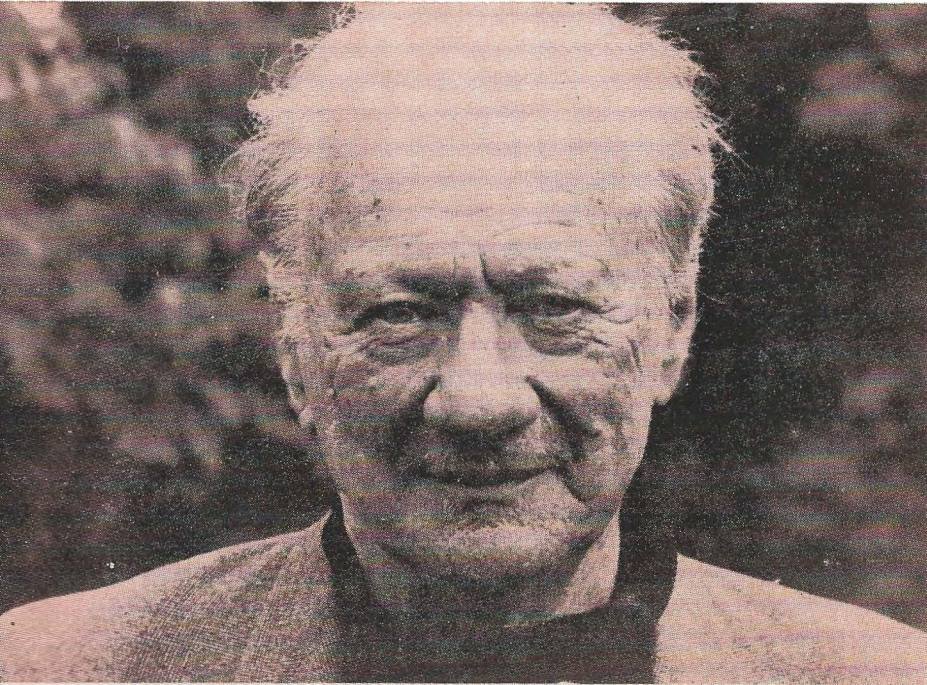


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*Jack Lindsay 80th Birthday Issue*

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# overland

April, 1981

JAMES McQUEEN

## The Brush Bronzewing

With the passing of the years he had ceased almost to think about it; and at last the sporadic moments of recollection struck at him, when they occasionally did, with a shock of alien discord. And with the thirty year old memory would come the questions: what would I have been, what nightmares would have claimed me, if my childhood had lasted a hundredth of a second longer?

There was no question, in the days of his childhood, of the use to which school holidays must be put. Economic exigency dictated that a job must be found, and the wages put to the family account. By the time he was twelve his two older brothers were already at work; one an apprentice butcher, the other in a sawmill. So that year, the beginning of his thirteenth, he found himself on the threshold of labor.

At the beginning of the summer holidays his eldest brother told him: Eddie Harris is looking for a cleaner. . .

And so he had presented himself next day at the office of the picture theatre. In the clutter of old posters, faded stills, ticket rolls, film cans, he made his nervous application. Harris—thin, stooped, as grey and insubstantial as the images on his patched screen, his greasy felt hat tipped back—greeted him with dignity. All right, he said, rolling a spitted cigarette to the corner of his mouth, start on Monday. And then: I'd thought fifteen bob a week, but it's worth a quid of any man's money. . .

And the boy went away with a straighter back, feeling the new weight of employment solid on his shoulders. A pound a week: his father earned only five.

The work was neither hard nor demanding. He cleaned the stalls three times a week, after each performance; folding back the rows of wooden

seats, sweeping away the tidewrack of lolly papers, ice cream wrappers and torn ticket stubs, hardly nervous at all at the scrabbling of the rats beyond his vision. The great vault of the theatre was lit only dimly by half a dozen small bulbs, but darkness had never worried him. All the same, sometimes, stopping to free his soles of the wads of chewing gum, he would listen with some small apprehension; not to the silence, but to the faint sounds of movement from the circle, high above, behind the long curved balustrade.

For up there, Bummer Bill was at work.

And the boy nursed a small kernel of secret fear—held in check, mentioned to no one—since his brother had told him of the job; had carried in his mind each day the image of the tall shambling figure with its strong sloping shoulders, its lank dark hair and sly spaniel eyes. That image was coupled indissolubly in his mind with the stories—told in low voices caught halfway between horror and fascination—of the things done to boys caught alone by Bill in the sandhills, in the shelter sheds, under the bridge, in the deserted recreation ground. It was true that he had never been charged, even arrested. But, with the knowledge that children carry—below the threshold of adult wisdom—they knew that in the shambling gait and yellow leer there lay a menace as real as the clash of buffers in the railway yards where they played.

No one called him Bummer Bill to his face, of course; only behind his back, or shouted from a safe anonymous distance.

And now the boy was trapped with the menace for long hours in the vast darkened theatre. For Bill was assistant projectionist, upstairs cleaner, maintenance man; shuffling quietly and unpredictably about the narrow stairways, the rat-ridden aisles and dim storage rooms.



The boy comforted himself with the thought that Eddie wouldn't let anything happen, wouldn't permit Bill's presence if there were really any risk. . .

But—Eddie was an adult, beyond the reach of children's truths.

The weeks passed, though, and Bill did no more than leer a little, grin knowingly as they passed.

All the same, it was a relief to leave the theatre for two days each week; days in the sun with ladder, pastepot, rolls of posters. There were hoardings scattered through the town, and he would make his rounds, the paste and posters an honorable badge; he had a place, however temporary, in the world of adults. He savored the thick smell of flour paste, the brightness of the garish inks, the vicarious glory of the names: Roy Rogers, Gregory Peck, Spencer Tracy, John Garfield, James Cagney. . .

But always there was the dark theatre waiting, the thought of it casting a small shadow on the summer's brightness.

With the coming of February, though, the shadow began to lighten. The end of the job, the holidays, was in sight, and still Bill kept his distance.

Eddie sent him, one afternoon, to clean out a room under the stage against the coming winter repertory season. It was bare and musty; dust and rat droppings were thick on the floor, the kalsomine was powdery on the old brick walls, the bulb dangling from its frayed flex was dim and clouded.

It was there that Bill, slouching through the doorway, found him. "Keepin' you busy, then?" he said, his voice low and sly.

The boy said nothing, stood quite still in the far corner, the stink of old dirt and mould a sudden stifling threat.

Then Bill smiled at him.

And the boy knew then that the stories *were* true. With no avenue for retreat, he stood his ground as Bill sidled closer. He thought once of darting past to the door.

But then it was too late. He was seized, wedged into the angle of the corner, kalsomine flouring his back, his arms, his hair. He looked up into the wide brown eyes, saw the lurking blank worms of strange lusts. Opened his mouth to shout, to scream.

Bill shook his head slowly, and the boy closed his mouth again.

He felt a hand reach down and slowly unbutton

his fly, a crooked forefinger winkle out his small limp penis. Then suddenly a pair of pliers was in the hand, nipping his foreskin, holding him imprisoned by the threat of greater pain. His jaw began to tremble, and he feared that he was going to cry.

Frozen into immobility by the grip of the pliers, he felt the fingers of the other hand slip into the fly, squeeze his testicles, invading, violating, their obscene curling explorations triggering in him a deep loathing; and the first great hot blooming of a murderous hate. Staring up into the dark empty eyes, his own—wide, blue shocked—began slowly to kindle with rage of violence so deep that its power frightened him.

Then, dropping into the hot silence like blessings, came the salvation of footsteps in the aisles above; and the thin echoes of Eddie's voice. "Bill? Bill? You there, Bill?"

The obscenely caressing hands were gone, the pliers' grip released. He looked down at the angry pinchmarks on his foreskin, fumbled at his buttons, concealing his shame.

"Comin', Mr. Harris. . . ." Bill paused in the doorway, looked back at the boy, shook his head slowly, meaningfully. Then, in sardonic arrogance, raising his voice: "Just givin' the lad a bit of a hand. . . ."

That evening he had thrown in his job, offering no explanations. His father had grumbled. But after all, school was only days away.

In the next weeks he saw Bill occasionally; in the street, at the cricket, on the beach. Gave him a wide berth, evading the knowing leers, the hints of obscene complicity in the man's sallow grimaces. And lay awake for many nights, flushed with the memory of his shame; but afraid too, and able to exercise the fear only by contemplating the violent extinction of his enemy. The warming thought of death was all that could bring him peace.

But as winter began to crisp the land, and as his life slowly resumed its natural shape, the fears and shame faded a little. What was left, and what hung to him as the months passed, was a cold implacable hate.

In the May holidays he was summoned by his grandfather—his mother's father—to the farm sixty miles away. Both of his brothers had made the visit, singly and in their turn, and had never gone back again.

He went, if not with enthusiasm, at least will-



ingly, and with his mother's encouragement.

His father said nothing. It was years since he and the old man had spoken. It rankled with his father that the two-hundred acre farm was running slowly to ruin. It would one day come to his wife, and he seemed already to think of it as his own.

The boy caught the bus on the first day of the school holidays.

The old man met him at the door of the old sagging farmhouse; looked at him keenly, carefully, said little, led him away to a small bedroom. From the window the boy could see the gnarled and lichened trees of a neglected orchard, a few blighted fruit clinging to the stark branches. The rank grass was spotted with fallen apples, rotting slowly, and spiked with high rusty docks and grey thistles. The old man, thin, slow, and knotted with arthritis, had limped off, leaving the boy to unpack.

At dusk they sat down in the kitchen to a meal of barley soup, mutton and potatoes, cold custard. The old man ate little. Across the scrubbed table the boy watched him surreptitiously: the blunt forehead, the beak of his roman nose rising like a ship's prow from the furrows of his cheeks, the hard pale eyes in their deep sockets. After the meal the boy sat by the fire, listening to the crackling radio and the harsh rattling of the old man's breathing. Later, in his own hard narrow bed, he could hear the old man groaning softly as he prepared himself for the night.

In the morning, after porridge, the old man labored to his feet. The frosty light silvered his skin to the color of a weathered fence-post.

"Take down the gun," said the old man, clapping a worn felt hat on his head, picking up his sticks.

The boy had seen the shotgun on its pegs by the dresser. He took it down gingerly. He had never fired so much as a pea rifle, and the weight of the gun, the gleaming metallic solidity, the menace of the long barrels, daunted him.

"In the crook of your arm," said the old man. "Fingers off the metal, you'll leave rustmarks."

Outside, across the stretch of mud and weeds, stood the cowshed. The man who came in twice a day to milk was at work, and the air was filled with the lowing of the beasts, the rattle of cans, the warm yeasty smell of fresh dung. The old man watched for a moment or two then turned, uninterested, away.

They set out along the paths of the farm; the

old man with his twin props, the boy with the lethal grace of the gun; up to the edge of the hills, along the high hedges, across the sodden pastures to the edge of the river's great reed-beds. The old man paused often, his breath rattling, his lungs bubbling. Watching him, the boy thought that his eyes were the color of the pale sky, the stubble on his cheeks as icy as the frost.

The boy wondered aloud at the impotent burden of the unloaded gun.

"Just carry it," said the old man. "Get used to the feel of it . . . that's all."

Curiously, the boy looked at the knotted arthritic claws that clamped the two sticks; could not imagine them holding the delicate curve of the gun's stock, stroking the smooth curves of the twin triggers.

"That's right," said the old man, catching the glance, the wisp of a smile creasing his thin lips. "Past it, I am. Never mind . . ." He paused. "Your brothers are bloody useless."

Later, sitting on a log, the old man said: "Just so you know, it's a twelve-bore, thirty-inch barrels, side locks. The trigger pull's light, two and a half pounds. Right barrel scatter, left barrel three-quarter choke." He stopped then, eyeing the boy with something like malicious mockery. "I had it made for me in England, a long time ago. It's worth a lot of money, maybe a thousand pounds . . ."

The boy looked carefully, with some awe, at the smooth oiled walnut stock, the blue sheen of the metal, the delicate chasing about the breech. It seemed impossible that anything could be worth so much money. And yet already its presence, balanced almost weightless in his crooked elbow, was beginning to work some small magic in him, a magic that hinted at the beginnings of some commitment.

A little later he turned to ask a question, the gun swinging with him. And felt the weighted lightning of the old man's stick on his shoulder.

"Never point it at anyone . . ."

He rubbed his shoulder.

The old man laughed, almost happily. "That's the first rule. There's only three."

"What are the others?"

"All guns are loaded, until you find out otherwise."

"You said there were three."

"Don't miss," said the old man, limping along the track towards the house. By the time they reached the door the old man was gasping, chok-



ing, and seemed almost on the point of collapse.

The woman who came in to cook and clean the house hustled him off to his room to rest. But at the doorway he paused, looked back at the boy. "I'm sorry," he said. "About the stick. But there isn't much time . . ."

Without quite kowing why, the boy searched until he found oil and rags, cleaned the gun carefully before setting it back on its pegs.

Sitting alone by the fire the boy was suddenly aware that quite soon the old man was going to die.

In the morning, though, the old man seemed to have recruited a certain fragile strength. And, while the boy again carried the gun, he had, slung across his shoulders, an old haversack. Across the tidal flats of the broad grey river a chill wind blew from the sea, salt and sour. The old man reached into the haversack, drew out a handful of red cartridges. "Break the gun . . ."

He showed the boy how. Showed him how the ejector spun the shells from the breech. Showed him how to thumb back the hatched hammers.

"No one can teach you to shoot," said the old man, his voice as thin as the wind's edge. "Either you can or you can't." He paused. "Your brothers can't." He took a slow breath, mustering terminal energy, clenching back the convulsions of his lungs. He spoke steadily, slowly, each word planted like an exhausted runner's footfall. "Books tell you where to put your feet. How to stand, how to move, how to swing. Everything. It's all shit. Everything's too quick, there's never time. Balance, if you've got balance you're right." He paused, sucking air. "Just two things. Squeeze the trigger, squeeze it, gentle as if it were a girl's tit. And don't hold on a target. Swing, sight, squeeze, it's all one movement, don't wait, let your arm go with the gun . . ."

The boy felt quick apprehension, the sense of approaching a test of some kind that might mean more to the old man even than his tenuous hold on life.

They plodded on another hundred yards, the gun now charged with its lethal red capsules.

And the boy knew that soon he would have to fire it.

Remembered the old man's words: Your brothers are bloody useless . . .

"Past the next clump of reeds," said the old man, "there'll be native hens. They run fast, low to the ground. Take a close one with the right barrel, then another with the choke."

Stepping from behind a wall of head-high reeds the boy saw them. Five big dun birds scattered, feeding, in the clearing thirty yards away.

The boy was never quite sure what happened to him at that moment.

Except that something strange and new was born in him; a kind of calmness, a certainty. The world about him seemed to move with great slowness, and his mind functioned with an enormous clear precision. The birds scattered—in comic slow-motion, it seemed to him; one of them to the left, the others fanning to the right. The gun swung up, and he snagged back the hammers as it rose. Motion, time, seemed almost frozen. The butt nestled sweetly to his shoulder and the focus of the world narrowed to the bright head of the foresight. As it reached the first bird he squeezed gently, felt the recoil firm and reassuring as a hand's pressure on his shoulder. The sound of the shot was no more than a distant echo as the twin barrels swung, traversed, his finger slipping smoothly to the rear trigger. Two more birds were converging rapidly, heads down, racing, necks to the ground. He let the barrels drop a little, waiting. Then, as their shapes merged for an instant forty yards away, swung up, squeezed again. Saw both bodies tossed, blown, dropped lifeless in the thin grass. Smelling the burnt pungency of the charges, he broke the gun, and the twin red cylinders of the empty cartridges curved over his shoulder.

And the world resumed suddenly its normal aspect; sound and movement caught again their accustomed pace, and he felt himself shivering in the cold wind. He turned a little uncertainly to look up at the old man.

Watching the ancient harsh-boned face, he was appalled to see two small tears form in the corners of the cold eyes, runnel slowly down beside the pinched beak of the nose.

"Oh, holy Christ," said the old man. And to the boy the familiar oath sounded more like some kind of grateful prayer. Then the old man turned away, stood motionless, looking off into the distance where clouds were gathering over the mounded hills.

In the days that followed they tramped the farm, the scrub, the hill together. He shot more native hen; and baldcoot, rabbit, hare, pigeon, plover. The boy protested at the plover. "Aren't they protected?"

The old man was curt. "They're on my land." And, seeing a hare break cover: "There!"



As his visit drew to a close he noticed that the old man took longer each day to recover; his feet dragged, his breathing labored more, and his face grew more drawn. But as the flesh fell away the cold blue spark in his eyes burned keener and brighter. He watched the boy as avidly as a lover might.

On the last evening the boy cleaned the gun for the final time and hung it on its pegs. They sat in front of the fire, and outside the rain beat on the rusting iron roof.

"When I'm gone," said the old man, looking into the flames, "you'll get the gun."

The boy said nothing in the face of such a manifest improbability. Yet the yearning was now burned into him like a deep scar, and every few minutes his eyes slid away to the dull gleam of blued metal on the wall. The prospect of abandoning it in the morning seemed like the threat of an amputation.

"You're a good boy," said the old man, eyes lost in the shadows of his heavy eyebrows.

At home again, preparing for school, for winter, he did not speak of the gun. His brothers asked him: Did he make you go shooting?

"He didn't make me," he answered equivocally.

At the beginning of September, with the first daffodils, the old man died. The boy's father preserved a discreet silence; his mother wept a little, departed for the funeral.

"There's no money," she told his father later. "The farm's mortgaged, there'll be nothing left after the debts are paid." His father's face set in grim cheated lines that faded only slowly, leaving a residue of querulous irritation.

No one mentioned the gun, and the boy could not ask, could not hope.

But a month later the solicitors sent a letter, a letter addressed to him, written in a crabbed and painful script. "You will have the gun," it read. "I have taken steps to see that no one can take it away from you, a good friend owns it now and will not ask for it back and you will get it legally when she dies. This is to protect you. Show this letter to your father. Your loving grandfather. . ."

His father snarled half-heartedly. "Don't blame me if you blow your foot off. And don't expect me to buy you cartridges. . ."

His brothers laughed; but a trifle enviously, remembering its possible value. Each one thinking, it could have been mine. . .

But he cared nothing for what they thought, any of them. And one day a parcel arrived. Inside

was a mahogany case, baize-lined, the gun—broken down, oiled and shining—nestled into the recesses. He had no money for cartridges; but it did not matter; for the present the gun was enough. It seemed to him that in some new way he was complete, a missing part slipped neatly into place. And he waited, with comfortable expectation, for the summer.

Strangely, the death of the old man touched him little; it was simply as if a natural messenger had visited then departed.

He had grown in the year, his frame taking a new wiriness, a hardening of muscles. So he found a summer job at the cannery, forking peas from trucks into the viner. It was grinding, aching work. But he did not mind. Because it was well-paid, and he could buy cartridges. Those were the years when the sight of a boy with a gun brought no comment, and in the evenings he would walk along the disused railway line and into the bush. There, fatigue dropping away, he would become a different animal: quiet, untiring, predatory. Each night he returned at dark with game; rabbits, a hare, pigeon, quail even.

His father sneered at the gun, but ate the game.

Yet for all this, he was still a boy, intent on boyish things: Sunday afternoons spying on lovers in the dunes; small vandalisms on the golf course; swimming by the long breakwater; and postman's knock, played with giggling girls in the green thickets of German ivy.

It was a good time; yet memories of the previous summer, of the rat-ridden theatre, of his terror in the small dim room, slipped at times unbidden and unwelcomed, into his mind. And frightened him a little. Because, still, at the outskirts of his life, slunk the half-threatening figure of Bummer Bill: distant glimpses in the dunes; fleeting glances behind the toilets at cricket matches and in the low scrub by the creek. Always in the smooth sallow features the boy seemed to sense the threat of some final culmination of what had begun in the theatre cellar. And at those times he felt a sharp chill.

He had even, once or twice, caught sight of the familiar overalled figure in the evenings; the man slinking a long way behind, dodging into a stand of wattle by the rusted tracks, or simply waiting, silent and still, by the factory gate.

What surprised him most was that the man seemed still to seek him out, not realising that what had been, at a certain time, a feeling of strange fear, mystery, terrible fascination even,



had passed not only through the fear, but beyond it into a cold and icy rage.

But the boy felt a certain new control now, unfamiliar and pleasing, and contented himself with avoiding Bill, sensing that another year or two would remove him forever from the small ambits of those strange lusts. That Bill seemed not to accept his rejection puzzled and angered him; for the dissipation of his fear was almost complete, its infrequent onslaughts always drowned out quickly by his controlled and icy hate.

Towards the end of the summer he moved in the evenings into the deeper bush, the dense thickets of eucalypt regrowth, seeking wood-pigeon—the brush bronzing that were seldom seen closer to cultivated land. He sought them out because the pursuit taxed his new skills; and he rejoiced at the sight of the birds bursting from thick coppices, bulleting through the low branches between narrow crowded trunks, their feathers gleaming penny-bright, the pale shields of their breasts catching the late flat light.

One evening, moving slowly and carefully over the dry crackling leaf-floor—tense, intent only on the prospect of birds bursting from scrub pockets, the outside world eclipsed, its realities suspended—he was struck, stunned, frozen into immobility by the sudden sight of Bill standing motionless, fifty feet away, at the edge of a clearing.

The boy's entrails seemed to shrivel, and a sick trembling shivered in his belly at the familiar figure in its dirty overalls; the strong sloping shoulders, the dark oily hair, the slight and knowing leer. He gaped, the gun suddenly heavy and awkward in his hands; it was no longer a charm, a talisman that might protect the confused and frightened boy he had suddenly become again from the dark and obscene fears that invaded him.

"Been a while, eh?" said the man, grinning slyly. "Came out all this way just to see you, thought you might want a bit of a hand. . . ."

And with the words the boy felt the last remnants of his courage drain away. Hate grew thin and unlikely, rage failed him. He knew then that in spite of his new prides and prowess he was alone, abandoned, vulnerable as any other paltry victim.

Tremors in his calves rose and putted his knees.

Then, suddenly, the miracle of a small brown explosion shattered the stillness, and a wood-

pigeon broke cover to Bill's left, swooping across the clearing. And with a volition that seemed its own the gun in the boy's hands took its old life, rose, imparting the calm familiar sureness to his arms, swung to follow the bird. The barrels led the pigeon's flight, flight that took it past the back of the man's head. Then, as the bird sped on, the boy found with some little surprise that the gun had not followed it, that the bead of the foresight was steady on the junction of the man's dark brows. He had heard his grandfather say it so many times: squeeze, don't wait. . . . And as his right hand tightened on the stock the old icy rage flowed back, and life rose again redly in him; and death was only a matter of skill.

And then, in the millisecond before the sear tripped and the hammer fell, he seemed to see the world change shape; old patterns found new and wonderful perspectives, and his hate was only the single side of a spinning coin. He knew, in that moment, that the man before him has no place in his new world, in any world, and his rage was extinguished, his fear dissolved; pity even was born. His left hand tipped the fore-end of the gun and the shot rattled and tore through the leaves above the man's head.

Without thought or decision the gun swung in his hand, the foresight overtaking the receding bird. Now it sped through the thick maze of saplings, its shape half lost in shadow. As it burst past a tree-trunk he squeezed the trigger and took it cleanly with the choke barrel at forty yards. It dropped, a sudden puff of bronze feathers catching the low sunlight like a shattered mirror.

He broke the gun, not bothering to reload, not looking at the man. Walked through crackling twigs, picked up the body of the bird. Turned back again.

The man had not moved. But now the sallow face was wax-pale, with light sudden sweat beading his upper lip. His mouth hung a little open, discolored teeth exposed, one lip corner twitching in a kind of unspoken supplication. The boy stopped a pace or two away, tossed the dead pigeon at the man's feet. It struck his shoe, and bright blood splashed the scuffed leather, speckled the dirty trouser cuffs.

The boy said nothing. But he smiled, and found with pleased surprise that it was a smile not of triumph, but of release. He shook his head lightly once, almost impatiently, then turned and trudged off, gameless, into the deepening dusk.

As the years passed he still shot regularly. But

some urgency had passed. The gun was always kept as pristine and immaculate as ever. But by the time he had seen his own sons approach their bridegheads to manhood it was only once or twice a season, he found, that he took it down, went off alone into the hills and scrub patches. And it was only ever the most difficult shots that he essayed, shots that demanded the subtlest of his skills.

