he points out, the qualitative methods have for too long been confined to the warm up work, while the rest of the race has been run by numbers. Nevertheless he does not shake off this legacy entirely. He carefully steers a middle course between the individual and his inner conflicts on the one hand,

and society as interacting roles, institutions and culture, on the other. The latter school of thought would simply seek to extrapolate on the human evidence, but how *can* we, asks Little, when human beings themselves are understood but crudely?

The basis of the book, the three case studies, bear out the usefulness of this attitude. They are compactly written with the clinical sympathy of a sociological guru. However the approach is probably more significant than the results. We don't really find out that much more about the social origins of political behavior but we do come to realise that human needs must come before social imperatives, that we need less behaviorism, and that we need more study into the irrational factors governing political choice. Little has at least recognised that there is a split between feeling and behavior in the social sciences and has attempted to do something about it.

His insistence on style and personality leads into his thesis on the "new" politics. This concerns itself with the "feminisation" of politics, manifesting itself in such counter-cultural concerns as abortion, ecology and so on. The counterculture and politics have fused, with the result that the range and scope of politics have been extended considerably. It is the inner-directed politics of Compton, independent and non-violent in character. It stresses personal relations; and this is where Abbott, who is just becoming involved, and—particularly—Bond come in, with Bond's sense of human needs and liberalism, and Abbott's sensitivity. It is called the "feminisation of politics" because the "new politics" requires a sensitivity and an outlook that are not tied to party organisation. Such an outlook is clearly emerging. The politicians are starting to look more like Bond, and the public more like Abbott.

The new politics could explain the Federal Labor win or Hamer's win in Victoria, but it is an awkward concept to locate in action. The politics of feeling and experience will have to do battle with the aggressive Australian male political style and the fact that Australian life is lived on the outside. Sensitivity is not a national trait. There are dangers of course. There is nothing to say that this new politics will not turn violently ideological, and Little sees this possibility.

Towards the end of the book Little does seem to lose his grip. He treats the movement as a coherent political movement rather than just a state of mind. But overall Little writes with common sense and a feeling for his own limitations.

THREE WOMB UNIVERSE

Owen Webster

Joseph Johnson: *Womb to Let* (National Press, $5).

Literate Australians have been priding themselves in recent years (ever since the spate of critical orgasms that came with *Bring Larks and Heroes* in 1967) on having grown out of the cultural cringe; of recognising the genius when he appears among them; of according him due, albeit cautious, acclaim. No longer are they unsophisticated colonials incapable of appreciating an avant garde talent; an artist of startling vision and profound originality can grow in Gippsland and work in Melbourne as well as in Dublin, Trieste, Felpham or Lambarene. The critical hostility which Patrick White endured in his homeland until noses had been rubbed for long enough in his encomia from overseas, can't happen again.

Of course, they're kidding themselves. At the time of writing, thirteen weeks after publication, the most exciting and original first novel to be published in Australia since Peter Mathers's *Trap* in 1966 has been reviewed in one major book reviewing newspaper only. Current sales of the book: about fifty. Critics for the *Bulletin* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have refused to review it, claiming it unworthy of notice. The rest are presumably either bracing themselves or vacillating.

The publisher is confident that in due course he will sell out the small edition of five hundred copies that he printed as a characteristic gesture of altruism towards an author and a work of a quality beyond the general acceptance level of the reading minority. In time, copies of the book will become collectors' items, for *Womb to Let* is clearly not the product of a one-novel author, nor is it merely a work of promise. It's both a mature achievement in its own right and contains evidence that Johnson has left a great deal unsaid. He certainly has the spiritual, mental and technical equipment to say it.

D. J. O'Hearn, one of the few academics in our English departments daring enough to commit himself to a public judgment of a work of contemporary literature, wrote in the Melbourne *Age* of 7 July, 1973: "Johnson has obviously exorcised himself of some dark, vestigial roots but he has done so with calmness, humor and control. He has examined the nature of The Search and expressed in creative originality his own vision of the Kafkaesque world. He has at his disposal the talents of a fine novelist and one senses that

his strong imagination will not easily allow him to cease from exploration."

The hint of understatement in O'Hearn's expansive notice may have been due to an understandable caution against his own enthralled response to the recognition that the novel reveals a possible course of spiritual recovery from the depredations of a Catholic boyhood. For they are the "dark, vestigial roots" that Johnson has set about "exorcising"—though there's nothing very vestigial about them. The womb is to let because he has achieved nothing less than a return to it and a re-vacation of it, never to return again. In the process he has seen the manufacture of madness; he has scrutinised the fertilisation and nurture of the purest evil—that which masquerades as the greatest good.

Johnson's universe consists of a series of three wombs which might be described as the uterine, the mundane, and the infernal or post-credal. His pilgrim, or evolving foetus, is named J. Desmal Elendhof. The surname means "an enclosure of misery". For Desmal read dismal, or *des mal*, or the Latin source of "dismal", *dies mali* (evil days) with J., as in Latin, standing for the "I", the two I's in *dies mali*, the evil I. And of course J. also stands for Joseph, Johnson, and Jesus.

Elendhof is certainly a reconceived being; and as he reaches a kind of preconscious awareness of his reincubation, he finds he shares the first womb with his twin sister, Catherine, who, apart from being his actual reconceived sister is also his "pure" anima (Greek, *katharos:* pure).

> Not without nostalgia he gave Catherine one last terrible mauling, beating her senseless so that she could not impede his peregrination. When she was born by caesarian incision, six days later, a full four and a half pounds heavy, she was still very black around one eye.

So much for the Greek half of the Elendhof duality: caesarian origins imposing a Roman future. In the Second Womb, "the day after Elendhof turned seventeen, and five days before Catherine's own birthday, there was a great deal of activity in the house in Thomson Street [Thomist's son?], for later that afternoon Catherine was to catch the train to Melbourne to enter the convent for the term of her life, beginning with a six-month period as a postulant".

Three of the book's assembly of six chapters are concerned with Catherine's spiritual and psychological peregrination from pure devotion through fanaticism to the very edge of madness, when she is rejected by the order. She pursues her destiny like a true latter-day saint in a Passion of squalor and stigmata as a prostitute in St Kilda, an episode recalled under the scourge of psychiatric treatment in hospital.

The author handles this—as it were—anatomy of the dark night of the soul with a quite astonishing depth of perception and technical mastery. Catherine's inner life in the convent is revealed through her diaries. Her breakdown is seen from the other sisters' point of view, in the questions and answers of interviews conducted by Elendhof. The mortification of her flesh is revealed by what could easily be taken to be a stream of consciousness technique but is in fact deliberately not a stream but a long series of small eruptions of verbalised thought from a silent magma of darkness and chaos.

> . . . my next lover . . . we wandered into the bushes . . . he asked to be pissed on . . . that was no problem . . . he was so big . . . cruel . . . gross . . . he ripped me apart . . . pain tore through me . . . and he left . . . I couldn't move . . . I lay there . . . I know your secrets now . . . big bad world . . . but he returned . . . he said: Make me want another . . . I asked . . . tickle me under the balls . . . rub me up . . . lick my stomach . . . I did it all . . . he went away . . . is this the path to . . . need I four men first . . . in a St Kilda park . . . why was I here . . . me . . . that was the reason . . . me . . . whistle . . . another may come . . . I feel between my legs . . . my hand is red in the moonlight . . .