But he knew that, although his ventures might

diminish in frequency, they would never cease entirely. Not, at least, until the need arose to pass on certain privileges; for the occasional exercise of his skill had become not only the celebration of a release, the preservation of some nebulous trust, but the confirmation of a gift. And, being a man without sentimentality, he knew that a few small deaths was a price that weighed lightly against his debt.





CECIL HOLMES

## Return to the Near North

*Cecil Holmes, 59, is one of the most experienced of Australian film directors. He is at present involved with the making of films on Morrison of Peking, Mark Twain in Australia and "The Killing of Angel Street", an investigation of the Juanita Neilson case. Overland readers will remember his remarkable reportages on New Guinea and on the Darwin cyclone. Later this year, in association with Dorothy Hewett, Cecil Holmes will work on a screenplay for Joseph Conrad's Australian work, The Planter of Malata. In October, 1945, two months after the Bomb, Cecil Holmes flew through Asia to make a newsreel report. In 1980 he went back to Singapore once again, to write a television drama.*

The DC 3 labored down to the end of the runway, the cabin door flapped, the crew did a desultory cockpit drill . . . tired men, as exhausted as the machines they drove.

In a few minutes we had reached five thousand feet, and slipped over the edge of a Darwin dawn. The cloud clumps stood like sentinels, pointing the way across the South China Sea to Singapore.

Brigadiers and group captains monopolized the canvas seats, we lesser beings lay along the steel floor.

It was biting cold.

The pilot switched to George and went to sleep, the navigator turned the pages of a Dick Tracy comic book, a brigadier went aft to use the bucket, suffusing the cabin with a powerful stench. My cameraman, Roger Mirams, nabbed the empty seat, in the impudent manner of his kind.

Just after midday the descent began. We stirred ourselves and beheld, below, the Roads of Singapore, the great harbor. Twisted and turned, the canted carcasses of sunken ships littered the shallow waters. We banged down to an abrupt landing on Kallang Airfield . . .

They were fluttering in from all over, like steel dragon flies, the sun glinting on wings, and they bore within them the victuals of victory: whisky for the officers, beer for the troops.

So I viewed my first Japanese — looking very small and harmless — as they hurried, at the double, bearing these goodies for the conquerors to impatient trucks. One fell beneath his burden — he was smartly rattaned by an Australian corporal and subjected to a stream of expletives which I could not hear for the thrumming engines. The prisoner



redoubled his efforts however. Victory, I considered, may be a fine meal in itself, but the dessert of revenge is even sweeter.

One of the crew had gone to commandeer a jeep, and we stretched and blinked in the brightness.

It was biting hot.

And I caught my first whiff of Asia, the distinctive odor. What was it? A mix and mingle of burning charcoal, of a body smell, rice turned in a pan, ripe fruit, a fallen flower? A muskiness and pungency that would stay with me for the next five thousand miles northwards.

The jeep roared through the ruined streets, grey and peeling, the dour sad bitter faces, caught briefly . . . the pilot hit the horn, fled down laneways wildly, tipped over a brazier, ran a rickshaw out of his victorious way.

In a hail of gravel we pulled up at the hotel. Some child beggars clustered around to carry the gear, and were flung a scatter of coins.

The desk bell was pounded with vigor and baths, liquor and food ordered up in short order. The defenders of democracy had arrived — in style.

Time may be concertinaed by the intake of alcohol and food, by gazing at movies, but even so it's a very long sector from Sydney to Singapore. The empty darkness of the night spreads away beyond the window, the air swishes softly by and a baby cries. There is a row of three empty seats beside me and I covet them, but a rather more seasoned, or energetic, traveller moves quickly on the very point of take off . . . I must be slipping.

And I slide into a myopia, the half dream, half reality induced by this motionless jet journey . . . yet, as one moves irrevocably forwards, I experience a twinge of fear in the entrails, for I must meet with my employer, a tough if generous American who expects a fifty-minute original television script to be created within the next twenty-eight days. How in the name of Christ will this absurdity be made to happen? A rollicking adventure story about a couple of guys who run a salvage boat . . . well, now, why not a play on Stevenson, a Treasure Island? There is the buried treasure, the wrecks dotted about the China Seas, the pirates who prevail in these parts, but how to see it through the eyes of an innocent child? No way. We will have to skip that . . . but what's the trick of it? The freshness? He has told me he had a boat called the Shanghai Trader . . . well, perhaps that might be the real star, not the people . . . oh, bugger it, we'll fock-sick something out, rummage around. I ring for another Vodka.

The muzak penetrates, a distant voice proclaims the imminence of arrival and, beneath, the festooned lights of some two hundred ships slide slowly forward to announce the fact that this is the world's third port.

The reception hall is vast and soundless as we

pour through it. Walking beside me are men and women of some Holy Order, clad in flowing white robes. Their lips move but I cannot hear their words. It is ghost like, spectral.

I am met and then move out into the open towards the car. And I pause a moment to savor the musky pungency of the air, the odor of Asia . . .

I am spirited to a comfortable apartment on Clemenceau Avenue and there, from the fifteenth floor, my American waves his arm over the towering glitter of night-time Singapore.

He says, "A monument to Lee . . . if you'd come here ten, even five, years ago you would not have seen anything like this."

It is a remark I am to hear often. Foreigners and locals alike seem convinced that Lee Kuan Yu created this city-state singlehanded. And indeed his power and presence does pervade most powerfully.

*Amnesty International records:*

*The only known case of a political prisoner who has been put on trial during the last decade is that of Tan Wah Piow. Trial by jury was abolished in Singapore in 1959 for all but capital offences and ten years later, in 1969, was likewise abolished for these offences.*

*Tan Wah Piow was president of a Singapore Students Union at the time of his arrest in October 1974. Prior to his arrest he had been engaged, together with the Students Union, in research into redundancies amongst workers with foreign corporations. On 30 October 1974, together with some other students, Wah Piow went to the office of the Pioneer Industries Employees Union after learning that several hundred workers were to be laid off by a United States concern, American*



*Marine. As a result of a subsequent disturbance at the plant Wah Piow was charged with unlawful assembly and rioting.*

*An Australian lawyer, Frank Galbally, who observed the subsequent trial, found many unsatisfactory features in the prosecution's case. In particular, he pointed to the lack of credibility shown by prosecution witnesses:*

*From the evidence there did not appear to be any reason for Tan or the other accused acting in the way alleged. The behaviour of the witnesses as described by themselves during the riotous incident was very difficult to understand and would have to be viewed with grave suspicion.*

*Moreover, in the opinion of Mr Galbally, Tan was not afforded a proper opportunity of testing the evidence against him, the judge frequently ruling his questions to witnesses out of order. Indeed Tan was unrepresented at the trial because the court had refused to adjourn the trial to allow John Platt-Mills, QC, a distinguished English barrister, time to arrive in Singapore to defend his client, despite the fact that Platt-Mills had been admitted by the Singapore High Court for the specific purpose of defending Tan and the two other accused. Most striking of all, several defence witnesses were arrested on the opening morning of the trial and deported to Malaysia.*

*The trial ended on 22 February 1975 with Tan Wah Piow being sentenced to one year's imprisonment, and two other workers tried with him to one month's imprisonment. Upon his release from prison in February 1976, Tan Wah Piow was allowed three days of freedom before being conscripted into the army. Fearing for his safety, Tan Wah Piow left Singapore for exile in Europe.*

The Equatorial Hotel is reputed to contain the finest Szechuan Restaurant in these parts, which I can well believe, for after the first course I feel like sending for the fire brigade. The table linen is white and Irish, the heavy silver glitters, chandeliers glow and the red-robed waitresses are swift and knowing. However the reason for being borne here on this Thursday evening is in the hope, even promise, that Lee Kuan Yu will appear . . . he usually does. Indeed I am not disappointed. Just on nine o'clock the Happening is heralded by a sudden hush, heads turn, eyes gape and Lee enters with his small entourage of friends. Lee lopes leopard-like towards his corner, the best vantage point of course. He is also

accompanied by his plump, smiling, bespectacled Chinese wife. Smiles and waves to some acquaintances scattered about, the maitre d' fawns and menus are dispensed. Lee bears his middle age easily, has a lean fit look, alert eyes that briefly glance about. He makes some remark, there is dutiful laughter from the group. There are no bodyguards.

I stare in unabashed fascination at this man who is surely one of the world's most secure and utterly successful politicians, a man who rules his city state of three million folk with more care and cunning than any old Greek ever did his, who in some twenty years has yanked a ruined rejected colony into one of the world's richest and most stable economies. No natural resources, not even its own water supply, only people . . .

For a fleeting moment I catch his eyes, as hard and glittering as a pair of gems.

*During the thirty days a detained person is held under Section 74, his routine alternates between long spells spent in solitary confinement and rigorous interrogation that may continue for 72 hours or more. The interrogation is carried out by teams who subject the detainee to a constant and merciless cross-examination that in many cases has led to mental breakdown and/or the ritual 'confession' sought by the government. Amnesty International has established that prisoners have been subjected to serious ill-treatment and torture during this period.*

*The interrogation room is usually air-conditioned to a temperature of 50 degrees Fahrenheit or lower, whilst the outside temperature is in excess of 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and is even higher in the hot and humid conditions of the underground cells. "X" is an ex-detainee interviewed by Amnesty International who was subjected to 72 hours' continuous interrogation after her arrest in 1977:*

*The cold was indescribable. The Special Branch officers wore woollen jumpers and thick jackets. I thought I would never stop shivering. Indeed at one point I thought my heart was going to burst. By the third day, my lips had become very cracked with the cold. My watch had been taken away and I had no idea what time of day or night it was. It was like being in a nightmare. The worst thing was not knowing what would happen next.*

*I had a feeling after a while of extreme exhaustion. You were deprived of everything. Prisoners are even forbidden to sing or talk in their cells. I tried to remember poems that I had learned at school and scolded myself that*



*I could remember so few. It is the complete lack of contact with anything or anybody in the outside world that is so unbearable. I remember distinctly one unforgettable incident that I am sure kept me going during my detention. I had called the guard to ask to go to the toilet, and for some reason was taken to a different one from the usual one, which involved walking through a courtyard. As we walked through it, I could see that it was late evening and suddenly a leaf from a rain-tree blew onto the path. I remember thinking it was some kind of God-send and feeling so grateful that here was something from outside the prison. I picked it up and kept it with me for the remainder of my time there. I can never convey how much that one thing meant.*

The American Club on a Saturday night.

The men sorrowing into their bourbons on the rocks, exchanging Chinese 'jokes' with brief, bitter laughter.

The women, their chunky jewellery and resentful eyes, whining about the servants, the amahs.

It is quite a complex, bowling alleys, poker machines, several restaurants which dispense appalling food.

At this moment, at this time, scattered all over the earth there must be scores of such enclaves where Americans are clustering together in mutual self-protection against an outside, alien world.

Our dinner host actually comes from Peoria, Ohio . . . a thin, gangling, white-faced fellow, humorless, earnest, he taps his long fine white fingers together as he raps out assertions in the quiet controlled manner of his kind . . . he dilates on the sanctity of the family and of man's increasing need for God's guidance. He is heard out with patient politeness, not perhaps for what he has to say but for what he is — the local head of General Electric.

At the other end of the table, in every sense, sits Harry. Late forties, I guess, bald-headed, broken-nosed, open-shirted, a slightly rude tattoo on his sprawling belly. He is forking slabs of corn beef down his gullet as though this is the last nourishment he will get for a long time. His accent is rough Bronx and as he makes blue jokes which are received with nervous giggles. I wonder how Harry has managed to storm this inner sanctum, become an inmate of this institution . . . but he is a captain in the U.S. merchant marine. He doesn't say so but I learn that he has just finished the tow of an oil derrick — he is a tug boat skipper — from the Arabian Gulf to the Sea of Sumatra, through the monsoon season. Three

months of it with tows being broken and men lost. Harry is no slouch, and a member of a tough service. I am drawn to him and decide on some cultivation, for he may prove useful in my researches.

Harry and I go to the Ambassador Hotel. He tells me this is a favorite hang-out for seamen, he doesn't go there often because, he says, "I see enough of these guys six months of the year anyway". The bar's low lighting reduces the seediness of the battered furniture, softens the hard faces of the good time girls. But the mix and mingle of races is there . . . Germans and Australians, Englishmen and Americans, Africans and Frenchmen . . . the accents and dialects swishing back and forth like a small surf. The sailors pull at their beers slowly, washing away the rigors and the salt of months at sea. They are quite relaxed, even tired — perhaps sea faring is harder now than it has ever been. The trips are longer, the sea lanes more congested, the cargoes so volatile . . .

One bloke, standing up, gesticulates at the twirling overhead fan. He talks to it as though it is a helicopter coming to land on the oil derrick. An advanced case of DT's.

If I am enthralled and taking in the color and sound of it all then Harry is, naturally, rather bored. However he espies someone who has just come in, and brings him over. It is Taffy, some old buddy, a chief bosun on a sea-going tug. Taffy is small and weathered, monosyllabic, very Welsh. Harry says that he, Taffy, has made a film, maybe I would like to see it. Taffy protests that it is nothing. He had, he said, not seen his folk back in Wales for a long time so he had decided to write a letter home, using the device of making a home movie. He had bought an 8mm. camera, done some tests, then compiled his work — a kind of day in his life — complete with sound track. Can he bring it round to my apartment one night and show it? I ask. Well, of course, but it is not much good. Very amateurish, he modestly claims.

Next evening Taffy and Harry duly turn up with the film and a projector. I resign myself to the usual mish-mash home movie. But it is not to be.

Exxon (Esso) operates an offshore oil field near Sumatra. Some half a dozen rigs extract about 40,000 barrels of crude a day — a rich source indeed. From time to time the rigs have to be moved to another location. Three tugs are involved in such an operation, and each of the anchors of the rig are marked by huge buoys.



These have to be lifted, then the anchors itself, over the open-ended sterns of the tugs.

In one sequence the weather is a screaming gale with violent, immense waves. At the stern some four Chinese seamen tussle with the huge rampaging buoy. Time and again they try and lift it in . . . then in a sudden appalling movement the object strikes against a seaman and he is washed away. The rest work on. No rescue is attempted or indeed possible. The cameraman, Taffy, keeps running his gear, then moves in relentlessly for close ups. It is cool-headed, brilliant film-making.

I am momentarily stunned by the starkness of all this. Taffy calmly rewinds his film. I think

The ancient hotel, a towering and arrogant affirmation of the English Presence, was doing its best to return to the earlier glories of uncomfortable rooms and bad food. I wandered outside vaguely, after the alleged dinner, and contemplated. Martial law was brutally effective by day, but at night time, in the shadowy unlit streets, anarchical violence prevailed. By day a looter was shot on the spot, by night the innocent abroad would invite a knife in the back.

So I stood uncertainly weighing up whether to savor further this sad city, or to leave well enough alone.

But indecision, for once, had its reward.

At the hotel portal stood a Sikh, as was traditional. A tall, handsome, turbanned, bearded man, the commissionaire.

An English lady emerged. She was fiftyish, worn, not too well-dressed and, I surmised, had not long before emerged from one of the prison camps.

She was also very drunk. She sought a rickshaw and instructed the Sikh accordingly. He shrugged and did nothing. She liberated a stream of obscenities which impressed me, for such a person. No response. No rickshaw. The lady took a deep breath, then made the supreme effort. She began to slap the Sikh, missing sometimes in her drunkenness but striking quite hard. He stood stock still. She exhausted herself. Then the Sikh drew himself up, just a little, sucked his cheeks in and directed a stream of spittle at her, well aimed, full in the face.

Silence, then hysteria. I turned away. End of scene, cut and print. So, I ruminated, will the British Raj end its days here not in a fusillade of gun shots, but a splash of saliva?

The voice comes up on the phone from the lobby of my apartment block. It is 6.30 am and still dark.

"Mr Holmes, this is Ranjit Singh, your guide and driver for the day. I await you in the foyer. I am very sorry I am fifteen minutes early. But I am ready. Are you prepared for our journey? We must commence soon for we have many miles to travel today."

It sounds like Spike Milligan and I groan with trepidation.

Mr Singh is a good-looking Sikh and he has the air-conditioned Mercedes at the ready. He

this guy doesn't need to go to any goddam film school to learn. He has a natural talent.

I ask, why do you have to operate in that bloody awful weather, why not wait a day or two for better conditions? He says, for the oil companies time is money. They never wait for anything, anyone. And I enquire, what do these seamen get paid? He says, about three dollars a day plus 'keep'.

I brood on the fact that my left-wing reading had always told me that the robber barons of the oil world were the worst of all the villains of capitalism . . . but that was back in other days. Surely things have changed? It seems not. And Exxon is still Rockefeller.

bows slightly, limply shakes hands and we proceed. Mornings are never my best time and I tell him brusquely to knock off the rock that blasts from the radio.

In cool silence we proceed towards the causeway, Johore and Malaysia . . . I have wearied, for the moment, of the milling, unsmiling multitudes of Singapore, the heat and humidity. I need some fresh air — and more than that I have long dreamed of making a pilgrimage to the city of Malacca, enshrined in the pages of Conrad, Kipling and Maugham . . .

We cross the causeway, briefly endure two sets of Customs and Immigration, then enter this



neighboring member of the British Commonwealth.

The mountains of Malaya seemed close enough to touch as we lifted out of Singapore, toy-like villages perched precariously. Green and rich and soft.

The brigadier, one of the Brass still moving on, suddenly lost his air of hauteur. He smiled for the first time, his eyes gleamed appreciatively and he pointed, saying, "An operation".

True enough, smoke rolled from some distant cluster of huts, an occasional explosion. Get your cameraman, he said. As was the habit of his kind, my colleague was already asleep. Against the dense roar of the engines the brigadier whispered into my ears, "Insurgents".

There had indeed been whispers in the Singapore bars of things going wrong "up north". The guerrillas, the self-styled Malaya Patriotic Army who had fought against the Japanese, were now moving back into the hills, and taking their arms with them. They were breaking the new-made rules, therefore they must be punished.

*Samad Ismail is one of Malaysia's leading intellectuals and writers. As a young man he was active in the nationalist movement and was twice imprisoned by the British. He was arrested in June 1976 and has since been held in solitary confinement at an undisclosed Special Branch Holding Centre in Kuala Lumpur. At the time of his arrest he was managing editor of the New Straits Times, Malaysia's leading newspaper.*

*Several months after his arrest Samad Ismail made a confession on Malaysian television that he had been a life-long communist. Amnesty International believes however that this confession was made only under extreme duress and against a background of threats both to Samad Ismail and his family.*

*Throughout the three years of solitary confinement he has been denied all reading material other than the Koran, and he is not allowed to write to his family. Two weeks before his arrest he was awarded Malaysia's highest literary award by the Prime Minister, Datuk Hussein Onn.*

Such fecund country, richly green and well watered, the usual picture-postcard thing of conical-hatted peasants guiding their buffaloes through the rice fields. Pleasing though . . . and the lowliest shacks inevitably wears one eye-jarring adornment, a television antenna.

There is a motorcade of black official cars

with outriders ahead and we slow for a while until waved on. Moving past I glance into the interior of the leading vehicle. It is Princess Margaret, plump and pouchy, sound asleep.

Ah yes, carols my guide, that is the princess. She has come to visit for a day or so. Ah, the good old British days . . . now they are gone, gone forever.

Some rubber plantations slide past, the rows of slim, serried trees, surprisingly small. I have read that the current crop will produce a thousand million dollars this year. We mount a rise and the flow of greenery is broken by a vast raw acreage of red earth. All the rubber trees have been cut down, burnt, Ranjit informs me, they will plant palm oil trees now. More money, more profit . . .

I contemplate this manifestation of human greed. No doubt by the time the palm oil comes to fruition in some years' time rubber will be scarce and more profitable and the process will revolve again.

We plunge through a valley, jagged hills tower. It is curiously like the country north of Cairns.

You should make a film about the men up there, I am advised. Ah, they make much trouble. Very brave men though. We had stopped for gas after passing over the causeway, and Ranjit had picked up a copy of the New Straits Times. He tosses it over. On the front page is a story about six farmers who have been convicted of "giving aid to the communist guerillas". They are to be executed this day by hanging . . .

*At the time of his arrest in November 1976, Kassim Ahmad was chairman of the Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaya (Malayan People's Socialist Party). Educated at the University of Singapore, Kassim Ahmad was Lecturer in Malay Language and Literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London from 1964 to 1966. On his return to Malaysia he became active in political life.*

*From the time of his arrest in November 1976 to August 1977, Kassim Ahmad spent nine months in solitary confinement at a secret Special Branch Detention Centre in Kuala Lumpur. His wife was allowed to visit him fortnightly at another police station. During this period he was allowed no books other than the Koran, and his spectacles and watch were taken away from him. At one point he was interrogated for three days and nights by six Special Branch officers.*

*Kassim Ahmad is now detained at Taiping Detention Camp. Since his arrest he has lost*



*weight and he is now suffering from high blood pressure and shingles. During his first months at the camp he wrote a 76,000 word novel which has been confiscated by the Special Branch. He has also expressed the wish to write a doctoral thesis, but the Ministry of Home Affairs has refused this request. Several of the allegations made against him as proof of his support for "Communist United Front" activities related to criticisms he had made of the government in his capacity as leader of a legal political party, and to his possession at the time of his arrest of several Russian novels.*

I want to go by the Coast road and maybe we

"On February 12th 1942 the transport ship Vyner Brooke carrying some three hundred refugees was bombed and sunk. There were thirty-four survivors, mostly Australian nurses and soldiers who collected on the beach. A Japanese patrol arrived and separated the party into three groups, officers, men and nurses. The men were marched away a few yards and shot. The officers were taken to the same spot and bayoneted. The nurses were ordered to walk into the sea and when they were knee deep in the water were mown down by a machine gun . . ."

We plunge into the excellent lunch. At a neighboring table is a curious party — some two dozen young men, Chinese, Indian, Malay and at the head an ancient yet powerful-looking, very old man with great tumbling locks of hair and wearing a curious garment — for a moment I am puzzled, then I realize it is the dress of the Samurai. There is much dutiful chatter and deference shown to this Ancient . . .

Then he imperiously claps hands, rises, grasping a silver-knobbed cane and strides vigorously towards the door. His acolytes scurry after him and Ranjit solves the problem once again.

He is a guru, a king of the martial arts, from Japan. They are his followers hereabouts.

The guru is leaving, it seems, for his luggage is borne off by the followers who aid him to his car, and they make a motorcade of Suzuki and Yamaha motorbikes, roaring away to somewhere.

In an hour we have come to Malacca. The Portuguese arrived in 1511, just twenty years after Columbus discovered the New World, then it was the turn of the Dutch and the French, the British. They built their forts and their churches. The Bible and the bullet arrived together. Grey, crumbling and moss-covered, yet persistently surviving, the worn ruins will be about for a long time yet. There is a high hill and I walk up these worn steps of antiquity. There is an agreeable breeze and I survey the small city

can stop for lunch at Muar. Ranjit assents.

Muar possesses a Rest House, I had been told, and a good meal could be had. (There is no such thing as poor food in this country anyway.) The Rest Houses had been built in earlier years by the Raj, in mountains and on the coast, as places of respite from the heat and the burden of their labors. They consist of rows of chalets along the shore and a complex rather like a large rambling motel-restaurant, bar, dance floor . . . very agreeable. I leave Ranjit to organize the lunch and make a small pilgrimage to the beach. It is quite deserted, the sea a sickly green and warm and sticky to the touch, like blood.

spreading away and, beyond, the shores of Sumatra.

There is a young man, a Malay with an easel and paints. He is, I observe distantly, creating a landscape in oils. I sit down and watch for a while, then decide to strike up an acquaintance.

He is untutored in his craft, has only been to primary school, but his teacher encouraged him, showed him how to back canvas and employ paints. His name is Mansur, maybe early twenties, and he has the rough hands and gentle staring eyes of the true artist. The work is gifted but naive, a lost talent one supposes, sadly. I wait and watch, quietly.

Soon the small work is complete — he offers it to me for fifteen dollars. I take it gladly and leave. He ignores me as I go, pinning up another empty canvas. I am gripped with some nameless sorrow; how often as we travel through life and places we meet and part with other specks of humanity that we long to know better yet never can or will.