Catherine finds a sort of salvation by assimilating something that has nourished her brother from the First Womb: the spiritual roots of the land of their birth, the lineaments of Aboriginal myth. Elendhof watches her undergo a fierce initiation rite, with ash, ochre, grease and other disfiguring paraphernalia, in a Toorak beauty salon. He hunts the Behemoth of his own unconscious in the company of an Aboriginal companion. A dugong named Thomas (Aquinas?) has become trapped in the lower reaches of the Yarra. They set out to rescue him from tourists, scientists and all the attendant publicity, but the rescue turns into a killing. Thomas must be baited to swim upstream, for it's only there, well upstream from where the river joins the sea, that extinct submarine monsters can be put to rest.

The outcome for Elendhof is his discovery that the Third Womb is a spiritually desiccated limbo

of futility. He finds himself in a bare waiting room preparing to take his place in a interminable queue, the longest he has ever seen, composed entirely of men as naked as himself. But not one penis was in sight.

> He found it difficult to believe that the reason . . . was the same reason why it was the most orderly Queue imaginable, and that was because each man had his penis buried in the rectum of another man, the man preceding him in the Queue. It followed that each component's rectum was also the repository of another's penis, of the man immediately behind him in the line.

Womb to Let is riotously funny, totally unsentimental, bawdy and inventive, absorbing and quite disturbingly profound. Joseph Johnson's stance towards his creation is one of a wry detachment but not one of indifference: it's a quality that establishes a curious blend of cynicism and compassion, heightening his objective observation of the world he has created, most notably in the remarkable convent sequence. He has written a book which goes a long way in support of answering the challege which the novel has been facing since the impact of the cinema, television, and other story-telling media. *Womb to Let* could never be filmed, televised or adapted for radio because it exists with such uncompromising integrity as its own unique medium.

One last point. Although the book ends with Elendhof about to join the Queue, there *is* a way out of it into a world beyond the Third Womb which need not be enclosed, uterinely or infernally. Johnson deserves to find it; and I, for one, impatiently await his next novel in the hope of finding out how he embarks upon his pilgrimage to the world of Here. And Now.

GREEK TRAGEDY FOR THE GREEKLESS

R. Johnson

G. H. Gellie: *Sophocles: A Reading* (M.U.P., $12.90).

Another book on Sophocles? Yes indeed — but this time with a major difference. Almost all the books on Sophocles have been written by classicists for classicists. A notable exception was Waldock's *Sophocles the Dramatist,* written by a professor of English. George Gellie's long-awaited book is written by one of the most highly regarded classicists (as scholar and teacher) in Australia, but is written primarily for "the growing group of undergraduates who know no Greek but want to read Greek plays".

For nearly twelve years I have been teaching such students. Every year one has to wean them from the concepts on which they were nurtured: that depiction of character is the central function of tragedy, that the plot is the working out of characters in a given situation, that tragedy lies in the destruction of the hero through some "fatal flaw" (how I have come to detest that phrase!) in his personality, that the universe is fundamentally just. It will be a great deal easier now to refer these students to Gellie, who shows, in most lucid and well illustrated argument, that Sophoclean (and in general Greek) tragedy is not like that at all.

The book begins with a review (about 25 pages each) of each play, going through its development and commenting on the significance of each move, each passage. There follows five chapters on Plot, Character, Chorus, Gods, Poetry. These bring together and focus interpretations scattered through the chapters on the separate plays, and I found them the most absorbing and penetrating sections of the work.

Sophocles chooses from the wealth of Greek myth stories which he wants to retell; through them he makes his comment on the universe, which is as cruel and impersonal as a minefield —one wrong step and you're gone, no matter how good you are, how well-intentioned. The story therefore is the play, and the characters are cut to fit: what kind of person would behave this way? Thus Gellie rectifies our usual view of the relation between plot and character and fits us for a true and hence richer view of Greek drama.

This leads him on to discuss Greek attitudes to character, goodness and so on. We have been accustomed, largely by Christianity, to recognize that "goodness" can be in a quiet character of no great achievement; but the Greek words for "good" mean "good at" and relate to achievement. That makes quite a difference to the drama. Similarly Gellie must discuss these curious participants, the gods; and again he turns us away from our Judeo-Christian conditioning and explains clearly and briefly the very different and many things that a Greek god was to the audience, and the relation of this to the drama. Equally sound is his exploration of the role of the chorus and the nature of Sophocles' poetry; both these chapters are marked by intensively detailed analysis of a couple of passages, to illustrate fully the general points being made.