We proceed across the bridges of this Venice of the East, up and down the gently winding and surprisingly broad streets (Lord Jim did you savor this very street?). I make some notes about camera angles and positions. The pace is leisurely, no raucousness. Then suddenly some strident sounds do penetrate. I stop the car, move in the direction of this odd tumult. It is a traveling Chinese theatre. A rough stage has been



erected beneath a canvas overhead, and the actors are there playing through their show in the stiff, stylized manner I had only ever seen on films. Here it was live and vivid and real, these human dolls strutting and shrieking in falsetto notes, an orchestra banging its cymbals, a joyous crowd shouting with delight. A hawker dispenses juice squeezed from sugar cane and blocked with ice . . . delicious it is too. I leave these Good Companions of the East and proceed to the port, the Harbourside.

Even at its mouth the river that flows through the midst of this small city and empties into the Straits is only perhaps a hundred and fifty yards across and only deep enough to bear the lighters that service the ships lying off the coast, and the dhows that drift in from Sumatra. This is no longer the great and busy port of other years. We climb some steps, hollowed by a million calloused feet, past the long row of white washed godowns, with names like Sim and Darbie, Dunlop, Jardine Matheson. Worn and weathered they may be, yet they have stubbornly survived wars, hurricanes and even so-called revolutions. Their owners are still in business, indeed putting more money in the bank than ever.

I pause for a moment and regard a dhow just in from Indonesia — some forty miles away — groaning with a cargo of sacks of charcoal. Spidery little men of indeterminate age silently heft off the great sacks. They are paid about five dollars a day.

Suddenly, as from nowhere, a child appears. A girl of perhaps ten years of age, a round brown face with two whips of hair hanging down her cheeks, eyes solemn. She volunteers a short resumé of her town and place, as if by rote. The town of Malacca, she affirms, got its name from a tree, it is a very ancient town and many years ago before the Europeans came it was a rich capital of our country . . . She speaks on and I am enraptured. She points to another ship coming in. I glance away, then back, and she has gone, this perky little Dickensian waif. Who is she, I wonder. I ask Ranjit. He says, just a child of the waterfront. Once again I am filled with sorrow. What will the world offer this scrap of humanity? Where is its future?

The shadows lengthen and we go in to have

one more meal. The food is bubbling and steaming in the glass cabinets. Some huge crisp prawns, flavored rice and a variety of delectable vegetables with a bottle of fine beer to help it all down.

I stretch contentedly as the night falls about, in its color and glitter and shadows. Pedicabs go thinking by (what sort of a desperate living do such folk make?), a couple of plump Chinese merchants gossip politely, some children bowl hoops, lads with their pretty girl friends perched on pillions chug by on their bikes, Buddhist priest in yellow robe minces past. The atmosphere is quiet, relaxed, leisurely. These are a people possessed of warmth without effusiveness, dignity untinged by arrogance.

Ranjit breaks my meditations, saying, You don't want to leave here do you? The return journey is slower and I find excuses to stop occasionally at some smoky village.

*Tan Hock has been detained for eleven and a half years without trial. Before his arrest in July 1967 he was a schoolteacher and legislative councillor in Penang. He was formerly assistant secretary general of the Labour Party of Malaya. He is now 39 years of age.*

*Tan Hock Hin was arrested for taking part in demonstrations against United States intervention in Vietnam and for protesting against the Malaysian government's decision to ban the United Malayan Estate Workers' Union. The government held that such activities were "prejudicial to national security" and "promoted Communist United Front activities". Tan Hock Hin is now one of 89 prisoners who have been held for more than five years under the Internal Security Act.*

*Like all political prisoners in Malaysia, Tan Hock Hin has never been formally charged, and consequently has had no opportunity to challenge the government's allegations against him in open court. He is detained at Batu Gajah Special Detention Camp.*

At about midnight we are back at the causeway and agreeably exhausted. Ranjit takes me to a disco and its splendid bar. He orders a scotch. The girl asks him, what brand sir? He says Black Label — and not too much ice. Then he tells me about the Sikh religion.

It was a twenty-minute jeep ride to Changi prison and in the event we never shot a foot. Like any other gaol it was grim, forboding, characterless . . . the handful of inmates, Japanese, potted around. Their guards, English and Australian, stared on languidly. Reversed roles, the handcuffs switched, but still tied to each other.



I noticed an odd street name, Moon Crescent, wandered down to the sea-shore where, as if untouched by wars or the passage of great events, leathery old fishermen in their conical hats still dipped their nets.

Beyond was a large island and an informant said that it was called Pulau Tekong Besar.

It was a half hour taxi ride to Changi. It is a kind of satellite suburb of the city, a New Town, oddly Western. There are supermarkets, boutiques, small restaurants, a tree-lined main street with angle-parked cars. I walk towards the old prison. The solid structure has been cleanly white-washed, there is a surround of well-kept lawns and gardens. But the fences are high and formidable, the guards, in jungle greens and sporting machine pistols, tough and wary. It is still a gaol.

I walk away down past the signpost that says Moon Crescent, towards the sea, and stare across at the island of Pulau Tekong Besar. Leathery old fishermen in conical hats lift their nets, and the island seems peaceful and deserted.

*Dr Lim Hock Siew was arrested on 2 February 1963 in "Operation Cold Store". The former secretary-general of the Barisan Sosiolis, Lim was exiled to the island of Pulau Tekong Besar in November 1978. Amnesty International continues to regard him as a prisoner of conscience.*

*In the course of his detention, Dr Lim has been at various times offered both release and exile outside Singapore. In 1972, he was offered release on condition that he made a statement saying he would give up politics and support "parliamentary democracy". He refused on the grounds that such a statement was self-contradictory.*

*In 1967, Dr Lim and four others successfully applied for a writ of habeas corpus. The High Court granted the writ and ordered the release on the technical grounds that the detainees' detention orders had not been signed by the President. The five were immediately rearrested under the Internal Security Act. Lim was held in Moon Crescent Detention Centre until his 'release' to Pulau Tekong Besar.*

I call on Peter Hollingshead, the head of the ABC's Asia Bureau. I hadn't seen him for years, since he had toiled in the newsroom at Gore Hill.

He has spent twelve years in the East now, an Old Hand. He seems to run a tight ship, and is content. "The further away I am from those bloody bureaucrats the better." He puts me onto

a salvage company called SMIT, a Dutch outfit, who have been in the business for more than a century. Their local boss is one Captain Smiley, an Irishman, but as he's away with the flu I deal with his offsider, a German named Luther. He says he knows Jan De Hartog, the sea writer. Luther regales me with some good yarns. One goes like this:

Normally we don't bother with cargo but once when we were looking for something else one of the divers came upon an old Portuguese galleon — must have been down there for three hundred years. He brought up a handful of what he thought was just old broken crockery. Now my hobby is collecting porcelain and I recognized this as Ming Dynasty. Very old indeed, sixteenth century at the latest. I told the Diver to bring up what he could find. He thought I was mad, but he did it. Only took a mornings work. We recovered thirteen perfect pieces. The company sold them at huge prices to collectors and museums . . . they let me have one as a gift. He pulls a desk draw open and produces a small bowl. It is eggshell white and veined with blue dye. It is as though it had been created yesterday. He enjoins me to pick it up, but I dare not.

And another:

In early 1945 a U-boat, a very big one designed for cargo work, was sailing from the East back to Europe. It was torpedoed by a British submarine off the Malaysian coast. It's there now in sixty feet of water, quite shallow. Its cargo was twenty-three tons of mercury — for use in rockets — now worth about six million dollars. Why is it still there? Because there is an international squabble about who should take it away. The British want it as a prize of war, the East Germans want the bodies of the crew, the West Germans just want the cargo, the Malaysian government won't let anyone touch it. So there it is, still at the bottom.

This morning is surprisingly quiet for a week day, and I can hear clearly the long cries of the mullahs calling from the mosques. Yes, the first of May, May Day, a holiday. Even here. Nothing much to do so I idly watch television, the solitary government channel. There is a scatter of mediocre sporting events, then a relay of the



Trade Union's annual meeting.

Lee delivers a long homily (in English) on the need to work even harder and better, says that there is still no room for changes at the top because the "Young men are not showing enough zeal as yet".

An official reads out a long list of 'resolutions' which are passed swiftly and unanimously, without discussion.

Then Mr Deva Nair, the President — a kind of Bob Hawke — delivers an attack on the British trade union movement which he asserts is ruining that country, let us not fall into their "errant ways". As an example of how things can get out of hands he quotes the example of a shop steward in some electronic factory in the industrial area of Jurong who has "behaved badly". It seems that this disaffected fellow had, after some disagreement with the manager of the plant, dispensed what had appeared to be a conciliatory gift. This present had been nicely wrapped up, within was a wicker basket. On opening this a cobra had popped out, the manager fell over in a dead faint and had to be carted off to hospital with a heart attack. That Mr Nair says sternly, is not a good thing. Such people must be punished

...

*Chng Min Oh was arrested on 3 August 1970. He was chairman of the Goldsmiths Employees Union. He was held in solitary confinement for the first six months of his detention. In August 1978 he was transferred to Whitely Road Holding Centre for interrogation. While undergoing*

*interrogation at Whitely Road, he was assaulted and forced to pour his urine over himself. In protest at these conditions, he went on a hunger strike. By late September 1979, he had lost 40 pounds in weight and both he and Ho Koon Kiang, another prisoner who had been subjected to similar treatment, were transferred to Changi Prison hospital. Chng Min Oh later complained of multiple injuries including damaged ears resulting in a loss of hearing. In November 1978, Chng was returned to the Moon Crescent Detention Centre.*

On the twenty-sixth day of my twenty-eight day visa I hand in the script — the adventure story as required with some comic overtones and plenty of action. It meets with approval, I pack my bags to go to the airport, make a foray into the duty-free area, have a farewell drink with the American producer — who now has a long haul ahead of him in getting the pilot film shot.

I go to the barrier and there is Ranjit Singh — all smiling but sad to see me go. How has he known I am off? The mysterious ways of the East, I suppose. The bus drives the passengers out to the 747 and we pass two aircraft sitting side by side — an air freighter owned by China Air Lines and a passenger plane with Aeroflot markings.

They seem friendly enough.

We lift off, the free drinks are dispensed (Singapore Air Lines do it well) and the movie comes on. It is entitled AND JUSTICE FOR ALL.



## NIGHT DRIVING

We go, go, go in capsules of steel  
(boxes of tin to put it bluntly)  
into the forest in a powered box,  
a crate on wheels, mobile but ungainly.  
The myth closes in and all we feel  
is our reality's no longer real;  
nothing has weight, even those granite rocks  
weigh only as heavy as yellow light.  
Neutral patches of negative green, a cloud  
of near growth holding out the night,  
and at the roadside, cut from lead sheet, a crowd  
of ferns and bracken are not what they were, or seem.  
The loom of light over a hump-backed rise, the beam  
becomes an orange tunnel round another box.  
There go more aliens, more naked apes,  
go, go, go in a bubble of glass and tin,  
aware of magic, that's the paradox,  
shut out, seeing only silhouetted shapes,  
the trees like hairs on the earth's blotched skin.  
Look up at that slit of sky above our car;  
the dark hairs wave across the silver track  
entangling here and there a wanton star.  
The forest's lying on her back;  
we drive into her dark cunt awed and blind;  
our yellow road turns on its edge  
but joy remains encapsuled in the mind.  
Our heap of metal is a brutal wedge.

FRANK KELLAWAY

## WAITING

*there are no barbarians, any more*  
— Cavafy

saturday night and  
the buffaloes are coming

like some strange scene  
in a movie by cavafy, they  
are coming to eat off civil  
ized plates and curl their tongues  
round silver spoons

the buffaloes are coming  
and will chew the seams  
of our velvet curtains then  
begin to eat us too

then swing from chandeliers  
hung like stars in the deep  
blue ceiling

then touch the wood that  
touched the shoulders that  
rubbed the shoulders of  
important people who ate here  
once

the buffaloes are coming  
as buffaloes must, to graze  
in pastures not fitting  
their ugly teeth and  
sitting awkwardly in antique  
chairs that they often break  
then

laugh  
then try another

the buffaloes are coming, they  
really are coming, because  
cavafy was wrong, and

cavafy told lies

STEPHEN J. WILLIAMS

## TOULOUSE LAUTREC'S ELLES

Filles without joy. Here in frail line  
flesh weary of use. All the spark's  
beaten out, in lust's monotony  
faces ground flat, and here's the saddle nose  
of born infection.

Run your fingers  
over the pulpy fruit, did ever  
that crumpled belly cinch to twenty inches?  
Oh, what a heavy joy you'd have of these.

But the painter  
himself freaked out, chose this  
their stale cup, immortalises  
their slack and raddled hospitality,  
a tolerated guest, whose measuring eye  
portions no blame. (See how she sleeps, off duty.)

BARBARA GILES



RICHARD HAESE **Communism and Culture**

*Left-wing Art in Melbourne and Sydney, 1942-1946.*

*Richard Haese, born in 1944, is lecturer in art history at La Trobe University, and his study of Australian art and social life, 1930-1950, will be published by Allen Lane in September 1981. We are grateful to Penguin Books for permission to publish in advance chapter six of Rebels and Precursors.*

*A national art requires more than the photographic rendering of certain national symbols . . . A national tradition arises from a people as they struggle with their social and geographical environment.*

Bernard Smith (1946)

The diversity and the individuality of Angry Penguins artists like Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker have never been in doubt. By comparison, left-wing artists of the 1940s who embraced a different kind of radicalism have too often been viewed as a homogeneous bloc. Part of the explanation for this error lies in the selfconscious public face the left presented to the world: crusaders in a common cause know that they weaken it if disagreement is exposed within their ranks. In part this misapprehension can be explained by the genuine ignorance of the Sydney and Melbourne groups concerning their respective conceptions of art and culture. Mutual suspicion exacerbated misunderstanding but, for political reasons, differences were suppressed and cracks papered over. The result was a blurring of distinctions and a caricaturing of positions that has remained to this day.

The Melbourne-based artists called themselves "social realists"; those in Sydney who established the Studio of Realist Art in 1945 used the label "realists". Realism in art meant, however, many different things to communist artists, as did political radicalism. While there was a consensus of sorts, membership of the Communist Party in

Australia covered the widely varying degrees of political commitment that were characteristic of an era before the hardening of political arteries during the cold war. One could be a card-carrying member of the Party and still qualify for the title of "fellow traveller".<sup>1</sup> Assessing their degree of commitment is important if one is to ask how far Australian artists and intellectuals were prisoners of an ideology and under the direction of a "sectarian" political party and how far they felt free to work from more independent aesthetic and ideological positions.

Such questions have not been asked. Fine paintings produced by artists of this camp have been lost or forgotten, and those that have been discussed have not been seen in their full political and cultural context. Few commentators have dissented from the conclusion that radical realists "often begin as good artists and end as poor politicians; by putting more energy into politics than into painting they burn themselves out".<sup>2</sup> The evidence points to a more involved relationship than the sacrifice of aesthetic priorities to political and humanitarian ones, although that was indeed the case. Rather, it was the *nature* of the humanism to which communists responded that determined the respective aesthetic attitudes of Noel Counihan, Yosl Bergner and James Cant. In 1943, while the Angry Penguins refined an art concerned, through surrealism and expressionism, with the psychological realities of the life of the mind, the social realists were turning away from such matters.



To those who by 1944 had sloughed off their sympathy for Marxism-Leninism, Melbourne communist artists appeared to present a unified front. But that unity lasted only as long as the war and by the time of their major group exhibition, "Three Realist Artists", in July 1946, it was crumbling.

The first indication of a coherent left-wing movement had been an exhibition by communist artists in 1942 at the Jewish cultural centre, the Kadimah Hall, in Carlton. This exhibition of over forty canvases contained work by Noel Counihan, Vic O'Connor, James Wigley, Nutter Buzacott, Yosl Bergner and others.<sup>3</sup> There had been, of course, a well-established left-wing movement in the arts in Melbourne and Sydney during the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> The Great Depression, which had propelled Counihan into the ranks of the Communist Party in 1931, produced in young radicals a sense of overwhelming need for social and cultural change. One early result was the appearance of the magazine *Strife* in 1930, edited by Judah Waten and Herbert McClintock. The early cartooning and caricaturing work of Noel Counihan in Melbourne and of George Finey in Sydney was also an important contribution to the left-wing press. The Workers' Art Clubs, established in 1932, offered ordinary people a chance to discover and participate in theatrical production, literary activity and the visual arts. Leading figures in this effort were Counihan, Finey, Jack Maughan, Judah Waten, Bill Dolphin and Nattie Seeligson. Always somewhat suspect as far as Party functionaries were concerned, the clubs took their cue from similar organizations in Europe and America. These were, in turn, founded on similar principles to those of the *Proletkult* movement in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. In this sense, they were forerunners of the later Studio of Realist Art in Sydney.

The populist movement in Russia was suppressed by Stalin's directives in the early 1930s. In Australia the Workers' Art Clubs and associated left-wing publications were ended in 1935 and united front activities took their place. By the 1940s the earlier specialist branches were wound up and in 1942 the Party adopted a policy of integrating specialist members with the ordinary rank and file in branches or of establishing more apparently independent "front" organizations. The Artists Advisory Panel was a good example of such a body. In the great anti-fascist crusade artists of all persuasions were called

upon to play their part in the common cause.

Although Counihan was in the forefront of this effort, it was a difficult time for the artist. The fight against tuberculosis was accompanied by running battles with the Party leadership over ideological issues and political tactics—on account of which both Counihan and Waten were expelled from the Party in 1942. Counihan was reinstated in 1943 but Waten stayed out for the duration of the war. Few of Counihan's early experiments from 1941 or the art-political works of 1942 have survived. "Heil Hitler", "Tribute to Stalingrad", and "They Shall be Avenged" were all destroyed without, one supposes, any enduring loss to Australian art. No doubt "The New Order", which has survived, was a superior work. A small picture, it was inspired by Goya's monumental canvas "The Third of May", and was the nearest that Australian painting got to socialist realist propaganda as exemplified in Russia by Alexander Gerasimov or Isaac Brodsky. Comparable painting in Australia would have demanded that the artist work in the *plein air* realist style of a Roberts or a McCubbin. The catch was that communists like Counihan were defending in Russian art a type of realism that was inimical to the aims of the Contemporary Art Society.

To the extent that Noel Counihan and Albert Tucker were both concerned with an art of communication, they shared a common problem: that of conveying, through convincing iconography and an appropriate style, ideas and values that were a response to personal social experience. Probably Counihan's most successful contribution to the Anti-Fascist exhibition and the 1943 C.A.S. exhibition was a drawing entitled "Pick-Up". Counihan depicts in straightforward terms the meeting between an American G.I. and a local girl. It is a natural, even sentimental, event which avoids the critical ire the subject would have drawn from Tucker. Apart from the more modest achievement of his graphic work, Counihan was, however, profoundly dissatisfied with his more ambitious early efforts. They were, he later held, "too dominated by the idea element; they lacked the flesh and blood of intimate experience".<sup>5</sup>

Vic O'Connor had a similar problem in painting a "political picture". Like Counihan, he felt unable satisfactorily to contrive an imaginative protest against German atrocities. Four such efforts were exhibited in the Anti-Fascist exhibition: "The Refugees", "After the Raid", "Nazi Culture" and "Pogrom"—the last three of which



he subsequently destroyed. "The Departure" and "The Refugees" (1942), which looked to Bergner's style and personal experience, were different. Both paintings are based on vivid recollections of the eviction of O'Connor's family during the Great Depression. Only thus did O'Connor feel that he could achieve a convincing image of loss and desolation comparable to the sufferings of war refugees in eastern Europe. From this point, his style became more expressive and painterly, an unforced approach more in keeping with the temperament of this intuitive artist.

Late in 1941 Yosl Bergner joined an army Labor Company and was sent to Tocomwal where he was put to work with other aliens loading and unloading railway trucks. A painting from that year, "End of a Day's Work, Tocomwal", is moving and disturbing testimony to the experience of alienation. Four civilian soldiers occupy the immediate foreground, the central figure being that of a fellow Jew. Their attitudes and expressions are those of men doubly dispossessed. Each figure is withdrawn and introspective, a point underscored by the reclining figure who shields his face with a hand. The night scene is lit by artificial light, the town in the background looking like a prison.

Two themes occupied Bergner from 1942 to 1946: the plight of Australian Aboriginals and that of Polish Jewry. The connection between them was implied by the inclusion in the Anti-Fascist exhibition of two works from each theme. For Bergner the evidence of dispossession and alienation was everywhere—in the sight of an Aboriginal "busker" on a city pavement playing a popular American song on a gum leaf, as much as in Carlton tenements. In Tocomwal Bergner discovered two Aboriginal families, camped on each side of the town, to which they were forbidden entry. He reacted by producing two paintings entitled "The Aborigines Come to Town", paintings that made a wholly ironic point.<sup>6</sup> In "Refugees" (1942), Bergner depicts a group of pathetic figures against the background of a burning town. Whereas the Aboriginal pictures of this time have a monumentality of form, with the Jewish subjects Bergner employed a heavy painterly style more indebted to the early mode of Van Gogh.

By 1943 Bergner and O'Connor had joined Coughlin as members of the Communist Party. Yet despite their fierce battle of words with the Angry Penguins, it was not a productive year. They were heavily committed to military and

political tasks, and Coughlin's health again collapsed. In May 1943 he wrote to Bernard Smith with the news that he was confined to bed and not painting.<sup>7</sup> Bergner, he said, was at camp in Tocomwal for months on end. Meanwhile, Vic O'Connor confided to Smith that he was far from happy with the painting he had exhibited with the C.A.S.<sup>8</sup> There were many frustrations and difficulties: "I have a full time army job (work one stretch of five weeks without a day off—and about five nights a week)". What was a decisive and vigorous year for the Angry Penguins artists was a frustrating one for their opponents.

#### BERNARD SMITH

Any public statement by communists at this time must be viewed in its military and political perspective. Thus Coughlin declared in response to Tucker's attack on Zhdanov's conception of culture: "Who is Zhdanov? He is one of the most brilliant leaders of the Russian Communist Party."<sup>9</sup> It was the declaration of a political activist, a man for whom Zhdanov's military leadership in the epic defence of Leningrad was sufficient to brand anyone who questioned his cultural wisdom as a fascist. But we must also understand that there was a considerable difference between the toughness of this public stance and more private feelings concerning Marxism and conceptions of culture appropriate to socialism. Although many leading left-wing artists and intellectuals were prepared to accept the term "socialist realism", many held private doubts about the Zhdanov prescription for art and literature that had been proclaimed as communist dogma in 1934. Naturally, it was unthinkable that such doubts should be aired. Yet the curious fact remains that both Sydney and Melbourne communist intellectuals accepted the public rhetoric of each other at its face value. In private, Coughlin and O'Connor thought that *Australian New Writing* was excessively rigid and sectarian. At the same time they were aware that Bernard Smith saw their own position in much the same terms.

For his part, Smith saw the virtue of maintaining a consistent ideological position in public while his real position was somewhat more pragmatic. How uncompromising that public stance could be is indicated by Smith's repudiation in July 1943 of the charge by Max Harris that *Australian New Writing* falsely claimed to represent the only truly progressive art and culture in Aus-



tralia.<sup>10</sup> The claims of *Australian New Writing* were not, Smith replied, based on claims for any new artistic tendency or impetus since this would suggest equally valid rival claims: "There is no rival. It is." The artist had one choice and one choice only: to be progressive or to be reactionary. In these terms, Smith dismissed as bogus any claims by Harris that a broad intellectual front of radical artists and writers was possible. There could only be one popular front and that was a front based on the working class. No "pure" theory of art was possible: "You can't unite the *intellectual class*, but you can unite intellectuals around the need for a better society, for alliance with the working class, for the defeat of Fascism."

In less public terms, Smith was more flexible. Writing to a fellow communist whose piece of art criticism published by *Australian New Writing* would have done credit to Zhdanov himself, Smith counselled against appearing excessively narrow and sectarian. One must attack "intellectualism", Smith stated, not "intellectuals". He went on to specify the immediate tactic within the long-term strategy of the revolutionary struggle. Such a clear statement by a man then writing the first analytical history of Australian art is worth quoting at length:

We have got to lay the essential scaffolding of a materialistic aesthetic in this country in the next few years. We will have to deal with these problems over and over again, applying our methods to Australian writers, to periods of Australian art, to detailed aspects of all the arts in this country; and we can only do it if we have our own position pretty clearly defined.

To do this I feel one of the main guiding principles must be the *necessary divisions* [italics added] that we must make between our convictions which arise from our socialist philosophy, our belief that art arises out of the social ethos, that is charged in content and form . . . by class struggle. We have to distinguish these convictions arising from our theoretical position from our own tactics in relation to modern artists, artist and writers clubs . . . We understand the position well enough in the realm of politics, the guiding policy of National front, united front . . . We must realise that there is a counterpart in the cultural world. All those artists who are willing to resist fascism have our support. We will not openly attack the forms of their art, even though we may believe that it arises from their misconception of social realities.<sup>11</sup>

The critic should confront cultural politics wherever this appeared reactionary (as in the case of the views of a Lionel Lindsay or an Alister Kershaw) because in such cases there was, for Smith, a clear link between aesthetic beliefs and politics. Elsewhere a more subtle strategy was required. Communists themselves had always to be on guard against sectarianism within their own ranks: "Who are we to say what the best products of socialist realism are? Far better to say, here is a socialist, who is also an artist, look what he is doing." Smith went on specifically to reject social prescriptions in art and culture and cautioned against ideas central to Stalinism—that art should be optimistic and that it should employ the mode of academic naturalism. Such rules, Smith believed, were arbitrary and the communist critic should substitute a concern for art produced by all sincere anti-fascists and art that stressed a general tendency to return to realism.

In broad terms, this was the position Smith adopted as an art historian and critic in *Place, Taste and Tradition*. He was not prepared to dismiss modernism—he could not as an historian—but he employed criteria of political intention and the degree of realism to sort out progressive from reactionary artists. As he wrote in July 1943, however, any criticism of modernist ideas demand careful handling:

we will formulate our arrangements differently [from a sectarian stance], showing whenever possible the *positive* developments of the modernist movement . . . On the other hand it is necessary to criticise those negative aspects of mysticism, subjectivism etc. which are so often present. In this way we would aim at keeping contemporary painters in touch with reality . . . There is no rigid line in these matters. But the artist is an artist and as a man has a duty both to himself and to *his art* to appreciate and gather information from the political developments of his time.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, as *Place, Taste and Tradition* bears out, this open conception of art criticism was not easy to hold to, and Smith showed scant sympathy towards any of the Angry Penguins painters. The problem for communists was always the conflict between the demands of art and the demands of politics, between the role of the historian and the more judgmental role of the critic. So critical of other views was Smith in the original manuscript that the publisher, Sydney Ure Smith, refused to publish the section dealing with the Lindsays.



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This was subsequently published in two parts in the *Communist Review* under the pseudonym "Goya" as "The Fascist Mentality in Australian Art and Criticism".<sup>13</sup>

Despite the tone of this piece, by the time the book was published in 1945 Smith's views were being modified considerably by contact with Sydney Ure Smith and by his own growing doubts about the intrusion of politics into art. *Place, Taste and Tradition* is, in fact, two books: one is a sharp and incisive review of Australian art history from its beginnings to the twentieth century, based on much original research; the other is a book whose political rhetoric betrays its partisan aims. The second aspect must be accepted as a product of Australian art politics at a time when the Contemporary Art Society was being torn apart by an internecine struggle of which *Place, Taste and Tradition* was a part.

Smith did not hesitate to state that, in his opinion, Australian painting culminated in the politically conscious realism of Bergner, Counihan, O'Connor and Herbert McClintock. These were the artists who had "reacted vigorously to the social and political upheavals of their own time". Smith extended his favor also to the work of Russell Drysdale, Peter Purves Smith, William Dobell, Donald Friend and James Cant. The Angry Penguins artists, on the other hand, were linked with James Gleeson, Max Harris and Ivor Francis to the spirit of "war-time defeatism" manifesting itself in surrealism and apocalypticism. Perceval's rejection of socialist realism for an exploration of the world of the child was "clear enough evidence that regression to a purely individualistic art has not resulted in the heightening of his artistic powers". Nolan was mentioned only in passing and Boyd not at all. Tucker was dismissed on the basis of unsound political views and a pessimism "linked spiritually with the world-weariness of the Eliot school".

In the final analysis, Smith fell back upon that old socialist realist standby, the demand for an optimistic response to significant events. It was in this sense that he felt that the humanism inherent in the treatment of social and political events by the left-wing realists was superior to the work of other contemporary painters:

They have felt these issues, not as abstractions for the purpose of discussion, but as natural forces at the threshold of existence, moulding their lives. They have realized that Australia is

a part . . . of world movements: that it cannot be separated from these movements. But they have reacted no less vigorously to the social and political environment of their own country. Both these aspects of their work have arisen from their preparedness to record the urgencies of contemporary life, both at home and abroad.<sup>14</sup>

If Smith was not prepared to state outright that their vision was a more optimistic, and therefore a more progressive one than their opponents', it was because there was no need. Their contemporary rivals had already been found guilty of pessimism, world-weariness, intellectualizing, mystification, introversion and defeatism.

Two major arguments are woven into *Place, Taste and Tradition*. The first is that the important thrust of contemporary painting was towards a new realism. The second is that Australian art and culture possessed a native democratic tradition. These matters lie at the very heart of a longstanding and continuing debate in Australian cultural history over the fundamental question of an Australian identity and Australia's place in the world.

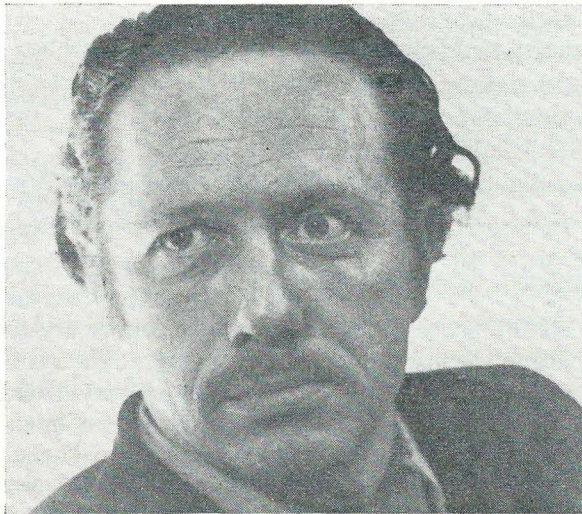
Smith devoted the final chapter of *Place, Taste and Tradition* to a plea for a new realism in art.<sup>15</sup> In answering the question, "Where is contemporary art going?" he addressed himself to what he saw as a crisis in twentieth century art and culture generally.<sup>16</sup> Since art and culture are tied to human history, they must progress. The claims of men like Adrian Lawlor and Albert Tucker for essential and unchanging verities in human experience were dismissed as spurious. The disputes in the C.A.S. which began in 1943 were evidence that many members had fallen out of step with history. As Smith put it, "a Society like the Contemporary Art Society, by its very title, pledges itself to a kind of eternal youth, a sort of constitutional necessity to be always arriving." If the C.A.S. was to survive it had to open its doors: abstractism and surrealism must give way to a new realism—a realism of a kind reflected in the recent work of Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, Diego Rivera, José Orozco and others. The obscurantist aestheticism and mysticism of expressionism and surrealism in Australia were merely another form of that anti-intellectualism which was also the central feature of the fascist flight from reason.<sup>17</sup> Romanticism in all its guises was the antithesis of reason and represented a flight from reality. In the 1930s Smith thought that many artists had turned their backs on political realities



and accepted in a fatalistic way the destruction in Germany, Italy and Spain of European democratic culture. The surrealists had been hypnotized by the power that destroyed them. The time had come, Smith declared, for the artist to take whatever was of value in modernism and put it in the service of humanism.<sup>18</sup>

Much of the difficulty for communist artists of any nationality lay in the great confusion surrounding the Russian reaction against aestheticism. In taking their cue from Russian ideological precepts, both Bernard Smith and Noel Counihan were ready enough to favor proletarian content, but did not accept "national form" if that meant academic naturalism. Both admired the early work of the Heidelberg School, which in 1943 and

*James Cant, c. 1945 (top)*  
*V. G. O'Connor, c. 1942 (bottom)*



1944 was being rediscovered by artists and young intellectuals. But it was inconceivable that they should either adopt or support the style of Ernest Buckmaster, precisely because of its popularity with the Australian public. Whereas the Studio of Realist Art in Sydney was based on ideas close to those of the proletarian movement in its support also of untutored art, Counihan committed himself to an art of high seriousness of subject and purpose. The alternative was the modernist tradition of social realism. There was no other option unless the artist were to slavishly accept Stalinist socialist realism as some Party members demanded. To experiment with proletarian art risked lowering professional standards; to risk tainting art by surrealist adventures was to be politically suspect.

*Judah Waten and Noel Counihan, Horsham, 1943*





These were the problems and dilemmas upon which the incapacitated Counihan brooded in 1943. Beyond all else he knew that the best art was that which communicated an experience of the human struggle. To base art on personal experience of social realities (properly understood, of course) seemed to be the key. Thinking that Smith's views as expressed in *Australian New Writing* seemed to repudiate this conviction, Counihan wrote at length to him in December 1943 setting out a broader conception of socialist realism on which he, O'Connor and Bergner based their work. Counihan wanted no misrepresentation of their ideas in *Place, Taste and Tradition*. The statement represented a manifesto of the Melbourne communist group:

Our trend at present is to endeavour to record the most important, most comprehensive, most suggestive subject matter by digging into the depths of our own intimate individual experience—that is, the indirect approach, to reveal the social relations involved in our most intimate experience. This approach to socialist realism, our objective, is the antithesis of the subjectivism of surrealism, and the sterility of all formalism. We are not concerned with examining our own 'stream of consciousness' . . . we are not concerned with symbols of purely subjective significance or psychological symbols. Our subject matter is the material, tangible, visible world of nature and a [view] of human society—the human society of 1943, capitalist society with all its social, class relations, its conflicts.<sup>19</sup>

*Noel Counihan painting Frank Dalby Davison, St Kilda, 1947*





The values expressed in the statement were intended to distinguish Melbourne communist art from the apparently more doctrinaire views held in Sydney. By 1944 the group opted for the term "social realism" to describe a humanistic art based on personal experience. Well before 1944 it was a term which, like "socialist realism", had common currency among left-wing artists.

By 1943 Australian left-wing artists were less concerned with Moscow than with the indigenous national democratic tradition within which they felt they worked. There was a marked shift in this direction in the tenor and the subjects in left-wing publications such as the *Communist Review*. Miles Franklin, for example, contributed "Joseph Furphy, Democrat and Australian Patriot" in September 1943. In October Max Brown, in a review of the Contemporary Art Society exhibition, wrote that the men of *Angry Penguins* "will not go ahead until they turn their faces directly to their people and their country, bury themselves in the life about them, and learn to work with all their hearts and souls."<sup>20</sup>

Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* can also be seen as part of this revival of left-wing Australianism. Above all else, Smith stated, he was concerned with the relationship between the course taken by Australian art and concurrent European tendencies from which Australian artists had drawn sustenance for an art of a national character. What were the characteristics of a genuinely national art? For Smith, "A national art requires more than the photographic rendering of certain national *symbols* . . . A national tradition arises from a *people* as they struggle with their social and geographical environment."<sup>21</sup> That was seen as a legacy of the Heidelberg School, embodying as it did the aspirations of the democratic labor movement. It was a vision which had been lost by the subsequent distortion of the pastoral tradition in the conservative nationalism of the "blood and soil" mystique of J. S. MacDonald. The logical consequence was (as Smith continued the argument in the *Communist Review*) the blatant anti-semitism and racism of a fascist Australianism:

there is a direct line of theoretical descent from the aestheticism which grew out of the Melbourne Bohemian circles of the nineties, and the increasing mysticism associated with the practice of landscape painting, to the development of an arrogant nationalism . . . and finally to an arrogant mysticism which takes on all the attributes of the fascist mentality.

Smith had no doubt about the danger and pervasiveness of this evil: "the final common denominator of this 'cultural' tendency is to be found in the concentration camps of Dachau and Belzen."<sup>22</sup>

For communists the evil thus identified was contained within certain clearly definable class limits and ideological values. This was not the case for artists like Tucker and Boyd, or later for writers like George Johnston. The evil they identified could not be answered by an appeal to alternative virtues residing in "the people" and realized in the heroic struggle of that people. For Smith, as for Counihan, the notion of "the people" had a double loading: the people were an international proletariat but were also identified with an Australian working class that had in turn been moulded by specific social and geographical conditions.

Communists were attempting to found a new nationalism free of fascist contamination by locating its values in those of a native democratic labor movement based on the authentic values of an Australian people—values which also partook of a universal character. Smith pointed out the perils of this difficult but necessary dialectic:

A national tradition of Australian art should be sought for, not in the hopeless endeavour to create an *art-form* peculiar to this continent—as aboriginal art was—but an art the nature of which will grow from the features of a changing Australian society. Such an art, while maintaining many international connections and drawing from varied international sources, will reflect the life of the Australian people . . . For a vital art can only grow out of its own time and its own place.

Like Counihan, Smith bore testimony to a belief that there was an Australian way to socialism and an Australian art which might help show the way.

That national cultural tradition could only be produced "from the gradual assimilation of many overseas tendencies as they react upon the local conditions of the country."<sup>23</sup> It was a conception of culture which neither Burdett nor Reed would have disclaimed. On such a theoretical level of cultural aspirations, practically everybody was in agreement. The essential difference lay in the demand of left-wing radicals such as Smith and Counihan that the attitudes to be assimilated by artists, and the values to be discerned in a culture, be prescribed by Marxist-Leninist ideology. What-



ever freedom artists or critics found for themselves within such strictures was severely circumscribed in the 1940s by the requirements of the united front. The irony for communists was that this not only alienated potential liberal allies, but ensured that the divisions within their own ranks were not bridged. Moreover artists like Bergner and O'Connor, though fundamentally "fellow travelers", might have remained with the Party had they not been alienated by its demands in the post-war years.

#### NOEL COUNIHAN

As Counihan slowly recovered from his debilitating illness late in 1943 he began to paint once again. In December he wrote to Smith: "I am painting steadily, but my restricted time is broken into by various demands, including political cartoons . . . However my painting is making progress and I am working hard as circumstances permit."<sup>24</sup> Always a slow worker, Counihan produced even less than O'Connor and Bergner at this time. Speaking on behalf of the three artists, Counihan pointed out to Smith that their work could be divided into two categories: first, an imaginative treatment of aspects of the war against fascism; second, work dealing specifically with local Australian subject matter.<sup>25</sup> The first category after 1942 belonged almost wholly to the work of Bergner and his series "The Jews". From December 1943 Counihan's work was, by contrast, wholly local in its concerns.

Counihan's first paintings of an immediate milieu were of familiar images around the working-class streets of St Kilda. The subject of "In the Waiting Room" (1943) is an old and emaciated woman seated in a doctor's waiting room. "At the Corner of Nightingale Street", painted early in 1944, depicts a pregnant woman with two children hanging onto her skirts gossiping with an old couple on a St Kilda street corner. They express a sense of compassion for the poor and the lonely and are painted with an energetic brush-stroke and vivid streaks of color. The subjects were the "living material of real, profound experience" which Counihan stated was derived from an intensely felt personal contact. Counihan assessed his progress to Smith: "aesthetically my own work is developing as a result of the turn to very local subject matter, rich in human and social content."<sup>26</sup>

After this small group of works there was a gap in Counihan's output until he began a group of paintings based on memories of the Great

Depression and produced in July and August 1944. The reason for the break was that Counihan's health had collapsed again in March 1944. During a further period of convalescence, he contemplated ways of attempting a more ambitious painting statement. It is not uncommon for artists with such an aim to turn to the exalted genre of history painting—whether in relation to the distant mythical past or the heroism of modern life. Counihan turned in 1944 to contemporary events in the process of passing from history into myth, to what were perhaps the most intensely felt experiences of his life: in 1933 he had risked prison by haranguing crowds from behind the protective bars of an iron cage in Sydney Road, Brunswick, as a protest against restrictions on free speech. In 1944 Counihan painted "At the Start of the March, 1932", "The Speaker, 1932" and "At the Meeting, 1932". "At the Start of the March, 1932" is stylistically close to the work of 1943. However, "At the Meeting, 1932" is more sombre and, like Bergner's earlier "End of a Day's Work" looks to the early paintings of Dutch peasantry by Van Gogh in its use of heavy accentuated forms to express the stoical endurance and strength of the unemployed.

#### YOSL BERGNER

In June 1943 Counihan wrote to Smith apropos of Bergner's Aboriginal paintings: "for the first time these abused people are being painted by a painter with an understanding of their sufferings and exploitation. It has taken a Polish Jew to interpret the aboriginal realistically, sympathetically, as a struggling people, without patronage or sentimentality."<sup>27</sup> By the end of the year Bergner was also working on a series based on the theme of the Warsaw Ghetto. The extermination of Jews, begun in Poland and eastern Europe in 1942, was by now in full operation. Little could be known outside or inside occupied Europe but certain events indicated the dimension of the tragedy. In April 1943 an unsuccessful but significant revolt took place in the Warsaw Ghetto, when for several weeks virtually unarmed Jews successfully held off German army battalions. Without doubt this event precipitated what are among his most important works: four key paintings from 1943, "Hanging Jews", "Father and Sons", "Looking Over the Ghetto Wall" and "Job". Exhibited in 1944 with the C.A.S., they were not for sale. They are painted in a heavy manner with strongly built-up surfaces of pigment. The colors used exploit stark contrasts:



black, white, greys, red and touches of blue-grey. The figures are unmistakably Jewish; men wear either cloth caps or skull caps and invariably a *talis kuten* or *tzitzith* jerkin.

The two figures in "Hanging Jews" are broken and emaciated corpses, sacrificial victims with bound hands and crossed feet. The landscape in which they hang is bleak and snow-covered. The figures in "Father and Sons", a man and two naked children, stand within the ghetto against a red wall. Houses with dark windows take on the appearance of death's heads and the firmament above is dark and oppressive. Bergner was not religious in an orthodox Judaistic sense but the whole outward bearing of the figures suggests the withdrawal of celestial grace.

In "Looking Over the Ghetto Wall" the figure wears a cloth cap, suggesting not only Jewishness but also working-class status. This lone figure looks back over one shoulder at a high red wall topped with barbed wire. The wall emphasizes that a ghetto is a prison; the fiery sky behind that wall suggests, perhaps, an even worse hell beyond it. As with all ghettos, the wall that locks people in also serves to keep alien and hostile forces at bay.

Bergner continued the series in 1944 and one important work from this year is "Funeral in the Ghetto". An emaciated woman and two youths push a cart upon which lies a skeletal corpse; in the centre of the picture stands the grief-stricken figure of a man who covers his face with a huge and helpless hand in a gesture of unutterable sorrow. In the background are the tenements of the Warsaw Ghetto, and above, the invariable burning sky. In specific terms, the painting appears to relate to the German policy in 1944 of deliberate starvation of the last survivors in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The advantage that Bergner had as an artist, if such it can be called, was the possession of a theme that became one of the greatest human tragedies. As a Pole, Bergner knew well the character of the Warsaw Ghetto and, as a Jew, he knew personally what it meant to be a member of a persecuted race. Moreover the complex Judaistic tradition offered the artist a set of symbolic references. His Australian colleagues, whatever their personal sympathies, were denied this identification and its symbolism. They had necessarily to turn to comparable themes within their own cultural traditions. It is significant, if unsurprising, that Bergner's paintings of Aborigines

are less convincing and less moving on the whole than those dealing with the fate of his own race.

#### VIC O'CONNOR

Early in 1944, and now out of the army, Vic O'Connor began a series of street scenes based on images of life in the lanes and streets of West Melbourne. Two works, "The Woman with the Pram" and "The Woman with the Bow" were based on an old woman O'Connor often saw at the market. The sight of this figure revived early memories and combined with an image of the artist's mother in a powerful way. It was a turning-point for the artist:

From that moment on . . . I was beginning to realise what activated my painting and the way to respond to it.

I wanted to paint autobiographical things. I wished to paint people around me, the reflection I had on what was happening in life, the judgements I made out of it—and I felt that people should be told and I moved to tell them about it.<sup>28</sup>

By 1944 Melbourne left-wing artists had a clear vision of the course of their art. In a statement published in the C.A.S. exhibition catalogue of

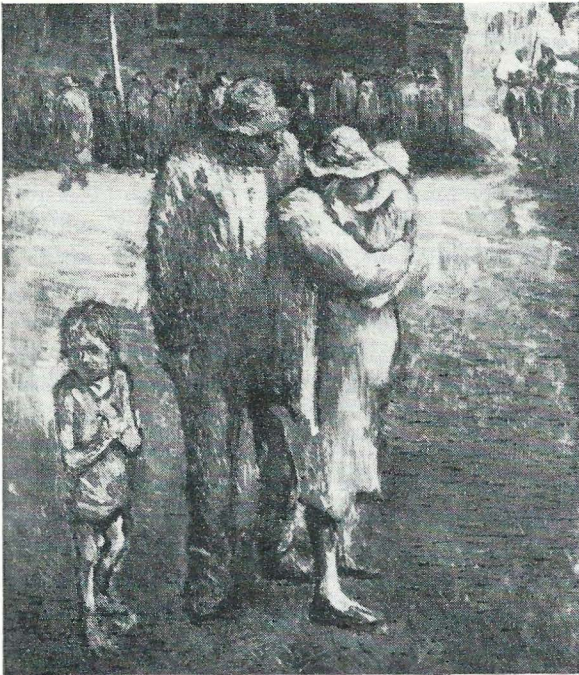






*Preceding page: Yosl Bergner,  
"Aborigines in Fitzroy", 1949.  
Collection: Art Gallery of South  
Australia.*

*Above: Yosl Bergner, "End of a  
Day's Work", Tocumwal, 1941.*



*Left: Noel Counihan, "At the Start of  
the March, 1932", 1944.  
Collection: Art Gallery of N.S.W.*



that year, Bergner, Counihan and O'Connor reaffirmed that they represented a common point of view and worked together as a group "to create a democratic art combining beauty of treatment with a realistic statement of man in his contemporary environment". They concluded:

We three painters believe in a human, democratic art with its roots in the life and struggles of ordinary people, devoid of all obscure clichés and mannerism . . . an art intelligible and popular, expressing the deepest aspirations of the people.<sup>29</sup>

#### THE STUDIO OF REALIST ART

In 1943 and 1944 the titles of many of the paintings exhibited in the C.A.S. exhibitions by Sydney left-wing artists such as Herbert McClintock and Rod Shaw suggest comparable interest in the genre subjects of their Melbourne counterparts. Roy Dalgarno oscillated between paintings based on Aboriginal tribal images, which he had seen while on service in the Northern Territory working with an R.A.A.F. camouflage unit, and socialist realist works such as "Foundry Workers" (1945). In 1945 James Cant introduced for the first time a more selfconscious political dimension into his art in works such as "The Dole Days" and "Centre of the World, 1930". As with Counihan's essays on the theme of the Great Depression, these were reconstructions of the experiences of the unemployed. But unlike Counihan, Cant adopted a simplified, rather naïve mode of apparent artlessness in depicting the dehumanization of that experience.

The idea of the Studio of Realist Art originated with James Cant after his discharge from the army in 1944. Other early participants included Dalgarno, Shaw, Bernard Smith, John Oldham and Hal Missingham. All except Missingham, who might be ascribed a fellow-travelling status, were members of the Community Party. These artists had become increasingly discontented with the C.A.S. in 1944-45 because of its general lack of sympathy in Sydney towards figurative art.<sup>30</sup> Yet despite apparent similarities in their art, the whole thrust of S.O.R.A. was quite different from that of the Melbourne social realists. To a large degree this can be attributed to Cant's wider experience with radical movements in England and Europe in the 1930s.

Cant had studied in Sydney under Dattilo Rubbo and then at the East Sydney Technical College and Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School

before going overseas to study in 1934.<sup>31</sup> After attending the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, he was invited to join the English surrealist group led by Roland Penrose. Typical of his early activity as an artist is his surrealist "Constructed Object". In 1938 he withdrew from the surrealist movement to become a member of the Artists International Association and participated in several anti-fascist exhibitions. At the same time he maintained a concern for aesthetic radicalism and in 1939 was included in the exhibition *British Surrealist and Abstract Paintings*. At this time Cant's work, as "The Deserted City" (1939) indicates, owed much to de Chirico. In 1940 he was forced by the outbreak of war to return to Australia.