HUMANISING THE WORLD

D. J. O'Hearn

David Ireland: *The Flesheaters* (Angus & Robertson, $4.50).
Michael Wilding: *Aspects of the Dying Process* (University of Queensland Press, $2).
Rodney Hall: *The Ship on the Coin* (University of Queensland Press, $2).

Each of these three local writers has his own voice and plies his creative energies into fields of his own choice. Ireland, abrasive, sharp-eyed, angry, explores his vision of the world as a madhouse; Wilding, lucid, sophisticated, fluent, searches the intricacies of social and personal relationships for a sense of what it might mean to be human; Hall creates an allegory where the de-sensitised commercial octopus grasps not only the minds but the bodies of mankind.

Ireland's novel is, finally, something of a disappointment. He is a writer of fine talent and *saeva indignatio* but in this book he cannot control the corrosive power of his anger. The world he creates is a self-contained institution called Merry Lands: boarding-house, prison, psychiatric hospital all rolled into one. Mostly its inmates are sent and kept there by "congenital poverty" but nothing is really explained—they are existential creatures, condemned by an unknown but inexorable past to have no future. Scotty the young writer lives in a tree-house, fascinated by the romantic idealism of Scott Fitzgerald and sent scuttling to his abode to savor in private any list of proper names others may throw to him. Language becomes for him a geographical kaleidoscope: "Hiroshima, Monte Carlo, San Paulo, Reno, Narvik, Murmansk and Minsk" send him into indescribable rapture. Another inmate, Granny, lives her life chained in a huge kennel at the rear of the house. She survives because she has been reduced to animal instincts and so, asking little of the world, is satisfied with even less. Lee Mallory, the bemused narrator, enters this world of bizarre madness and cannot escape it.

His friend Clayton Emmet survives because Clayton has seen reality:

> As animals are eaten, so people are eaten. By riches and poverty, new creeds, old creeds, parents, children, obedience, war machines, accidents, love, hate, revenge, ambition, pollution, age, envy, greed and by your very aggregation.
> Poor man, everything is your flesh-eater.

Nothing in Ireland's created world comes close to denying this vision. The world is a great hospital and the doctors are sadists—everybody pays in flesh and survival is a matter of remaining a finer predator than your fellow.

Ireland creates this vision but cannot control it. At his best he uncovers the horror and corruption of life in grimly real terms. At his worst, he falls into the mad pit of his own creation and his work becomes an accumulation of destructive images from which he the author can find no exit. As a result the prose breaks down and the reader begins to suspect that the crazed vision is itself distorted, that such a density of blackness is itself unreal.

Perhaps as an elemental exorcism this novel was necessary for Ireland. His talent is undeniable:

> As for the words, I *do* manage to live a little through them. Perhaps one day I'll run out of people I know and actions I've watched and begin to write words which represent what no-one has ever seen. Instead of reviving the dead, I'll be creating new life. And this new life through new words will keep me alivc a bit longer. And the work of putting them on paper, well, it's something to do between now and dying.

Such is the final state of his narrator, having witnessed madness, violence and degradation, having suffered love and the death of love, having tried out the world and retired to a psychiatric ward. The grim refusal to capitulate may be a tenuous sort of hope but the haphazard and carnivorous world already created, denies hope any meaning. Ireland is deeply sensitive to the ways in which man may be put upon, but in this novel the agony is too much for him and his voice is a little too strident.