Cant's conception of a radical culture embodying both an aesthetic and a politically radical dimension set the tone for S.O.R.A. Although the group had the tacit support of the Communist Party, it must have been viewed with considerable misgivings. In its attempt to forge direct links with the trade union movement rather than the Party as such, S.O.R.A. was cast in the mould of the discredited Russian *Proletkult* movement. On the whole S.O.R.A. members did not contribute to Communist papers and magazines and were not as active generally in politics as their Melbourne counterparts. Members like Roy Dalgarno, Rod Shaw, Dora Chapman and Hal Missingham had been fully involved during the war years with camouflage work for the armed forces or the Civil Construction Corps, or had worked in Army Education. This experience may partly explain why Cant's notion of a new and radical art society having close ties with ordinary people evoked a receptive response from artists closely involved with the war effort on this level. The aim of S.O.R.A. was to achieve a cultural climate sympathetic to radical action in society through creative activity.

S.O.R.A. was officially opened on 2 March 1945 in a three-roomed basement backing onto the waterfront in Sussex Street.<sup>32</sup> In June the group moved to Herbert McClintock's vast studio in the old George Street Bulletin building. As James McGuire noted in the *Angry Penguins Broad-sheet*, Sydney militants were no longer found in such strength at the C.A.S. The Sydney branch had suddenly become more genteel with the departure of "meerscham pipes, chest warmers, velveteen coats and trousers, beards, neckerchiefs, sandals (with socks), yellows and reds and similar gear".<sup>33</sup>



S.O.R.A. plunged into an energetic programme of lectures, art classes, social events and plans for communal art projects. The first issue of its Bulletin appeared in April 1945 and stated the reason for S.O.R.A.'s existence:

It is natural that such a group as ours should come into existence, in opposition to the large amount of other-worldly, art-for-art's sake that fills the walls of so many exhibitions—work that is an expression of decadence and puerility, that is impossible to relate to the mass of Australian people.<sup>34</sup>

The days of élitism in Australian art were claimed to be numbered and the new *lingua franca* in art was realism and communal art. Architectural murals and print-making were to be the primary media and, as McGuire noted with some cynicism, "Realism is in everything. Realism will out; it cannot be stopped. It has energy, drive, organization, initiative, raffles. Realism is in Art."<sup>35</sup> If these ideas found scant sympathy in established Sydney art circles, they were no more readily accepted by the central Communist Party leadership. Cant's Party membership was tenuous, and typical of that of many wartime adherents. No doubt the Party hierarchy saw in S.O.R.A. a potentially fruitful extension of cultural front activity, but it soon realized that artists are rarely amenable to rule. For Cant, as for others, surrealism provided a lead into realism. Because of this legacy, he was reluctant to dispense with psychological realities in favor of social ones. S.O.R.A. leaders also continued to insist that workers should become artists, whatever roles artists might visualize for themselves. The activities of a body such as S.O.R.A. were intended to parallel Party political activity rather than serve it slavishly.

How did other communist artists regard this group? Bernard Smith did not exactly disapprove of S.O.R.A. but, even though a member, had doubts about artists isolating themselves from broader associations. Counihan was not prepared to accept the cubist and folk-art influenced work of an Orozco or a Rivera with its central strain of primitivism as an expression of the art of the people. He did not see art in open and experimental terms in the way that Cant, having been a member of the surrealist movement, did. For Counihan, the job of the artist was to educate the workers *up* to art, not to bring out their natural expressive capacities on their own terms, as the classes organized by S.O.R.A. attempted

to do by relating art to the needs of ordinary men and women. The innocent eye received short shrift with Melbourne communists.

Much energy at S.O.R.A. went into organizing painting and drawing classes, public lectures and film nights, and a library of books and reproductions. S.O.R.A. organized an annual exhibition of the work of both artists and students, and more specialized exhibitions in conjunction with trade unions and the Party. Ambitious plans for murals were conceived but never carried out. One of the more radical ideas that fell through was a series of paintings to have been published in book form by Dalgarno and sponsored by four federal unions: the Miners, Seamen's, Wharf Laborers' and Ironworkers' unions. Paintings by Dalgarno such as "Foundry Workers" materialized but the publication did not. Dalgarno did not help matters by his arrogant and outspoken attitude, which alienated many. All too often, ambitious schemes launched by S.O.R.A. collapsed.

There were other problems. The second exhibition held at the David Jones Gallery in 1946 was to be opened by Jessie Street, wife of the Supreme Court justice, Sir Kenneth Street and a leading spirit in the 'progressive' movement. The management of the store objected to her presence. In protest, Rod Shaw officially opened the exhibition and then closed it in one speech. In July 1947 a fire destroyed the George Street premises. This accident precipitated a series of moves from place to place that accelerated the decline. Never primarily an exhibiting society, S.O.R.A. had to have such facilities to be successful.

Then S.O.R.A.'s activities—intended to bridge the gap between artist and public—went awry. Unfortunately, as the artists came to realize, the bohemian attitudes and antics of artists and those on the fringe did not accord with a working-class sense of respectability. Parties intended as efforts to raise desperately needed funds often got completely out of hand—a result of the volatile mixture of alcohol, turpentine and aggression. For James and Dora Cant, the effect was to wear away the fine edge of their faith in the harmony and mutual tolerance on which S.O.R.A. was launched.

The decline of S.O.R.A. belongs to the story of the general radical demise of the late 1940s. In 1946 it was still extremely active and appeared to be a strong force in Australian art. In the editorial of the ninth issue of *Angry Penguins*, Harris and Reed acknowledged that this communist "cultural offshoot" attracted many of the



younger and livelier Sydney artists.<sup>36</sup> However, the attitude of the Angry Penguins was that S.O.R.A. offered a coherent set of ideas on art and the role of the artist in society only by grossly simplifying the confused and confusing picture of modernism. It is a charge not lightly dismissed. As with Meldrumism and other forms of academicism which sought to lay down rules for the artist, social realism, even in its more open forms, had appeal but was potentially limiting.

S.O.R.A. nevertheless was a brave and idealistic enterprise with few parallels in Australian art. The Melbourne social realists toyed with the idea of establishing a similar "workshop" in Melbourne once it became clear that they were unable to impose left-wing values as guiding principles for the C.A.S. Their problem, shared by all artists, was to find a means of exhibiting work. Before the rise of an art-dealing profession in Australia, art societies of one kind or another naturally fulfilled this essential role. After 1945 the social realists withdrew from the C.A.S. and were absent from its last exhibition in 1946. The idea of establishing a Melbourne left-wing art society in a formal sense came to nothing, and by 1946 the social realists decided along with other left-wing artists to move into the Victorian Artists Society and attempt to radicalize that august body.<sup>37</sup> By 1946, however, the social realist group hardly existed, in spite of the ironically successful group exhibition at the new Myer's Gallery in July 1946 by Bergner, Counihan and O'Connor.

#### SOCIAL REALISTS AND THE AUSTRALIAN TRADITION

Although they were never as prolific as the Angry Penguins artists, the Melbourne social realists had been very active between 1944 and 1946. The member of the group who earned the greatest kudos during this time was undoubtedly Counihan. The three paintings he exhibited with success in the Australia at War exhibition in 1945 are among his best: "Miners Working in Wet Conditions", "Miners Preparing for a Shot", and "In the 18-Inch Seam". In 1948 a fourth painting from this series, "Miners Waiting for the Mine Bus" (1944), won the Albury Art Prize. These four paintings were the product of a month spent by Counihan in late 1944 and early 1945 at the Wonthaggi State Coal Mine. Permission was given because Counihan had the active support of the Miners Union and because he intended the paintings as a tribute to the war effort by coal-miners, men whose union had come under severe criticism during the war because of strike action. Counihan

had painted little in the latter half of 1944 and the new subject brought the artist back to art and away from cartooning, an occupation which, for a time, he had considered his most important.

After the Wonthaggi experience, he indicated to Bernard Smith something of the effort involved: "My mining pictures are self-evidently progressive steps in my painting . . . I have enjoyed painting them greatly, although the problems presented by the underground scene are *very* tough, and there are no examples as a precedent to turn to, the problem must be tackled *originally*."<sup>38</sup> Counihan did, in fact, handle this difficult subject in a way that suggests Van Gogh's solution to the dark interiors of peasant houses in "The Potato Eaters" (1885). In "Miners Working in Wet Conditions", one of Counihan's finest works, the composition is structured in a similar fashion around an oval of artificial light that illuminates the figures in dramatic chiaroscuro. The bold simple forms and stark contrasts of tone lend to the scene a sense of powerful drama, while the central figure, legs braced and straining, suggests the heroic action of Tom Roberts's "Shearing the Rams".

Counihan went on in 1946 and 1947 to new subjects and new themes in portraiture and the satirical parliamentary paintings, but these lack the power and immediacy of the mining pictures. In a similar manner to the left-wing American William Gropper in his satirical lithographs, he produced three paintings of the State Legislative Council in 1946. His aim was to show "decrepit and intransigent philistinism and reaction enthroned on crimson plush".<sup>39</sup> The paintings make their point, but they are limited by obvious caricature. Only the portraits of "Frank Dalby Davison" (1947) and the earlier "Portrait of William Dolphin, the Violin Maker" (1945) possess a directness of visual statement comparable to the mining pictures. In 1947 he returned to the mining theme, which he now developed further through a new medium, linocut and lithographic printmaking.

In reviewing the "Three Realist Artists" exhibition, Clive Turnbull drew attention to the difference between such works and Counihan's earlier and more deliberately tendentious pictures. Turnbull wrote:

One has to go back a long way for the sympathetic treatment of the human scene in Australia—to Fred McCubbin, probably . . . Here is one of the most vigorous of our young painters who has a depth of feeling lacking in



some of the more glamorous artists of the younger generation. He ought to have much to say.<sup>40</sup>

The recognition of a clear link between Counihan's work and the tradition McCubbin had helped to launch must have been especially satisfying. A concern for nationalism was a conscious aspect of left-wing culture in 1944 and this was aided by other fortuitous events.

It was not until the end of 1943 that most of the more important canvases in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria were rehung.<sup>41</sup> For more than two years over one hundred canvases had been in safe storage. The whole collection, including the Australian works, was now rehung according to periods and countries. Other important exhibitions of Australian paintings also appeared in 1944. In August Counihan saw a comprehensive exhibition of canvases by Heidelberg School painters at Sedon's Gallery. He was especially moved by the sensitivity and honesty of vision apparent in the work of Conder and McCubbin. As he observed to Smith: "I have not yet seen anything by Conder which has left me unmoved and McCubbin's impressionism and Australianism in his landscapes and his feeling for the simple folk has played a tremendous part in moulding our national painting."<sup>42</sup> It is fair to say that as late as the 1940s Conder and McCubbin had been relegated to second place, if not largely ignored, in the adoration showered on the younger painters of the Heidelberg School such as Streeton and Longstaff. In 1945 the National Gallery of Victoria also put on show a major exhibition of the work of Frederick McCubbin, Walter Withers and David Davies. It was again a revelation:

These painters are very important in the development of Aust. painting and the best pictures hung make the bulk of contemporary painting look dull and irresponsible [*sic*]. These pictures are serious paintings, solving problems significant to their time, and without which no national tradition of any consequence could have developed.<sup>43</sup>

Just as Counihan's more tendentious works may be distinguished from those without conscious pedantry, so too can his enthusiastic rediscovery of a native tradition in the Australian culture be differentiated from a Party-directed 'line' on nationalism. In Counihan there seems to have been a continuing struggle for his creative soul between the artist and the politician. Fortunately

the artist won out as often as not. It was the artist who had responded to the work of McCubbin and Conder in 1944. In the same year it was the voice of the politician that deplored the uneven character of Australian cultural development and the fact that, with one or two exceptions, Australian painting was politically less radical than Australian literature:

As everyone is aware Australian literature has been marked from the beginning by its plebeian and strongly rebellious character—its intimate relationship to the labor movement and its reflection of militant democracy—but look at Aust. painting—what a contrast!<sup>44</sup>

It was also the politician who wrote 'The Social Aspects of Australian Drawing' published in the *Australian Artist* in 1947. In this Counihan was at pains to establish that in certain key respects Australian art in the late nineteenth century provided artists with a radical legacy. The drawings of Roberts, McCubbin and Withers were, Counihan argued, original expressions of new aspects of the Australian scene. As such they deepened and broadened a newly emerging national vision by sinking roots into the Australian soil and enriching and extending the Australian visual language and vocabulary. It was not until the advent of the Great Depression that artists were presented with a comparable challenge out of which to give new life to Australian drawing. The main figures in this, Counihan suggested, were Bergner, O'Connor and James Wigley, who "introduced into Australian humanism a critical tone, a deep compassion qualified by protest at suffering and injustice." The difference between the realism of the Heidelberg School and social realism, for Counihan, was that contemporary artists had adopted a more critical spirit, an attitude found more strongly in Australian literature than in painting. It was a tradition in which "there wells a splendid tide of passionate resentment and indignation at enforced poverty and social injustice".

The politician was strong in Vic O'Connor too. But in his case the natural artist was always equally present. O'Connor seems to have felt greater affinity for the painterliness of a Walter Withers than for the more significant realism and nationalism of McCubbin and Roberts. However, this sensitive talent was swayed by other demands during these early critical years of development: a consequence of increasing family commitments, work in the Department of Post-War Reconstruc-



tion as well as Party activity, and the diversification of his cultural interests. Between 1944 and 1946 O'Connor was even more active than Counihan in polemical debates. His output was therefore a limited one. Although always more independent of influences than either Bergner's or Counihan's, O'Connor's work affected a similarly sombre palette. In "The Departure", for example, he employs a rich use of complementary red-orange and blue, but the overall effect is low-key and appropriate to such a theme. O'Connor's illustrations to stories by Herz Bergner, especially "The Funeral" (c. 1946), are less successful than those where he was able to draw upon personal experience. In the early "Fitzroy Street" (c. 1943) there is a natural painterly flow to the shapes and an open and unforced quality about the composition—elements absent in the more selfconscious 'protest' paintings.

In 1946 O'Connor joined with Judah Waten in launching the publishing venture Dolphin Publications. The intention was to produce cheap paperbacks of quality and an annual literary journal, *Southern Stories*. Only one issue of the journal came out before the publishers went broke. They did, however, manage to print four books: John Morrison's *Sailors Belong Ships*, Raffaello Carboni's *Eureka Stockade*, Herz Bergner's *Between Sky and Sea*, and *Twenty Great Australian Stories*. Bergner's autobiographical novel was translated from the Yiddish by Waten and won a gold medal for literature. Despite being short-lived, the venture did bring O'Connor and Counihan into closer contact with Australian radical writers such as Frank Dalby Davison and Vance and Nettie Palmer.

Neither Counihan, Bergner nor O'Connor was prepared to forego a concern for social reality in art, and this was the overriding factor in determining the choice of an expressive style and the aesthetic models to which they looked for guidance. In part ideologically determined, it was also the result of selfconscious concern to produce well-crafted painting. For Counihan, "we were basically easel painters and on the whole our work was bought by middle class people associated with the left".<sup>45</sup> A change in the professional role of the artist must, he thought, await the revolution. Counihan could thus sustain a political radicalism without jeopardizing his aesthetic conservatism. Unlike others in the C.A.S., Counihan entered works for the traditional prizes: the Crouch in 1944 and the Archibald in 1946.

His views accorded well with the attitude of Party leaders on questions of art and culture, and

Counihan struck precisely the right balance in the miners series in terms of his own aesthetic expectations and the political demands of the Party. It was on the basis of such wholly affirmative images painted with sureness of touch that Party leaders such as J. D. Blake were able to express a faith in the work of the social realists. Shortly before the successful 1946 exhibition, Blake proclaimed to an Arts and Sciences Conference that there were two paths open to the art worker: that of the 'contemporaries' who were at the mercy of pessimism, mysticism and escapism; and that of artists who attached themselves to progressive class forces.<sup>46</sup>

At one time or another each of the social realists was charged with failing to paint optimistic images or with having a morbid fascination with the outcasts of society. But it was Bergner who, in persisting with the Jewish theme, created the most suspicion. The call for a new nationalism meant for Bergner a rediscovering of this own Jewish traditions, but ironically this preoccupation, persisting after the war, helped to alienate him from his friends and associates. Shortly after the end of the war Blake called Bergner in and demanded that he cease painting Jewish themes or the *lumpen proletariat*—Aboriginal or otherwise—and depict instead the noble figure which communism would make of the worker.

Bergner was little swayed by such Party injunctions. His last Aboriginal subject picture is "Aborigines in Chains", 1946. This image of four blacks chained to a tree in a barren landscape derived from a newspaper article in the Herald in that year. In 1945 Bergner continued to develop the theme of "The Jews" with "The Dead Nazi", "Ghetto Uprising" and "Return to Warsaw". The manner resembles that of his earlier works on this theme, and the titles are self-explanatory. The paintings add little to what Bergner had already said except to bring the tragic cycle to its end.<sup>47</sup> It was after this that Bergner's preoccupation with his own cultural heritage began to prove troublesome.

#### BREAK-UP

In 1947, Bergner's last year in Australia, he added a coda to the series in two works, "Warsaw on the River Vistula" and "Street in Warsaw". The first of these is the more interesting and is a reworking of the theme of "Pumpkins" painted six years earlier. By his use of warm colors, Bergner contrives to suggest a vision of a New Jerusalem. But by 1947 it seemed perhaps to edge too close to Zionism for the artist's communist friends. Cer-



tainly the mood of Bergner's Jewish theme had changed by 1946 from one of lamentation to one of celebration in works such as "Under the Green Trees" and "The Arrow".

In 1946 Counihan described such work to Bernard Smith as "very vivacious and colorful . . . they will undoubtedly unleash new aspects, and important ones too of his fertile talent". He added, however, that their 'folk' character might militate against their acceptance in Australia.<sup>48</sup> In fact, it was not long before Counihan doubted this new direction and was himself unable to reconcile their Jewishness with the demands of a communist brand of racial humanism. Waten and O'Connor agreed. While the theme of the persecution of the Jews was acceptable during the anti-fascist war, by 1946-47 to remain preoccupied by a Jewish tradition was to be escapist, if not outright Zionist. The radical nationalist had, indeed, to tread warily along a narrow path of national culture to escape censure. Despite the fact that Bergner's painting found no acceptance among Australian right-wing Jewry, the charge of Zionism was easy to make. On reflection Counihan felt that the element of realism was slipping from Bergner's work. This lack of sympathy and tolerance reflected more, perhaps, a loss of the sense of intimacy and mutual support that had sustained the three artists during the war years.

The group, always more unstable than it appeared to outsiders, had simply begun to disintegrate. Bergner attended classes at the National Gallery with James Wigley and was seen less and less at the Swanston Family Hotel. By 1946 his marriage began to fail and this further strengthened a resolve to get to Paris as the centre of European culture. Although O'Connor remained a Party member for some years, from 1947 he too gradually drifted away from active membership. Of the three, it was Counihan who remained

steadfast to the ideals to which he had dedicated himself from the age of eighteen.

The disaffection felt by Bergner and O'Connor was not that of 'fair weather' communists. It might even be questioned in fact whether Bergner was ever much of a radical, much less a Marxist. For Vic O'Connor painting and politics were not inseparable. The most left-wing of S.O.R.A.'s leaders were Cant, Dalgarno and McClintock, but as Bernard Smith recalls, "even in those cases, I think that at heart they were basically individualists and anarchists rather than politically committed people".<sup>49</sup>

Australian radicals knew from their own experience as surely as the conservative *haute-bourgeoisie* that the Australian middle-class mentality was a cultural desert. In the face of its values they opted for a belief in the values of an Australian people in whom virtue might be discovered. As O'Connor and Waten wrote in a joint introduction to *Twenty Great Australian Stories*, their aim was "to show how the great writers of our country have faithfully recorded the democratic and progressive hope of the people; how they have striven to disclose the evils and horrors that have stood in the way of the realisation of these hopes".<sup>50</sup> The search for resourcefulness, anti-authoritarianism and mateship in the Australian people became a central concern in the 1940s and 1950s of writers such as Vance Palmer, Brian Fitzpatrick and Russel Ward.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the facts behind the legend, the idea that such a tradition existed was held to and asserted as an unshakable article of faith. The work of the social realists and S.O.R.A. artists, as well as the writings of Bernard Smith, was likewise founded on faith. That faith was part of a great wave of radical optimism that accompanied the dream of a new Australia, a dream which it was hoped, post-war reconstruction of Australian culture and society would bring to reality.

## Notes

1. See David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: A Post-script to the Enlightenment* (London, 1973), p. 5.

2. Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, 2nd edn (Melbourne, 1971), p. 239.

3. Pinchas Goldhar, 'Yosl Bergner: On the Occasion of his Debut at the Art Exhibitions at the Kadimah', *Jewish News* (1942). This review is in Yiddish.

4. Charles Mereweather, 'Social Realism: The Formative Years', *Arena*, no. 66 (1977), p. 66. Mereweather offers a full account of communist cultural activities during the 1930s.

5. Quoted in Max Dimmack, *Noel Counihan* (Melbourne, 1974), p. 26.

6. Both paintings have since disappeared. One was exhibited in the Three Realist Artists exhibition, as "Aborigine Arriving in the City".

7. Counihan to Smith, 9 May 1943. Smith Papers, in the possession of Bernard Smith.

8. O'Connor to Smith, 28 August 1943. *ibid.*

9. Noel Counihan, 'How Albert Tucker Misrepresents Marxism', *Angry Penguins*, no. 5 (September 1943).

10. Smith to Harris, 2 July 1943.. Carbon copy in the Smith Papers.

11. Smith to Noel Hutton, 10 March 1943. Carbon copy, *ibid.*

12. *ibid.*, 2 July 1943. Carbon copy.



13. 'Goya' (Bernard Smith), 'The Fascist Mentality in Australian Art and Criticism', *Communist Review* (June 1946), pp. 182-4; (July 1946), pp. 215-17. The section was replaced by the emasculated chapter 7, "Aestheticism and Nationalism in Australian Art and Criticism" in *Place, Taste and Tradition* (Sydney, 1945), pp. 160-70.
14. Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, p. 245; p. 219; p. 217; pp. 245-7.
15. Smith also published a substantial part of this argument in a piece entitled "The New Realism in Australian Art" in *Meanjin Papers*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1944), pp. 20-5.
16. Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, op. cit., p. 258.
17. *ibid.*, p. 259; pp. 265-9.
18. Smith, "The New Realism in Australian Art", p. 21.
19. Counihan to Smith, 12 December 1943. Smith Papers. This is quoted by Smith in *Place, Taste and Tradition*, pp. 247-8.
20. Max Brown, 'Some Views on the Contemporary Art Show', *Communist Review* (October, 1943), p. 142.
21. Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, op. cit., p. 14; p. 21.
22. Smith, "The Fascist Mentality" (July, 1946), op. cit., p. 217.
23. Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, pp. 20-1; p. 21.
24. Counihan to Smith, 6 December 1943. Smith Papers.
25. *ibid.*, 12 December 1943.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*, 3 June 1943.
28. Vic O'Connor interview, 13 January 1975.
29. C.A.S. catalogue, annual exhibition (1944).
30. James McGuire, 'Sora Soirees', *Angry Penguins Broadsheet*, no. 1 (1945), p. 2. Rod Shaw recalls a meeting in 1945 over the issue of figurative versus formalist art (interview, 27 June 1974).
31. These details of Cant's career are from Elizabeth Young, "James Cant" (Adelaide, 1970); a biographical statement published by S.O.R.A. in March 1945 issue of the bulletin; and an interview (10 July 1973).
32. S.O.R.A. Bulletin, no. 1 (April, 1945). Cant was elected S.O.R.A.'s first chairman
33. McGuire, op. cit., p. 2.
34. S.O.R.A. Bulletin, op. cit.
35. McGuire, op. cit., p. 5.
36. Editorial, *Angry Penguins*, no. 9 (1946).
37. O'Connor to Smith, undated (1946). Smith Papers.
38. Counihan to Smith, 30 July 1945. O'Connor complained to Smith at this time that he thought Counihan too obsessed with cartooning (O'Connor to Smith, 29 July 1944. *ibid.*).
39. Counihan to Smith, 26 May 1946. *ibid.*
40. *Herald*, 15 July 1946.
41. *Argus*, 3 September 1943.
42. Counihan to Smith, 4 September 1944. Smith Papers, op. cit.
43. *ibid.*, 30 July 1945.
44. *ibid.*, 26 January 1944.
45. Noel Counihan interview, 5 May 1975.
46. J. D. Blake, 'Arts and Sciences and the Working Class Struggle (speech given to the Victorian Arts and Science Conference, 16 June 1946), *Communist Review* (August, 1946), p. 249.
47. There are in all fourteen paintings in the series. Most have since disappeared and the only surviving evidence for them are transparencies taken at the time.
48. Counihan to Smith, 26 May 1946. Smith Papers.
49. Bernard Smith interview, 15 January 1975.
50. Vic O'Connor and Judah Waten, introduction, *Twenty Great Australian Stories* (Melbourne, 1946).
51. Brian Fitzpatrick's *The Australian People* was published in 1946. In the same year *Southern Stories* published Fitzpatrick's article "The Australian Tradition". Vance Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties* appeared in 1954, and Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* in 1958.

ROBERT HARRIS writes: *In his otherwise informative article on Les Murray in Overland 82, Michael Sharkey states that there has to date been "no substantial questioning of the progress of Murray's polemic". However if you refer to Christopher Edwards' articles on the structure and significance of Murray's polemic, published in New Poetry during 1979, you will find these are not "throw away put-downs"*.



## THE TRUST (1)

Here it is. As it is always said,  
we-began-here-at-the- & anything which comes  
after that is what we will discuss. Don't trust  
me yet: I don't know what I will still  
require of you, & you don't know  
as yet the depth & danger in your trust.  
There is no room here to run, & none  
in you that I can run from. Here she is!  
As always we display the woman first  
& need some odds & ends, if just  
hair-color, eye-color, length of breast  
& length of fingernail. Her hair  
is red, her eyes are white  
as half-moons & her breasts are short  
with parchment haloes. She's on the floor  
somewhere in a stupor, but with no  
suspicious pulse, no needlemark, no drama.  
We don't need them. We can wake her.  
When you do, you clasp her shoulders, fear  
that somehow your hands don't look right,  
don't look functional to me, since I watch  
every caution entering between you. So  
there isn't any kiss. Her eyes are more,  
& more or less green, I'd say, a rust-  
flecked moss, perhaps. The lyrical vulture  
flexes his wings a little, on the ground  
with her, you & no drama: & I wait.  
There are wharves outside & landing stages built  
liquid on rippling night, & there are stars  
pendulous & luscious. You can push  
her waking carcass out across a ledge  
& sit with her in the reviving dark  
against a plank that shines out its  
broken oysters, weedy limpnesses.  
It would be nice to hear from me on the  
matter of trust, but no, just do  
what you like to the oyster-woman, but  
note that "to" not "with", & save some fear  
for later. Now, where were we: on  
the ground. And the woman woken well  
& she discerns you in the stars,  
& your hands from the jagged shells, & your tones  
in the mosses' salt whisper, a sigh  
that belongs to the water & slips back down  
fathoms down before the light can come.  
You owe me this: the way she breaks apart  
& the enclaspings spectrum curves its gloss  
on you as you lie open at her heart. And what  
salt meat will I require & who will ask  
or bargain that I might provide us less,  
for what is a joined journey from the start.  
I will not answer, would not waste your time.  
You are already with me & have brought  
no company except my promises.

JENNIFER MAIDEN

*Subsequent poems in this series are to appear in the  
magazine New Poetry.*

## VICTORIA PARK

Oh Parkie  
how I've missed you  
tied with the crumpled purple ribbon  
of the hills  
under the pink of first awareness

a red cloud swims  
through the tree weed  
you are my bowl

Parkie I should have come before  
your green ice mouth  
licks my feet

we circle each other  
a wisp of grey cloud  
wipes the sky's slate empty

the warm air rising  
from your hollows  
meets my face  
as you lean across your racecourse table

only two know how to sweeten my blood  
and you are one

these old oak's letters  
that you've read  
and tossed away  
flutter like leaves  
across your face

lay lay my head  
Parkie it's you I love

KATE LLEWELLYN

## PADDY

*A poem for land rights*

Nyuymanu:  
dingo dreaming place:  
Paddy Anatari's country.

Old man squints between wrinkles  
drawn into a smile in the broad, red land.  
Played a child; walked his every foot in its sand.

You see that rock over there?  
The top had been rubbed smooth and  
flat soft, as if cut by a diamond, but  
it's been done by another rock  
cupped in hundreds of hand:

increase site for birthing of dingo pup  
and  
Paddy Anatari strokes the rock again,

and again. He says:  
You see this rock?  
This rock's *me!*

BILLY MARSHALL-STONEKING



MICHAEL WILDING **Jack Lindsay**

*Michael Wilding teaches in the English School at the University of Sydney, and was one of the founders of the publishing house of Wild and Woolley. His books include The Short Story Embassy, Aspects of the Dying Process, Scenic Drive and The West Midland Underground.*

One of the great thinkers, writers, men of letters of this century, Jack Lindsay has received comparatively little serious discussion. He is so prolific, so formidably learned, that there are very few writers in a position to discuss the full range of his work. I certainly cannot hope to. This piece simply indicates something of the range of his literary work. His books range from classical studies to the fine arts, from biography and history to fiction and poetry. And he is not merely the desk-bound writer. In a couple of pieces I wrote for the Australian Author on little magazines and on small presses, I found that in each case I had begun my account with Jack Lindsay; in both areas he was a pioneer. The magazine *Vision* and the *Fanfrolico* Press are historic landmarks in Australian literary development, part of a revitalizing movement in Australian culture.

Lindsay left Australia in 1928, but kept in continual contact. In 1936 he published a children's novel with an Australian setting, long overdue for reissue — *Rebels of the Goldfields*. From the 1950s to the 1970s he wrote a series of major assessments of Australian writers for *Meanjin* — on Vance Palmer, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Alan Marshall, Barbara Baynton. He wrote an introduction to the English paperback edition of Hardy's *Power Without Glory*. And his autobiographical trilogy — about to be brought back into print, and not before time — deals with his Queensland childhood in the first volume, *Life Rarely Tells* (1958), with Sydney literary bohemia in *The Roaring Twenties*

(1960) and with his early years in England in *Fanfrolico and After* (1962).

In the mid-1930s Lindsay began writing an important series of historical novels, using his scholarship in classical studies — he took first class honors in classics at the University of Queensland in 1921 — his wide-ranging knowledge of historical developments and his understanding of social processes. *Cressida's First Lover* (1932) was followed by the trilogy *Rome for Sale* (1934), *Caesar is Dead* (1934) and *Last Days with Cleopatra* (1935); the trilogy has recently been reissued in response to demand by English library readers in Chivers New Portway library reprint editions, a sure sign of steady demand. *Men of Forty-Eight* (1948) has likewise been reissued, one of the novels he wrote about later periods which include *1649: Novel of a Year* (1938), *Fires in Smithfield* (1950) and *The Great Oak* (1957). In the 1950s he turned to novels of contemporary England — *Betrayed Spring* (1953), *The Way the Ball Bounces* (1962), *Masks and Faces* (1963) and *All on the Never-Never* (1961) which was later filmed — the only work of his that has been filmed, though the classical series has obvious television drama potential.

The University of Queensland Fryer Library bibliography of Lindsay lists over a dozen volumes of poetry, and the Chicago publisher Borg is currently preparing a collected volume of the poems. And it is important to mention here Lindsay's translations. He has been a prolific translator from Greek, Latin and Russian,



enthusiastically making available the great, the forgotten and the esoteric. This has been an important practical activity, sharing his erudition in the positive way of making these works available, whether through the fine, collector's editions of the Fanfrolico Press or the mass-market paperbacks of Elek's Bestseller Library. He has translated *Lysistrata* (1926), *The Satyricon* (1927, revised 1960), Theocritus (1929), Catullus (1930), *The Golden Ass* (1931, reissue 1960), *Daphnis and Chloe* (1948), Adam Mickiewicz (1957) and he has edited and translated such anthologies as *Medieval Latin Poets* (1934), *Russian Poetry 1917-55* (1957), *Ribaldry of Greece* (1961) and *Ribaldry of Rome* (1961).

Lindsay's contribution to literature has been as great if not greater in the areas of literary criticism, biography and history. His great characteristic is the way he approaches his subject looking for his or her positive strengths and achievements, and persuades us of their interest. We want to go and read Meredith or William Morris or Vance Palmer or the Troubadors after reading his critical and historical accounts. And of how many critical works can that be said?

His early book on Bunyan (1937, reissued 1969) remains a classic. It is one of the earliest, pioneering attempts to offer a sustained marxist reading of a major English literary figure. Its pioneering achievement has been admired by the historian Christopher Hill and denigrated by the critic F. R. Leavis. Leavis's famous attack on it, reprinted in *The Common Pursuit* (1952) is a classic of misrepresentation and distortion. Having written that "Mr Lindsay is mainly concerned to show that Bunyan's religion was merely a self-comprehending reaction to the class-war", Leavis then transferred his own use of "merely" to Lindsay: "while Mr Lindsay's 'merely' has the intention of exalting . . ." Leavis's essay attacked both Lindsay and William York Tindall; when he returned to Bunyan to write an afterword for the Signet *Pilgrim's Progress* (1964), Leavis still referred to Tindall's work, now a "valuable scholarly work", but any mention of Lindsay is totally excluded from this American series of classic texts.

First distortion, then suppression. Lindsay nowhere reduces Bunyan's religion to "a self-comprehending reaction to the class-war"; what he does do is place the particular form of expression of Bunyan's religious conviction in the social context of its time, seeing the historical

revolutionary moment and its aftermath of repression in Bunyan's writing. Lindsay's *Bunyan* remains one of the great, stimulating, enduring literary approaches to the seventeenth century. And Leavis, who rarely revealed his political position so explicitly, was here stung to come out in the open:

Though Mr Lindsay talks of 'fuller life' he proffers emptiness; like most Marxist writers who undertake to explain art and culture, he produces the effect of having emptied life of content and everything of meaning.

It is impossible in any case to believe that the classless society produced by the process that the Marxist's History has determined on could have a cultural content comparable with that represented by *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Lindsay's *Bunyan* is an indispensable work for any student of Bunyan, just as his *George Meredith* (1953) is for any student of Meredith. Again, the study situates Meredith in his social environment and draws out of his works the expression of the social conflicts and class-tensions Meredith observed and experienced and took as his themes. But Meredith has been the preserve of the formalists, and it is possible to take up academic studies of Meredith, as of Bunyan, and find no mention of, no reference to, no awareness of Lindsay's work.

As literary studies became an academic subject, the Victorian man of letters gave way before the professional academic writing for career and promotion; lit. crit. became professionalized like law and medicine. Lindsay wrote from outside the academy. At no stage has he held a university position. His phenomenal output of historical, literary and cultural studies has been the work of a dedicated, unsalaried, unsinsecured writer. He never came back to Australia after 1928 because he was living from his writing, he had to keep producing books, he could never take out the time to return.

Lindsay is one of the last of a rare breed; the independent intellectual. But this very independence not only required the bondage of continual production, but also ensured his exclusion from the professional lit. crit. world. His works were generally ignored, frozen out. Moreover he followed a procedure absolutely out of fashion with the prevailing mood of the times; he wrote the 'life and works' book, uniting the biographical with the critical, setting both in a historical context; his great success with these books arrived not with such literary studies as



his *Dickens* (1950) but with the series of studies in the fine arts. After a pioneering study of French art, *The Death of the Hero* (1960) he wrote the first of a series of biographical-critical studies of artists, *J. M. W. Turner* (1966) which had an immediate acclaim, it was followed by *Cézanne* (1969), *Courbet* (1972) and *Hogarth* (1977), and of two figures whose work, like Lindsay's cannot be defined within any one literary or visual 'art', *William Morris* (1975) and *William Blake* (1978).

But academic lit. crit. was firmly into the words on the page approach, 'practical criticism' of the Richards-Leavis-Empson variety, 'new criticism' of the Brooks and Warren approach in the U.S.A. These critical methodologies reached their full development in the cold-war years (the first cold war as we have to call it now, Time having announced the second cold war). Politics, social relevance, ethics, religion, biography, history, literary history, psychology were all excluded from the study of literature. Academic literary study became a system of exclusion — don't talk about characters, don't tell us about the author's biography, don't leave the text for history . . . And the 'prac. crit.' close-reading method still remains dominant in a vague, unrigorous way; it is easier to talk about one short poem, one brief paragraph, in a tutorial than to survey the 'life and works'; it is easier and safer to exclude politics, psychology, religion, biography, history — otherwise the students will start to relate the work to their own commitments and experience rather than the literary work, life will intrude; and when life intrudes you have problems of exam assessment. It is easier and safer to say, "we don't mind what you think, it is how you express it that matters" — much easier than to have to encounter the ideas. Saves having to read the history and the politics and the biography. Saves parents complaining about what is discussed . . . pragmatic liberalism; and the result is that academic lit. crit. generally keeps away from the ideas, the biography, the characters, the social relevance: it becomes the absent centre amidst the suppressed taboo topics.

This general drift within the subject, as will all other subjects, disciplines as they are called, could not have happened without a little pushing, a little direction. The cold war, the purges of the 1950s, were the decisive weapons. McCarthyism occurred in Britain as well as in the USA and Australia — though to call it McCarthyism is to be led to vilify one man (like

Kerr after the 1975 coup) and ignore the full orchestration. It was a wider anti-communism than that of a few front-men. Indeed in England the frontmen were less obvious, but the purges and exclusions no less effective. Lindsay's autobiographies don't deal with these years — though his *Meetings with Poets: Memories of Dylan Thomas, Edith Sitwell, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard and Tristan Tzara* (1968) valuably establish the political context of the European writers he knew. In a recent piece in *Stand* magazine, however, Lindsay made one of his rare comments on the fifties, writing of

The worsening Cold War, which had deadening effects here, though nothing as bad as the McCarthyism which was the form it took in the USA. Still, the cultural chill set in. Let me cite some examples from my own experience. The *TLS* used the review of my *Byzantium* into Europe for a call to banish Marxists from university posts; and no firm would have published my novels at that time except the Bodley Head under Nicholson. Not that he was at all left in politics, but he was a man of genuine liberal principles. He also at this time published Howard Fast and James Aldridge. (The *TLS* did not review the novels in question, then wrote a leading article attacking them.) It was the early years of the Cold War that saw the crystallization of the myth, now accepted as gospel, about the Thirties. For instance, Spender worked enthusiastically with me and others on the Writers Group of the SCR in immediate post-war years, when we had active and friendly relations . . . his positions were very different from what they became after the few years he then spent in the USA . . . A primary need of the Cold War was to break down the spirit of antifascist unity that had redeveloped during the war; and so an outstanding enemy were the poets of the French Resistance in whom that spirit had most powerfully and richly matured. I can still recall the shock of delight and stimulation with which I read a copy of the underground *L'Honneur des Poètes* during the war; and in the following years I came to know a considerable number of these poets. I made translations of poems by Aragon, Eluard, Tzara and others. Several publishers turned my manuscripts down. Then one of them took the step of saying, with what for me was an unprecedented piece of publishing honesty, 'Why did you do this book? It won't get into print. Surely you know these resistance fighters were a pack of brigands.' (*Stand*, XXI, i, 1979-80, p. 39).

And so it was that John Gross, editor of *Cul-*



tural Freedom's *Encounter* and now of the *TLS*, could write in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969) "Not even sympathizers, however, are likely to want to resurrect English communist criticism of the 1930s, and at this hour in the day it would be pointless to rake up the dogmatic pronouncements of Alick West, Philip Henderson, Jack Lindsay or the firing-squad of the *Left Review* (edited by, among others, Edgell Rickword) . . ." Well, in 1969, the reissue of that material would have been very valuable. Eleven years later it would still be valuable. But it still remains generally unavailable. (For instance the University of Sydney

Fisher Library has no holdings of *Left Review* or *New Masses*; even its holdings of the *Australian Communist Review* are woefully incomplete, unbound, and not even in the stacks, but stored away in the dust of the 'deposit library', from where they have to be specially ordered, brought over a few days later.)

But despite all the exclusions, one-line dismissals, suppressions and distortions, the work of Jack Lindsay remains and survives. It stands there as a marvellous treasury of Marxist practice, a great, positive achievement from one of the foremost writers and thinkers of our century.

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STEPHEN KNIGHT

## An Arthurian Totality

*Jack Lindsay and the legend of King Arthur*

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The historical Arthur has recently been thriving. A river of articles and a stream of books have argued there really was a man behind the legend. He is pictured as a Romanised Briton who led the Celtic British against the Germanic invaders; he won a great battle about the year 500 A.D. and secured peace for a generation. After the British collapse his name was remembered, his legend magnified in many cultures over the centuries. Jack Lindsay does not argue with that basic idea, but his book, *Arthur and His Times: Britain in the Dark Ages* (Muller, London, 1958) stands apart from the Arthurian industry as a whole. Not reprinted in paperback with a glossy romantic cover, not quoted or plagiarised in the more recent productions, not as well-known as, say, the books by Geoffrey Ashe or Leslie Alcock: it is just a different sort of book. It attempts to recreate the social and cultural history of a lengthy period which happens to include the notional historical Arthur. Lindsay works towards totality, but other modern Arthurian writers are much more reductive. Establishing their patterns will clarify the character and quality of Lindsay's achievement.

The 'historical Arthur' industry in general should be recognised as a new reduction of the Arthurian legend. For centuries writers have renovated the legend, and this process has three major aspects. They have created or exploited new literary modes that embody contemporary epistemology, new patterns of characterisation that realise contemporary ontology, new thematic issues that create contemporary notions of authority and the threats it faces — Arthur and authority are co-terminous throughout the legend. The modern Arthurians, in non-fiction

even more than in fiction, have re-produced all three aspects. In terms of literary form they are determinedly positivist, providing maps, footnotes, appendices, illustrations, close argument about probabilities. In one way this 'scientific' mode of knowing the world buttresses faith in the existence of Arthur even though no one point is proved beyond doubt, but it is also an epistemology rich in contemporary bourgeois ideology. Empiricism is a mode of knowing that presumes a knowing subject, an individual responder; it is only quasi-objective, not achieving that full objectivity which would reduce such reductive individualism.

As such, that formal mode meshes fully with the second aspect of renovating the legend, the presenting of character. This has been fully and openly individualist, the authors write about one man, one powerful will, a hero who is a wish-fulfilment dream of bourgeois competition and self-construction.

In the third aspect, the authority transmitted by the individualist empiricism basically flows to the sub-class who control and produce this mode of thought: academic quasi-objectivity demonstrates its own power and legitimates its own position, providing and sustaining the ideological bards of bourgeois society. But Arthur also stands for that larger projection of bourgeois consciousness, nationalism. Curiously naked chauvinist gestures tend to be made in the final chapters of books, the last paragraphs of articles. The Arthurian peace is sometimes said to have diluted Anglo-Saxon brute power with Celtic blood and tradition. This highly unlikely notion enabled the post-war English to separate themselves from a de-authorising kinship with the



hunnish Germans — Geoffrey Ashe works in this vein, continuing a project Matthew Arnold started years before. Similarly improbable is the notion that because Arthur was part Roman he transmitted classical authority to Britain — so presumably legitimating its civilisation, its exploitative empire, even its modern decadence. R. G. Collingwood publicised this fantasy, and John Morris has recently approved it.

Jack Lindsay's concerns and methods are quite different from these shapers of a modern Arthurian ideology. His attempt to write a total history of that dark but intriguing period is a praiseworthy one; it deserves looking at in detail.

The scope of *Arthur and His Times* is a major feature. Most modern Arthurians restrict their time scale to concentrate on the single hero; even John Morris (a founding editor of *Past and Present* who had a distinctly leftish historical viewpoint) only extended his coverage for a century before and after the Arthurian period, leaving the hero in the centre. But Lindsay uses a historical scale, not a personal one; he starts with a full statement of the character of Roman Britain and takes his narrative past Arthur into the settlement of Germanic England and the survival of Christian culture in Britain, Ireland and Gaul. For him the Arthurian period is just a stage in the process of history. In addition, he avoids geographic simplification as readily as biographic reductiveness, because he deals extensively with Ireland and Gaul, recognising that modern national boundaries have minimal significance in this period, and that tribal, economic and cultural patterns, like religion and the Latin language, were all European in potential scope.

Another important aspect of Lindsay's range is the variety of evidence he has explored. He is well versed in the conventional military and royal history of the period, and particularly adept at interpreting archeological evidence on a human and sociocultural scale, as was so clear in his earlier book *The Romans Were Here*. He is also familiar with the Irish and Welsh material, and unlike other Arthurians does not merely mine it for nuggets of Arthurian fact. His particular strength lies in his formidable knowledge of Late Latin literature, especially clear in his treatment of Gaul.

So much material is used and so many types of evidence deployed that a few slips are evident in the equally few areas where my own know-

ledge overlaps part of Lindsay's wide expertise. The Celtic material is occasionally faulty, there are some doubtful emphases and interpretations of the archeological material, and Lindsay accepts a bit too readily Collingwood's Roman military model for Arthur. But criticism of this last point, at least, depends on research published outside Welsh only since 1958. Archeology has moved even more rapidly since Lindsay wrote, but it is remarkable how much he did know then, and how little his judgements are weakened by later evidence. Densely annotated, even provided with some scrupulous afterthoughts, the book stands up well as a model of pure scholarship.

But Lindsay is not seeking that, not satisfied with that. He consciously moves on to use his knowledge to reconstruct what Raymond Williams has aptly called "the structure of feeling" in a period. The feeling sought is not just that of kings and heroes either. Lindsay spends some time setting out the real conditions of ordinary life in terms of environment, agriculture, trade, authoritarian impositions and reactive disorders. That method itself is still new in Arthurian studies, but to its general recreative force Lindsay adds some important specific interpretations of aspects of the early British world. He brings out sharply the exploitations of the period, especially through his treatment of the 'bacaudae' disorders, which most historians dismiss as peasant gadfly activity. Lindsay quotes widely to show that Roman taxation was especially oppressive on peasants and small land-holders; he sees the bacaudae disorders as large-scale risings like those that continued throughout the middle ages, and so he draws attention to a structural feature of Romano-Celtic life. His evidence is especially strong in Gaul but it is likely that the less well-recorded Britons endured the same patterns of oppression and ill-fated reaction.

As well as this innovative social treatment Lindsay reaches deeply into the cultural life of the period. There are many discussions and apt illustrations of visual art, both decorative and functional, and poetry is a rich source of recreative material. This is especially strong in the treatment of Gaul, where Lindsay has sifted the Late Latin poets and letter-writers thoroughly. Choosing his material with skill and translating with colloquial vigor, he offers vivid moments of contemporary experience such as Ausonius of Bordeaux's poem about an aggressive bailiff or Sidonius Oppolinaris's about a country wedding suddenly disrupted by soldiers. Lindsay



gives considerable weight to religion, and here too he offers a major piece of interpretation, laying stress on Pelagius. This much forgotten early Briton (c.400 A.D.) fathered a heresy and stood up to figures no less than St Jerome and St Augustine. An ascetic, hating riches above all, Pelagius held that man could perfect himself through good works and indomitable will. By themselves humans close the gap between sinfulness and salvation, the gap that orthodoxy could only bridge through God's authoritarian grace. Just as Arthur symbolises the military self-defence of a community, Pelagius represents a spiritual self-fulfilment. Lindsay presents both men essentially as Lukacsian 'world-historical individuals', ideal types of a supra-individual movement, tokens for the struggle of humans in history against their limiting conditions.

Out of his detailed history Lindsay reveals this constant struggle between people and their material world. The thematic pattern merges with, is confirmed by, the formal mode of his

book, which interrelates objective detail with a sense of affective human realities. That overall move towards totality indicates the difference between Lindsay and the reductive writers in the modern Arthur industry. It also indicates where Lindsay himself belongs, his own socio-cultural location. His work here as elsewhere, non-fiction and fiction, links with the tradition of Left writing. Lindsay's Arthurian book relates closely to the remarkable group of post-war British historians typified by Christopher Hill and Edward Thompson. It was somewhat disadvantaged in appearing before British history had made any clear move away from a snug relationship with bourgeois ideology. But looking at the book now, and especially in the context of more recent work on the historical Arthur, its quality is obvious and enduring. The most striking thing is that because Lindsay says so little about the individual Arthur and the nation of Britain, his book is all the better as a history of Arthurian Britain.