Michael Wilding, on the other hand, though less biting and more defensive than Ireland, is master of his material. Mainly his short stories deal with the young arty sophisticates who people the Sydney pubs and beaches, and parties in Paddington. He creates his characters with a deftness and an understanding that is at times quite masterful. The aimless drifting lives and talk reveal the search for human companionship, the attempt to forge sensitivity into something more lasting, some relationship of permanence and depth:

> He wondered what people usually talked of, sitting in the sun of a pub garden drinking beer. He could not remember the sorts of things he'd talked of before. They could never have been significant; drowsy exchanges; desultorily. Yet he felt the lack of them. Not even the insignificant dropped from their lips to agitate the hot afternoon. Not even; not at all; it was as if the insignificant would be an intrusion, triviality a diminution of the moment's rightness, fullness, a puncturing of the rested perfection. Their avoidance of the trivial, the crass, implied almost that anything spoken could only be trivial crass; but was that anything whoever might speak it? or anything spoken by them? or all he spoke?

There is nothing dramatic, nothing wildly euphoric about his people. As the musing above suggests, life is really lived inside the head, but it is there that it has to be got right. Wilding can make much of a threatening conversation between a host and guest who has invited all the pub around to a private party, and he can delve into the mechanistic moves of a predatory male trying to manoeuvre a friend's mistress from the kitchen to his own bed. The talent he displays is not so much in creating new situations but in getting the situations he knows under control, and getting them right. When he proceeds by understatement he writes finely and with great insight; on the other hand when he plunges into self-conscious descriptive passages his prose can often be barbaric:

> It was one of those painfully hot mornings, painful not only for the heat itself, which lay still and thick as if you could slice it and take it away as trucks cart snow in New York, but more painful in the potential.

One of his finest stories involves a young writer visiting another writer's beach hut, finding him away (probably on a sexual escapade) and attempting to make love to his teasing but oddly loyal mistress. Being rejected sexually by the girl he turns to his friend's manuscripts and in bitterness and guilty desperation reads them through, giving himself up to the sense of rape. Wilding captures the sense of guilt, fascination, aggression and tenderness with acute subtlety and sensitivity. The rape of a friend's soul and of his creative work is an awesome act, yet the awe, for very human reasons, gives way to aggressive superiority, a sense of victory which leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Wilding's talent is sure and creative. As he probes and displays his world the reader experiences a sense of rightness and a sense of revelation. The subtlety of social manoeuvres, of sophisticated response and reaction are set at a level of reality that begs comprehension. Wilding brings to his work an understanding that is rare and a sense of the psycho-social bonds which weave and unweave between people and their lives. He is a fine writer, capable and lively, and reading his work is an enjoyable and fruitful experience.

It is a pity the same cannot be said for Rodney Hall's *The Ship on the Coin*. Here is an imaginative story which quite literally disintegrates and flies off in all directions. A rich American, J. P. Quilty, seizes on a brilliant idea to revolutionise the tourist trade. He has refurbished an old quinquerene, and advertises for tourists who pay vast sums of money to row themselves around the Mediterranean. Ideally, Hall wishes to show the blindness of the American people to money and power and authoritarianism. So we see the tourists willingly accept a regime that is one of total slavery to the ship's masters—a slavery that is harsh, demanding, and paid for out of their own pockets.

The trouble with the novel is that despite the author's intentions the imaginative venture does not come off. There are some lively passages but there is no sustained body to the work. Hall doesn't seem to know how to end the story, nor how to develop any of the insights his imagination may have thrown up. He constructs an elaborate theme around the Cleopatra myth but leaves exploration of this theme virtually untouched. At times his prose is witty and sharp, but the lack of sustained attention to the direction of the novel leaves the reader bored and dissatisfied.

Of course it is easy to criticise, and even easier to damn with no praise, the creative work of writers who seriously tend to their talents. The important thing is not that one man's judgement is infallible but that the writer must, despite setbacks, keep his task of exploring the world and the meaning of reality. So every novel or piece of creative writing increases us all, enriches our experience and continues to humanise the world. And every criticism, outside of sourness, is a veiled thank you.