# island

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COLIN HUGGETT

## Jack Lindsay: A Personal Tribute

Jack Lindsay is now eighty, but his output is still prolific, his projects innumerable. He is the author of over a hundred books. He has a son of twenty-one and a daughter of nineteen. A remarkable member of a remarkable family, he is amongst the most notable writers Australia has produced, yet he remains little known. "Yes," they'll say, "the name does ring a bell. What has he written?"

It was in 1971 that I first started to read Jack's books. I wondered why it had taken me so long. I was attracted not only by the prodigious scope and subject matter but by their sheer readability. Later on, when I came to know him personally, I asked him why his books didn't attract a wider audience, let alone the attention of the critics. He wrote: "I have been so used to my role as odd-man-out that it doesn't strike me as peculiar when all sorts of useless characters are treated seriously on and off the media while I seem to live in my own time-space with no connection. After all one can't stand in opposition to all the established values and expect to be patted on the back. I think the situation is not in any sense that the people who run things, the leading critics and so on, have read my works and decided they are no good. They just haven't read them, and so they assume they don't matter. There are exceptions of course, individuals who know their own minds, from Edith Sitwell to Naomi Mitchison. I can't complain about the number of really first-rate people who have been my friends and take my work seriously; it's the second-raters however who run the system."

Jack is around five-foot eight in height, his build sturdy, even rugged about the clear, questioning gaze of the eyes; his grey hair is swept back and although thinning he is far from being bald. He wears glasses but mostly for reading

and they are usually dangling loosely in his hand when not in use, especially when he is giving a talk or lecture, the movement of the spectacles from his hand to the bridge of his nose being habitual, almost nervous in its frequency, for although he always has a script when speaking publicly he appears to know the material so well he only consults it from time to time. The immediate impression you get the moment he starts to talk is of his vitality of mind and thorough grasp of absolute essentials. Experience, a love of facts, and an innate understanding of man and life built up over many years are behind every word, every pause. It is a conscientiousness that attracts and calls out for attention. Here is a man who is consumed by the affairs of men, the marvel of life, the enigma of history.

He is neither bohemian nor overneat; he does not dress so much as put clothes on, and he invariably wears an inconspicuous grey suit with a roll collar sweater or shirt beneath, or a simple jumper. He doesn't seek to impress or shine; he is charming and considerate but seems diffident, unaware of his role, the position he holds. He allows his work to speak for itself. A full-time writer since his twenties, he has always avoided an academic and perhaps compromising role. One of his major achievements has been in avoiding the stultifying label "man of letters".

He is a square, stocky figure, then, with a direct manner and appeal, and there are still the remains of an Australian accent, a resonance in his voice, although this is quite faint and if you were not aware of his background it might not occur to you. The voice itself is neither high nor low in tone but, as one might expect from someone pre-eminently concerned with the use of words, his diction is clear and unconsciously forceful.



I first heard him speak about Norman Lindsay, about the relationship between himself and his father, about the Nietzschean creed generally, and about how it came to find a home at Springwood, New South Wales. He then went on to give a resume of the Australian experience, knowing this would lend a context to Norman's aims and ideals, showing at the same time how uniquely isolated he was in relation to what was going on around him. I was impressed by the respect he obviously had for Norman: a son who has out-run the towering shadow of a brilliant father and made a mark of his own — as Philip too had done — is a very rare person. Jack treated his subject with respect and admiration but without any sign of being intimidated or over-awed, even when he went into the reasons why he and Norman had fallen out he laid the facts bare and without prejudice, although he expressed regret.

The next time I heard Jack Lindsay, as I have heard him many times since, was at the Mermaid Theatre, where he gave a talk on the poetry of Edith Sitwell. The Mermaid on a Sunday afternoon is a very quiet and informal place and I found myself alone in the deserted foyer. Attracted to voices coming from the auditorium I found myself alone in the back row watching a run-through for the coming talk. The theatre was in semi-darkness with only the stage lit up. Jack was on stage with Patricia Routledge, a notable actress in the theatre and on television, who was to read the poems. There seemed to be some trouble, a hitch in the lighting and the acoustics, and from the indistinct group halfway down the empty tiers of seats I picked up the unmistakable bass of Bernard Miles calling out instructions to his staff. Soon after — there was about half an hour to go before the talk began — having satisfied himself that all was well technically, Bernard suggested they have some refreshment in the buffet. He suddenly remembered that Jack was a vegetarian but thought they could rig something up for him. The group of figures that had been seated with Bernard Miles rose from their seats and melted through a doorway, as did Patricia Routledge, leaving Jack on stage pondering over the script on the table in front of him. He seemed to be making notes: I felt he was nervous. The figure on the stage looked up; the chair made a scraping sound as he stood up, folding his spectacles and putting them in the top pocket of his jacket. I was already moving across the auditorium as he came down the steps from the stage and up

the gangway between the seats. "Mr. Lindsay, I'm Colin Huggett".

While we munched our way through cheese rolls the conversation turned around literary figures I admired, particularly those he had not only known but also written about. Dylan Thomas seemed to enter naturally into the conversation and Jack told me that although he knew Dylan very well it had been his brother Philip who was closest to him. Others he had known came into this reminiscence: O'Casey, Yeats (who once "summoned" him to lunch), Tzara, Lawrence (with Stephensen and using the Fanfrolico Press they had nearly brought out a book on the paintings) — these and many others figured in this brief, hectic spate of anecdotes and recollections.

I took up Jack's invitation as soon as I could and went down to see him. Castle Hedingham is in Essex, some twenty miles south of Cambridge, with the Roman remains and museum of Colchester not far away. Its proximity to London makes it popular commuter country, with a fair number of writers and artists dotted about the locality. A little to the north is Sudbury, Suffolk, a town Jack likes because of its varied history and its pleasant street market on Saturdays, where he shops. This is also the countryside made famous by Constable, and a house in the town has been made into a gallery devoted to his work. Leslie Hurry, the painter, whom Jack has written a book on, lives here and it was here also that the last peasant uprising in England took place, as Jack often remarks with relish. Castle Hedingham itself is a quiet, well-preserved village, and he has lived there since the early 1950s.

Although on the edge of the village — a small, sleepy place in mid-summer, as it was then — the house itself is rather isolated and difficult to find, concealed as it is behind a high wall and a screen of trees which prevent it being seen from the road. There are two entrances to the house and garden, one is through a wooden door set in the high wall, the other through a pair of iron gates leading on to a small drive beyond which can be seen a large area of sloping lawn and grassland, dotted with trees Jack planted when he first arrived. The garden is something like a smallholding, being some six acres in all and containing not only the usual vegetable plot and a large orchard but various types of fowl and, at that time, some half a dozen St Kilda sheep, acting as lawn mowers.



The house has been extended on one side and the conservatory is attached to this newer half, which in turn is adjoined to another, smaller building that Jack has put on to house part of his enormous library. But the main structure of the building dates from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, as becomes apparent the moment you enter it. The books that avalanche down on you seem to cover every inch of the walls, taking over the whole of the lounge, most of the dining room, the study, and even extending into a passage-way beyond the kitchen where they are also housed in floor-to-ceiling shelves. It is a standing joke in the family that if you took the books away the roof would fall in. The only place where you don't find them is in the kitchen. They even seem to eclipse the television set! Jack's collection of books by his brother Philip occupies a section in the passage-way, while in an enormous wall of them in the dining room are massed his collection of his own works (not complete!), both in English and other languages. He also has the books written by other members of the Lindsay family.

The extract from one of his letters to me, quoted earlier, shows how he can take up the cudgel on his own behalf; he can equally show the other side of himself, as his inscription in my copy of *A World Ahead* shows. Dealing specifically with a trip he made to the Soviet Union in 1949 as a guest at the 150th Anniversary of Pushkin's birth, the book is an enthusiastic and optimistic account of the reconstruction

going on there in the post-war years. The publication of the book preceded the Krushchev disclosures about the Stalinist purges, hence the apologetic tone of the inscription which runs: "I think the personal aspects of this account are still of some interest. Discount the naive aspects of enthusiasm in many respects — though I believe the response to the vital aspects of Soviet culture was genuine enough. The trouble is that the men on top keep stifling it. That was the aspect I failed to see and estimate".

Again, his public denunciation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 shows a noticeable discord with the leaders, the hierarchy, who he sees as acting against the aims and wishes of the common people. He knows that it is only with the man in the street that you ever change anything; whatever their ideals before they take office, the men who become leaders are inevitably compromised by the machinations of power and survival immediately they reach the top. At times his books may appear to be written only for intellectuals, but reading between the lines it is not difficult to see that behind their creation is his belief in an understanding of the 'common' man. That he too is often as confused as his leaders is something he is sadly aware of. Fortunately, he has many friends in many parts of the world, both intellectual and working-class, although he would not wish me to divide them in this way; it is a distinction that does little to improve the social conditions of the world or to bring men together. In so many ways this is really all he asks.

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JOHN ARNOLD

## Jack Lindsay: Towards a Bibliography

*John Arnold, 31, is a librarian now turned Melbourne antiquarian bookseller. He has been working on his Jack Lindsay bibliography since 1975, and has twice visited Jack Lindsay for his personal assistance in the process.*

Early in 1975 I started compiling a bibliography of Jack Lindsay. I had read his three volume autobiography the year before and was so impressed that I started collecting his books. The more I collected the more there seemed to be, yet there appeared to be little knowledge or recognition of his work in Australia. Hence my idea of a bibliography. Naively I thought it could be finished in two years. I am still working on it five years and many newspaper searches later.

My aim is to try and find everything by Lindsay that has appeared in print. I realize that this is close to an impossible task. Lindsay has always been and still is a prolific writer. It is the only occupation besides army service that he has known since graduating from Queensland University in 1920. However, with Lindsay's co-operation, I have so far traced all of his published pieces before he left Australia for England in 1926, most of those up to the war, and about three-quarters since.

Lindsay's career can be roughly divided into six periods. These divisions are as much geographic as literary.

### 1. Australia: 1917-1926

Matriculates from Brisbane Grammar School in 1917; University of Queensland, 1919-1920, (B.A. Hons. in Classics); bohemian writer and journalist in Sydney, 1921-1926. Editor: *Brisbane Grammar School Magazine*, *Queensland University Magazine*, and *Vision*.

Contributor to: *Queensland University Magazine* (poems, articles and reviews); *New Outlook* (art critic as "Jean Androde", poems and re-

views); *Art in Australia*; *Bulletin* (poems, articles and topical verse); *Vision* (editorials, poems, articles, short stories and reviews). Pseudonyms: "Plato"; "Jean Andrade"; "Rupert A. Bellay"; "Peter Meadows"; "Panurge"; "Hound of Crete".

A full listing of Lindsay's Australian career can be found in "Jack Lindsay. A bibliography to 1926" (unpublished copy available for reference at MS Collection, La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria, reference MS10932). The period is also vividly portrayed in the first two volumes of his autobiography, *Life rarely tells* (London, 1958) and *The roaring twenties* (London, 1960).

### 2. London and the Fanfrolico Press: 1926-1931

Proprietor and editor of the Fanfrolico Press. Editor: *London Aprodite*. Contributions to: *London Aprodite* (poems, articles, short stories and reviews); *Arts and Crafts* (poems and articles); *Everyman Pseudonym*. "Peter Meadows".

Harry Chaplin's *The Fanfrolico Press: a survey* (Sydney, 1976), gives details and commentary on the press's publications and *Fanfrolico and after* (London, 1962), the third volume of Lindsay's autobiography, deals extensively with these years in London.

### 3. West Country: 1932-1936

Recluse in the West of England; begins to write historical novels. Contributions to: *Healthy Life* (poems and articles); *John O'London's Weekly*



(articles and short stories); *Bookman*; *Literary guide*; *Freethinker*; *London Mercury*, short stories in the daily press.

The second part of *Fanfrolico and after* covers this period.

#### 4. *West Country Marxist: 1936-1941*

Converted to Marxism early in 1936 and becomes an active publicist for The Movement, in particular writing mass declamations for recital at demonstrations and anti-fascist meetings.

Editor: *Poetry and The People*. Contributions to: *Left Review* (poems, articles and reviews); *Poetry and The People* (poems and articles); *Left News*; *Reynolds News*; *Life and Letters*; *New Masses*; *International Literature*. Pseudonym: "Richard Preston".

Lindsay discusses his becoming a Marxist and subsequent commitment to the concluding chapters of *Fanfrolico and after*.

#### 5. *War years and London: 1941-1951*

Conscripted in 1941 and served in signals and later Army education; discharged in 1945 and settles in London; involved in the Unity Theatre and left-wing cultural activities.

Editor: *Anvil Life and the Arts*, *Arena*, *New Developments* and *Key Poets* booklets. Contributions to: *Life and Letters*; *Our Time* (poems, articles and reviews); *Norseman*; *Adam*; *Tribune* (reviews); *New Meridian*; *Arena* (editorials, articles and reviews); *Russia Today*.

#### 6. *Castle Hedingham and "Bangslappers": 1951 to the present.*

Moves to the country and purchases an old farmhouse, "Bangslappers", in Castle Hedingham, Essex, where he is still living. Begins his "British Way of Life" series of contemporary novels with *Betrayed spring*, makes several visits to Eastern Europe where translations of his novels are very popular. In the sixties turns to art biography; regular reviewer for the *Morning Star*.

Contributions to: *Russia Today*; *Central European Observer*; *Meanjin* (articles and reviews); *Marxist Quarterly*; *Marxism Today*; *Overland*; *Poetry Review*; *Anglo-Soviet Journal* (articles and reviews), *American Dialog*; *Comment* (reviews); *Morning Star*.

Some of this period is dealt with in *Meetings with poets* (London, Muller, 1968).

A comprehensive listing of Lindsay's books as well as publications edited and translated can be found in *Contemporary Novelists* (London, 1976), pp. 821-827. Additions to this are as follows: *The pleasante conceited narrative of Panurge's fantastically brocaded codpiece* (Sydney, Panurgean Society, 1924). Verse. *Spanish main and tavern* (Sydney, Panurgean Society, 1924). Verse. *Time-please!* (London, Joiner and Steele, 1932), novel *Faces and Places* (Toronto, Basilike, 1974). *The troubadours and their world* (London, Muller, 1976). *Decay and renewal: critical essays in twentieth century writing* (Sydney, Wild and Wooley, 1977). *Hogarth: his art and his world* (London, Hart-Davis, 1977). *Monster city: Defoe's London, 1688-1730* (London, Hart-Davis, 1977). *William Blake* (London, Constable, 1978). *Gainsborough* (London, Hart-Davis, 1981). *Crisis in Marxism* (London, Moonraker Press, 1981).

The following mass declamations were also published separately, although only in pamphlet or duplicated form: *Who are the English?* (1936), *On guard for Spain* (1937), *Five thousand years of poetry* (1938), *We need Russia* (1939). Most of these were issued by the Theatre or Poetry group of the Left Book Club, and Lindsay was co-editor of the Poetry group's magazine, *Poetry and The People* (1938-39).

In a note to his entry in *Contemporary Novelists*, Lindsay wrote that "I began as a poet and feel that my devotion to poetry has determined my curling career in all its aspects." Most of his early poetry was published in *Fawns and Ladies* (Sydney, Kirklay, 1923) and *The Passionate Neatherd* (London, Fanfrolico Press, 1930). A selection of the later verses in *Faces and Places* (Toronto, Basilike, 1974) and an American, James Borg, is editing and publishing a comprehensive collection of all of Lindsay's poetry.

A few items from Lindsay's numerous articles and criticism were listed in *Decay and Renewal* (Sydney, Wild and Woolley, 1977). The following is an attempt to give an extensive checklist of the more serious of this journalism. I realize that there may be mistakes and, certainly omissions. This is very much a work in progress report, and does not include poetry, translations, brief notes and letters to the editor. All the items are articles/criticism unless stated otherwise.



1917: Editorial, *Brisbane Grammar School Magazine*, Nov., p.1. Lindsay's first published piece.

1918: "Rupert Brooke", *Queensland University Magazine*, May, pp. 26-27. "James Elroy Flecker", *ibid*, Aug., pp. 20-22, "Some thoughts on war poetry", *ibid*, Oct., pp. 8-10.

1919: "Poetry", *ibid*, Aug., pp. 10-11.

1920: "Lyric poetry in Australia: Hugh McCrae", *ibid*, May, pp. 8-10. "Nationality and poetry", *ibid*, Aug., pp. 17-18. "Nietzsche", *ibid*, Oct., pp. 13-15.

1921: "The academic mind", *Galmahra*, May, pp. 25-28.

1922: "Wells and his critics", *Bulletin*, 18 May, p. 25. "Two directions in modern poetry", *Art in Australia*, May, pp. 42-44. "Palestrina and polyphony", *Bulletin*, 1 June, Red Page. "The lobster", *ibid*, 3 Aug., p. 48. Short story (hereafter SS). "Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Frank Harris", *ibid*, 14 Sept., p. 25. "The indiscretions of editors", *ibid*, 26 Oct., p. 25. "Bohemia in Sydney", *ibid*, 30 Nov., pp. 47-48. SS.

1923: "The function of lyric poetry", *Art in Australia*, Feb. n.p. "Musical form and imagery", *ibid*, n.p. "The adventure of art", *Vision*, no. 1, May, pp. 13-18. SS. "Australian poetry and nationalism", *ibid*, pp. 30-35. "Metamorphosis", *ibid*, pp. 37-41. SS. "The liar in music", *ibid*, no. 2, Aug., pp. 19-22. "The failure", *ibid*, pp. 29-32. SS. "France the abyss", *ibid*, pp. 35-39. "Nietzsche as pessimist", *Bulletin*, 20 Sept., p.3. "Form versus formality", *ibid*, 15 Nov., p. 3. "Two dimensional poetry", *Vision*, no. 3, Nov., pp. 38-41. "Compton Mackenzie", *ibid*, p. 50. Preface, *Poetry in Australia* (Sydney, Vision Press), n.p. By Jack and Norman Lindsay.

1924: "The complacency of critics", *Vision*, no. 4, Feb., pp. 25-27. "Shakespeare and Milton", *ibid*, pp. 32-39. "A defence of Sappho", *Bulletin*, 19 June, p. 3. Foreword, Norman Lindsay, *Pen drawings* (Sydney, McQuitty), n.p.

1925: "Phoenix and a use for critics", *Bulletin*, 19 March, p. 3.

1926: "Travel broadens the mind", *Manchester Guardian*, 10 July, p. 7.

1927: "The metric of William Blake", *Poetical sketches by William Blake*, (London, Scholartix Press), pp. 1-20.

1928: "The inflation of art-values", *Arts and Crafts*, May, pp. 55-57. "The artist as Goya", *ibid*, June, pp. 117-18. "Freed spirits", *ibid*, July, pp. 149-50. "More defence of the West", *ibid*, Aug., pp. 199-200. "The modern consciousness", *London Aphrodite*, no. 1, Aug., pp. 3-24. "The dung of Pegasus", *ibid*, pp. 39-46;

no. 2, Oct. pp. 116-25; no. 3, Dec., pp. 195-209; no. 4, Feb. 1929, pp. 280-88; no. 5, April, pp. 367-81; no. 6, July, pp. 447-57. SS. "An affirmation", *Arts and Crafts*, Sept., pp. 241-42.

1929: "Norman Douglas", *London Aphrodite*, no. 5, Apr. 1, pp. 385-89. "Poetry and Life", *ibid*, no. 6, July, pp. 464-87.

1930: "Why Australians leave home", *Everyman*, 21 Aug., p. 99, 106. "Is the Empire in danger? What an Australian thinks", *ibid*, 20 Nov., p. 519.

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JOHN McLAREN **Letter from Cambridge**

*John McLaren is head of the Department of Humanities at Footscray Institute of Technology. His books on education are well known, and he is editor of Australian Book Review. He is at the moment completing a critical study of F. R. Leavis and his school.*

While industrial society in both its eastern and western guises lurches further into depression and the world moves with seeming inexorability closer to a nuclear conflagration, Britain seems to be hooked on words. The facts are that at least two and a half million people are without jobs, that inflation has returned only to the level it was at when the Conservative government took office and began slashing public spending, and that both the British welfare system and the public and private industrial bases of the economy are being demolished. Public debate, however, centres on the great abstractions of monetarism, wealth-production, democracy and socialism, self-determination and the rule of law. Meanwhile, people are shot, burned, starved, frozen and mugged, and the government tightens its means of repression. But in the south-east, winter has been mild, the crocuses and snowdrops are already blooming, Murdoch has saved *The Times* and all's well with the world. The post office queues agree that Tony Benn is mad, that workers need some sense knocked into them, and that Maggie Thatcher is exactly what the country needs. As long as truth can be kept at bay by abstraction and stereotype, extremists on both sides can thrive.

In Cambridge, the great debate has been over 'structuralism', which has been depicted in both the serious press and the university Senate as a mixture of arcane conspiracy and passing Parisian fad. The debate in the Senate exposed a mess of double-dealing and discord in the English faculty, arising in part from the malign neglect of its needs by other parts of the university, but precipitated by the division between those academics who try to use their disciplines to engage with the problems of contemporary society and those who

hope to retreat to the safety of objectivity and scholarship.

Behind the whole debate has lurked the ironic shadow of the late F. R. Leavis, who had himself spent a greater part of his energies locked in such battles with his colleagues in Cambridge and his supposed enemies in the London press and literary establishment, and who wrote in 1969 that

English suffers by reason of its extreme remoteness as an academic study and a discipline from Mathematics: how produce and enforce the standards that determine genuine qualification? If the first emergent Faculty powers were unchecked mediocrities (they were) they would pack the Faculty with mediocrities, and thereafter it would be safe; to keep out the dangerous—that is, the intelligent and genuinely qualified—by unquestionable (or unquestioned) methods would be easy. It would be a simple enough matter to see that the Appointments Board was properly composed.

Yet in the present dispute Leavis would almost certainly have been on the side of the members of the committee who rejected the permanent appointment of Colin McCabe, the assistant lecturer whose championship of some methods of structuralism has so upset many members of the Faculty.

The problem of structuralism is not that it is necessarily true; indeed, by its own premises it could not be so, for its practitioners reject the claims to objective truth of any form of human knowledge, the conclusions of which, they argue, must be determined by its underlying structure. Like the existentialists, however, the structuralists demand that, in the absence of ascertainable and absolute truth, the practitioners of any discipline



accept the responsibility for their own conclusions, which are themselves forms of action in a real world, and not merely theoretical formulations. It follows that no academic can justify his conclusions on the grounds that they reveal "things as they are". He must accept the consequences of demanding that people see things as he does—a proposition frightening to the academic mind. The fear has been so great in this case that one man has been denied a job and many students discouraged from taking his ideas seriously.

This debate represents in miniature the state of Britain at large. If monetarism is true, Mrs Thatcher can ignore the rising numbers of the unemployed and stand firm on her gag-writer's claim that "this lady's not for turning". The death of IRA hunger strikers is not the fault of action or lack of action by government ministers and officials, but the fault of the strikers for failing to observe the absolute truth of the criminal law and their consequent status as convicts. The assassination of a Catholic busdriver or a Protestant storekeeper is not the responsibility of the assassins, but a necessary consequence of the natural rights of Ulster Protestantism or Irish nationalism, as the case may be. The Council for Social Democracy can split the Labour Party and lessen the chances of any alternative to Tory rule because they reject the decision of the party conference to involve unions and constituency members in the election of the party leader. Meanwhile, Tony Benn and the ultra-left, fresh from their victory at the conference, are preparing to use their numbers to get rid of Dennis Healey as Deputy Leader because he does not embrace their idea of socialism.

To an Australian, the whole scene of a labor movement divided in the face of a conservative restructuring of society is depressingly familiar. No one should underestimate the extent of the conservative onslaught on British society. Public housing is at a standstill, and a huge housing shortage looms. Supplementary benefits to families in need have been reduced and at the same time obtaining them has been made more difficult. School meals have been priced out of reach or eliminated. Educational expenditure has been cut, and staff at all levels face the prospect of the sack (known euphemistically as redundancy). Private health funds are being encouraged to take over many of the functions of the national health service. Arts grants, particularly to community groups, have been slashed.