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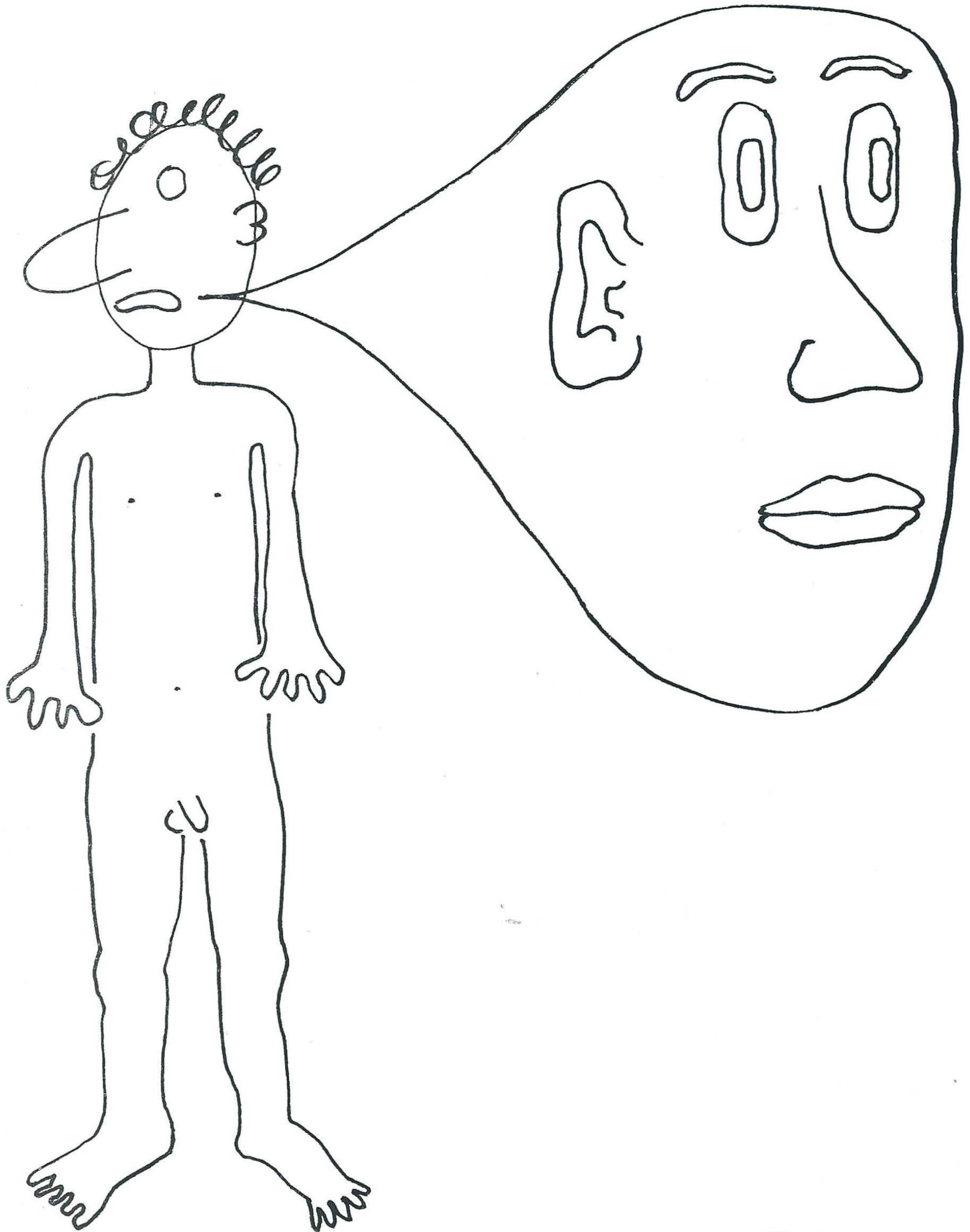

Mike Brown