Meanwhile, the government is extending its

control over any institution which might challenge or resist it. The courts have backed the Home Office against challenges to its discretionary authority over convicts, migrants and the insane. Although public affairs programs on television are still far more searching and provocative than any in Australia, the BBC is showing increasing reluctance to allow the broadcast of investigations of matters concerning security and defence. Unemployment is weakening the ability of the unions to protect their members, and such employers as British Leyland have used the opportunity to sack shop stewards, while right-wing groups are challenging closed-shop agreements. The central government has tightened financial controls over local councils, which are being reduced to instruments of Whitehall policy.

The prospect is not that Britain is about to collapse into totalitarianism. Rather, it is becoming steadily a more closed society in which violent discontent, particularly among Blacks and Asians, is controlled by an increasingly violent police force, and discontent and misery are isolated in the north and pockets of the southern cities. Under the guise of controlling inflation and providing jobs, income will be distributed, through cuts in wages and social services, away from the poor and, by means of reduced taxes and higher interest rates, towards the wealthy.

The problems of the Labour Party are a direct consequence of this situation and of the role of the previous Labour government in laying its foundations. The hostility to Dennis Healey is due to his surrender, when he was Chancellor for the Exchequer, to the demands by the IMF for financial discipline—meaning reducing the income of labor and increasing that of capital. Behind the abstract demands by the left for 'democracy' in the party, by which they mean more power to the minority of members who are union bosses or party activists—the latter including a great number of the younger members of the professional middle classes—and less to the minority who are members of parliament, lies a general feeling that no future Labour government should be allowed to betray its supporters as the last did. Behind the Council for Social Democracy lies the feeling among many of the older members of the professional middle classes that the Labor movement is becoming obsessed with internal power struggles and doctrinaire simplifications and is thus failing to offer any practical solution to Britain's troubles.

Neither in Britain nor elsewhere have democratic



socialists given sufficient attention either to the problems of change or to those of organization. It is common to speak of labor parties as coalitions, and to recognize that only such a form of organization can bring about socialist change in a democratic manner. The problems of conducting the organization, however, are usually swept under the slogan of "party democracy". The assumption is that contending factions play the numbers game and some sort of consensus emerges by a process of horse-trading and subjection to reality. The problems arise, however, when, as in Victoria, under successive factions, from about 1951 until federal intervention in 1970, and as threatens to be the case now in Britain, one faction has total control, or when, as in Britain under Wilson and Callaghan, pragmatic responses to reality completely subordinate principle.

That there is a conflict between principle and reality is to a great extent due to the absence of principles of democratic change. Marxism provides a convincing start for a diagnosis of what is wrong with a capitalist society, although it pays little attention either to the valuable achievements of that society or to the nature of the mixed industrial economics which have succeeded classical capitalism. Its proffered solutions, therefore, while useful to vanguard movements working towards revolution, provide only simplistic slogans for a democratic socialist government. Such a government is therefore faced with the alternatives either of ignoring the slogans and betraying its most loyal supporters, or of trying to implement the slogans and so frightening the controllers of capital that they withdraw their co-operation and the economy collapses.

Decades of economic growth concealed these alternatives from socialist governments by postponing the day of reckoning, so that it was possible to make real advances in social welfare, if not equality, in advanced industrial societies. The Thatcher attempt to reverse this process is unlikely to succeed because she is pursuing her aims in so doctrinaire a fashion as to dismantle industry as well as welfare. If, however, she is succeeded by a moderate Tory rather than a socialist government, the probability is that post-industrial Britain will be, rather like late Francoist Spain, radically unequal, authoritarian and comatose. Because such a society is an efficient adaptation to a static economy, and because oil wealth is an effective means of facilitating the necessary change in the distribution of power away from industry to finance, the Fraser

government may take Australia along the same path much more rapidly.

If the labor movement is to provide an alternative it must recognize that the period of economic growth is either at or near an end, and plan accordingly. This means among other things an economic strategy designed to replace employment in the heavy industries which both produced and depended on growth with employment in the personal services and small industries, parsimonious in their use of fuel, which have been neglected. The fallacy that the private section is the section that produces wealth should be exploded, and the concept of production for use given concrete substance. At the same time, the national economic and ecological planning necessary to achieve these changes should be directed towards the decentralization of economic and political authority.

In a period of economic stability no policy of change can be implemented without cost to some sections of the population, and the labor movement should not pretend otherwise. It is here that the organization of the coalition is important. The Labor Party and the trade unions are not, jointly or separately, the working classes—those whose economic interest is the sale of their labor. They represent interests which ultimately are grounded in this class, but as activist or officials members of the movement are immediately representatives only of an official class of bureaucrats and allied intellectuals. Their aim therefore should be to develop a policy which will, by representing all legitimate—that is, labor—interests, command general support across the coalition, which includes all members of the working class, as voters, workers and consumers, as well as those who choose to be active.

The principle of coalition, which distinguishes democratic from revolutionary socialist parties, prohibits the domination of the whole by any one segment, or even by a majority. This principle extends, crucially, to such areas as incomes policy, where a socialist movement must insist that powerful groups of workers have no more right than powerful groups of rentiers to increase their income at the expense of others. Above all, however, it extends to the conduct of the business of the movement, where only a powerful pluralism based on a respect for the rights of every view and interest, offers an alternative to power-seeking under the cover of empty slogans. This empty conflict is today rending the left in Britain and Australia alike.



CLEM CHRISTESEN **H. M. Green**

The centenary of the birth of the distinguished pioneer literary historian, H. M. Green, fell on 2 May of this year.

Henry Mackenzie Green (1881-1962) is perhaps best known for his monumental *A History of Australian Literature* (2 vol., A & R, 1961). However, as A. D. Hope has reminded us (Meanjin, 4/1961): "Henry Green's achievement is not merely to have been the historian and interpreter of the first half-century of Australian literature and its antecedents. That is a task which in the nature of criticism must be done and done again. His achievement, I believe, is the more considerable one of completing a literary history which will in itself in time be part of that body of literature."

H. M. Green was born at Double Bay, Sydney, and educated at All Saints College (Bathurst) and the University of Sydney. His antecedents were intimately connected with the rise and development of the colony, and with literary and educational activities. A great-grandfather, James Norton, was a member of the Stenhouse circle and a friend of Charles Harpur.\* His grandfather was president of the Board of Trustees of the Free Public Library and was interested in Australian bibliography. Henry Green graduated both in Law and Arts, but though he was admitted to the Bar in 1903 he did not practise. After travelling widely in Europe he joined the literary staff of the Sydney Morning Herald and later the Daily Telegraph. During the first World War he enlisted in the AIF but did not see active service. In 1921 he was appointed chief librarian at the Fisher Library, a post from which he retired in 1946.

\*Cf. *The Stenhouse Circle: Literary life in mid-nineteenth century Sydney*. By Ann-Mari Jordens (M.U.P., 1979).

Apart from the *History*, Harry Green's books include two selections of verse, *The Happy Valley* (1925) and *The Book of Beauty* (1929); *An Outline of Australian Literature* (1930), *Christopher Brennan* (1939), *Fourteen Minutes* (1944), *Australian Literature 1900-1950* (1951). He also edited the 1943 edition of the series *Australian Poetry, Modern Australian Poetry* (1946), and (with Ferguson and Foster), *The Howes and their Press* (1936). One of his novels was serialized in the Sydney Morning Herald, another remained unpublished. He was also a prolific writer of critical articles and book-reviews.

Nettie Palmer's useful primer, *Modern Australian Literature*, had appeared in 1924, but Green's *Outline* was the first critical survey of our literature up to 1930, and it remained the standard text for very many years. It provided the foundation for his main work later on.

But a mere catalog of Henry Green's published work would inadequately account for his pervasive influence on the development of indigenous literary culture. He corresponded widely with local and interstate writers, addressed innumerable student and public bodies, judged literary competitions, and lost no opportunity to stimulate interest in his chosen subject, Australian Literature. He was an active member of the Casuals' Club and had close personal association with most of Sydney's leading writers, artists, academics and publishers of the period. Tough of mind, a lively (often uncompromising) conversationalist, he was a dynamic force within Sydney's intellectual community for most of his adult life. In keeping with his strong personality it came as no surprise to find he was an expert boxer and axeman.

As president of the Institute of Librarians Harry Green did much to raise the status of the



profession. At the Fisher Library he built up holdings of Australiana, reorganized administrative procedures and introduced new techniques. He had also been a foundation member of the Australian Journalists' Association and maintained an active interest in moves to improve the pay, working conditions and training of newspapermen.

Over subsequent years Green gave regular lecture courses on the (then untouched) subject of Australian literature at Sydney University. His first lectures on Australian literature were given in 1926 and later became an integral part of the B.A. English course. Kylie Tennant's late husband, L. C. Rodd, was greatly impressed by the lectures given to second and third year students: "He was at his best in those lectures—eager, persuasive, able to inspire enthusiasm . . . they were an inspiration to us all." The course was introduced by Professor Le Gay Brereton and may be said to have marked the origin of academic study of Australian literature.

Green lectured also to the Workers' Educational Association, and became a leading critic, feature-writer, book-reviewer and ABC broadcaster. (A selection of those radio talks is published in *Fourteen Minutes*.) In the early 1940s he was appointed the first Commonwealth Lecturer in Australian Literature.

When I launched *Meanjin* in Brisbane in 1940 Harry Green was the authority to whom I immediately turned for information and advice. There was simply no one else at that time who possessed Harry's specialized knowledge. He was generous to a fault in providing information, and could not have been kinder or more encouraging to a beginner. I owe him an immense debt of gratitude—as indeed do all who later became associated with the nurturing of our literary culture—and I greatly valued the long

years of friendship. His annual surveys of contemporary writing, published in *Southerly*, were indispensable at a time when scarcely any critical attention was being given to our literature and when only a few bookshops bothered to stock books by our own writers.

Harry's crowning achievement was, of course, *A History of Australian Literature*, a major work of some 1500 pages. Here I should like to make the following points. The more I had occasion to consult the *History* the more impressed I became by the author's wide frame of reference—and by his knowledge of world literatures. So far as I'm aware his scholarship has not yet been fully recognized. Anyone who actually *reads* the volumes—instead of merely 'raiding' them for information—cannot fail to appreciate the quality of the author's scholarship.

Second, the conditions under which he labored while writing the *History* were indeed daunting—only a man of indomitable will-power and dedication could have completed such a massive undertaking. He was then living far from library resources, and did not have the aid of a team of researchers or access to the substantial body of specialized criticism, bibliographies, and other reference materials which have been produced only during recent years. If I visited him at Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains during winter months I would find him at his desk in a shed at the rear of the house, heavily rugged-up, a Balaclava over his head, his hands in a pair of mittens. Even when he and his family moved to Warwick on the Darling Downs, Queensland, winters could also be uncomfortably cold for a man of advanced years. His was indeed a heroic achievement.

Henry Green died in Melbourne a year after publication of his *History*, at eighty-one years of age.







Among the tangle of contour lines and symbols for roads, bush and cultivated land on a Country Fire Authority's map for an area north of Melbourne, is a blank white space labelled "Artists' Colony". It is as if, like their early predecessors who marked certain unknown territories "Here be Dragons", the surveyors and the cartographer had decided that neither they, nor any other sensible person (not even a fireman) should risk entering such a fearsome place. This lacuna shows not only the age of the map but, by inference, changes in Australian art and public attitudes to its practitioners since the early 1950s. At that time there *was* a colony, for a number of people, mostly artists, had emigrated from the city to settle a new country. Thirty years later the colony has become a kind of handmade principality, with a rich growth of legends now flourishing around the professional and personal life of the crown prince and what he has made.

Legends do no harm to a serious artist unless they hamper the movements of his painting arm, and there is no evidence that this has happened in the present case. In time some of the legends will wither and the dry sticks be used by journalists to kindle their little fires; the others will be seen as green and living truths when they are sensitively handled by a good biographer. Indeed a biography has just been written and this is to be welcomed, yet its subject is not yet sixty and in France an artist of this age is still one of '*les jeunes*'.

Given his generation and his character there were clear reasons for this artist to feel the need for a different and more claustal environment. The trip to New Guinea required by the army, where the landscape was soaked with rain, sweat and blood, and then four civilian years as a

C.R.T.S. student at the National Gallery Art School where the walls and floors were soaked with tears and brown oil-paint, had made a deplacement necessary. Others might stay in the city where their roots could seek for nourishment in cracks in the concrete of public indifference, but his care required a diet which only the bush could provide. It was, of course, not the first time that artists had taken off in this same direction, but now Heidelberg and Eaglemont were suburbs with Roberts twenty years dead and Streeton having survived as the best living-dead artist until the middle of the war. Now it was necessary to go further, and this time not with tents and blankets to empty houses, but to build a living and working place largely from the materials which the land provided. Mud-brick buildings have now become sadly smart, and will be provided for a suitably large consideration by architects and builders as an antidote to the making of anachronistic alterations to houses of doubtful Victorian vintage. But then it needed imagination, courage and hard work to design and build while at the same time surviving as a man and as an artist.

It is hardly necessary to say that Australians, with the exception of new arrivals and week-end motorists, have a love-fear relationship with the bush; it is a place to breathe and breed in, but it is also a place to lose oneself in (in several senses) and to be burnt in. The earlier paintings map the struggle, the sadness and the satisfactions which issued from this brave decision. The land and its animals are beautiful but they inflict cruelties on each other and on those who live close to them. Women and children are loved, but loneliness, and the demands which are made on the husband-father-artist edge between them, and they leave. The artist gives himself to the bush



and records his works and days in portraits of himself and of those around him. We can see the almost seasonal appearance and disappearance of the regulation bush-beard; and above it, as the face behind it becomes more worn, the eyes become more defiant. Children are posed dreaming or wide-eyed with wonder or alarm against the plants and animals; and there is the constant presence of the woman half-hidden and apprehensive except when she can call on the support of a pregnant belly. There are few direct autobiographies in paint in spite of the claims of second-rate novelists and art-historians. If all the written records and commentaries between Rembrandt and Picasso were destroyed we would know little of Watteau's tuberculosis or even Courbet's political allegiances. The screams of Van Gogh and German Expressionists perhaps tell something, but who would guess a back-yard in Battersea from Blake's drawings, or Monet's poverty and Manet's Proustian social life from their paintings? Certainly no other artist in Australia has been so bravely ready to reveal himself and those close to him and risk, as sometimes happens, the emotions coming through with a rawness which offends the squeamish.

It was perhaps these strains and the need to turn away from the self-reflecting mirror that helped to launch him as a professional portrait painter and so into another aesthetic minefield. One of the prerequisites for a serious portrait (let us leave aside the tribal totems which increase the claustrophobia of academic halls and company board-rooms) is obviously some kind of balance or rapport between the artist and the sitter, a balance which can be upset in one sentence by a missionary body or a wife or husband waiting outside the studio. The dangers are multiplied when the artist refuses to look at his subjects through other men's spectacles—as, for example, the tinted glasses of Meldrum—and when he wishes to make his portraits stand on their own feet as paintings, if or when the sitter is forgotten.

The portraits which have emerged have, as must be expected, varied in quality, at times unexpectedly awkward and unresolved even in the technical area, but often deeply moving, penetrating and convincing. In solving the problems stated above the artist has sometimes been led to set a 'good-likeness' against a painterly, or at worst a 'modernistic' backdrop. This has the disturbing suggestion of a sterile mating of two different pictures. But when the same drive has been applied to all parts of the canvas the works stand proudly apart from most of the portraits which have been produced in Australia. Max Friedlander made the important point that there are two kinds of artist who paint people, "portraitists who make use of the medium of painting, and painters who make portraits". In this case we are clearly dealing with one who is in the second group.

Curiously, in the light of his political convictions, his best portraits (and in fact almost all his works in this field) have been of individuals from the commercial, political and academic fields. Unlike William Dobell, whose best portraits like "Billy Boy" and "The Cypriot" are of workers, his urge to paint a portrait seems often to have been charged in part by the name and public position of the subject.

Perhaps he and others would prefer to have all this boiled down to one statement, "He is an artist". It is one statement at least about which there need be no dispute between us. But when so much has been said about him, when he must bear at least half the weight of a heavy coffee-table book, and when he has been admired, bought and reproduced so much, then there is no danger that this straw will add much to his burdens.

*Eric Westbrook, recently retired, had a distinguished career as Director of the Victorian National Gallery and as Director of the Ministry of the Arts in Victoria. He lives outside Melbourne at Panton Hills.*



# books

## BRAVERY AND DELIGHT

A. A. Phillips

W. H. Wilde and T. Inglis Moore: *Letters of Mary Gilmore* (Melbourne University Press, \$38.80).

It is good to have this selection of Dame Mary Gilmore's letters, even though it necessarily contains only a fraction of the thousands which her boundless energy and her readiness of friendship led her to produce. They build a portrait of a fascinating personality, at once lively-minded, resolute and warm-hearted—and chockful of contradictions. An unhappy circumstance robs them of much of the historical value which they might be expected to possess, considering how deeply she was involved throughout her long life in varying aspects of Australian life: as teacher, early feminine adventurer into journalism, participant in William Lane's Cosme commune, farmer's wife, political activist, peace campaigner, student of aboriginal lore, and poet.

Since the unhappy circumstance mentioned above needs to be frankly faced, let me first dispose of that ungenerous necessity. Mary was very much a romantic in temperament and romantics seek truth through the imagination. For them fact is a trivial and limiting obstruction. When she was reminiscing, the temptation to achieve a good story, or to create a fat part for herself in the drama, often led her to thrust past that obstruction without blinking an eyelid.

The muddying of the waters which this seemingly venial fault can produce are exemplified by her story of the Lambing Flat "massacres"—not mentioned in the letters included in the book, but discussed in W. H. Wilde's preface to it. In her poem "Fourteen Men" and the notes appended to it, she describes how, as a child driving with

her family along the Lambing Flat road, she saw fourteen corpses strung up to the trees. They were Chinese who had been lynched by the white diggers. Her notes—"searching memory for exactness" as she puts it—add vivid details of what she saw.

The anti-Chinese agitation and riots at Lambing Flat took place in 1860-61. Mary was born in 1865, by which time the gold-field there was almost deserted.

Wilde comments, in part, thus "The little girl who gazed with awe upon the row of Chinese swinging from the trees at Lambing Flat was certainly not the young Mary Cameron [Gilmore's maiden name]. But that scarcely matters at all. There *was* a little girl (there must have been many) who . . . would have had that scene indelibly imprinted on her receptive young mind. But (and Mary knew it well enough even if her modern critics do not) it is the Lambing Flat massacre that is important for us to recall—it is the event itself that is woven into our social and historical fabric."

Wilde's argument depends upon the assumption that the incident did in fact happen; and that seems open to doubt. Since 1960, four historians, working separately, have researched the Lambing Flat riots. None of their accounts mentions the episode. Neither do the petitions signed by 51 victims of the riots, seeking compensation for their losses. There is plenty of evidence that the white miners behaved with disgusting brutality, plenty of contemporary condemnation of their violence; but I have not been able to find any mention of this worse atrocity. Yet, according to Mary, that row of corpses hung for at least two days where anyone passing down the road could see them, near to a settlement with a population of about 4,000. I do not dwell on this issue in order to score a one-upmanship point against



Wilde. I cannot claim any superiority, since for years after I read Mary's account I too assumed its authenticity. Presumably Wilde and myself were not the only innocents thus conned. Because this can so easily happen, the unreliability of Mary's reminiscences needs to be unequivocally declared. Weaving non-events into the historical pattern is not a profitable exercise.

The over-trusting reader may also be misled by some of Mary's statements about Henry Lawson (pp. 73-4). She there declares that until she began to lend him books, "He had never held a volume of poetry in his hand nor had he ever read a novel." Books she claimed to have introduced to him include *Robinson Crusoe*, *David Copperfield* and Poe's poems. But Lawson's manuscript entitled "The Men Who Did Their Work" names these three among the books he read in his boyhood at Gulgong.

Mary also says that Lawson showed her his first draft of "Faces in the Street". It had no consistent metrical pattern and the intended rhyme-word was often placed in the middle of the line. She had great difficulty in convincing him that the rhyme must come at the end of the line. But "Faces in the Street" appeared in the *Bulletin* in July 1888. Mary was then teaching in the Broken Hill district; she was transferred to Sydney in January 1890. Moreover examination of Lawson's practice in his early verse-writing strongly suggests that the story cannot be true. The earliest known poem written by Lawson is "Shadows Before" which exists in a manuscript dated May 1885. Apart from some forcing of accents, its metrical scheme is accurately followed, and every line except one has a rhyme at its end.

Though Mary must be mistrusted as a dangerously unreliable witness, she nonetheless served the cause of Australian history well. Her letters repeatedly insist on the importance of exploring and recording the fast-disappearing evidence of how our Australian ancestors lived. At a time when most professional historians concentrated almost exclusively on the political, military and diplomatic records, she understood that the penny-plain processes of day-by-day existence could be history's most colorful and most significant material. If her shade today looks down at our flourishing school of social historians, it may well be exclaiming, "Glory be, I wasn't just a voice crying in the wilderness; I was a Forerunner." She deserves that title too for her early recognition of the

importance of preserving Aboriginal lore as a forceful element in the total Australian heritage.

Perhaps her most valuable form of service to our cultural development lay in the warmth of praise with which she greeted the work of her fellow writers. That may not seem of much importance to those who are not familiar with the conditions which handicapped Australian authors of her generation and the one which followed hers. The condescending disdain with which most educated Australians regarded their work gave a special value to any warmth of response which greeted it, and Mary's had the added value that it was also discriminating.

Sometimes, it is true, the swans she thought she had discovered turned out to be merely ducklings, sometimes her enthusiasm betrayed her into over-florid phrasing; but only the pedants and the cold-of-heart would want to condemn her for such excesses of generosity. Though her praise is lavishly bestowed, it is closely considered. She seeks the phrase which will assure the writer that his underlying intention has been recognised. Both the floridity and the sympathetic perception are present in a tribute to Hugh McCrae (p. 118): "A lovely, lovely book. Delicate and lovely and yet how pointed its arrows of honey! It is butterfly and dragonfly and yet the bee is in it."

Her attitude to Australian writing in general shows a similar discrimination. Though her own verse expressed her heart much more than her head, she set a high value on intellect, and was unhappily aware that Australian writing had been slow to develop strenuousness of thought: "I sometimes think we are a bold but not a brave people. Boldness is of the appetites and the body, bravery of the mind. Intellectually we have not dared. We have gone into the surf holding the same old lifelines as the rest of the world" (p. 169).

When younger writers began to develop stronger intellectual involvement, she welcomed them delightedly, for she was admirably free from the country-is-going-to-the-dogs syndrome which normally afflicts the elderly. In 1948 she wrote to Nan McDonald: "What things I have lived to see grow and come to being in, and for Australia! The day of the tinkle is over" (p. 227).

Of Hart-Smith's writing, so unlike that of the poets of her own generation, she writes: "He makes his own form. It jolts at times like a waggon on a cobblestone road. But the individual and the stuff are both there; they are not blown



glass from a factory and the jolt does not smash them" (p. 169).

I do not want to attempt here a rounded portrait of Mary, particularly as almost every comment I should wish to make has already been effectively set down by the late Tom Inglis Moore in his Foreword to this volume. One point, however, is too important to be omitted. It is best approached through the fact that in the early years of her marriage to a struggling farmer Mary virtually gave up writing, although it had probably been the strongest impulse in a life filled with idealisms insistently propelling her into activity. She explains her decision in a letter to A. G. Stephens. After cataloguing the endless tasks of a housewife, this pioneer feminist adds: "There isn't much time for writing—let alone vitality—and besides . . . I didn't contract when I married to be a writer, I contracted to be a wife and mother and the honour in and of and by one's home and household is greater than that of all the outside world" (p. 27). There speaks the inheritor of the traditions of the Cameron clan, for whom "covenant" is an important word. That tradition remained a reservoir from which she could draw strength, particularly in the triumph—that is not too strong a word—of her last years. In 1945 her husband and her only child died within a few months, leaving her deeply stricken. She suffered much ill-health and failing sight made writing a physically difficult task. But the Cameron in her would not permit her to surrender. She would not sink into querulousness or inaction or lose her eagerness of response to life, or to the development of her nation, or to her friends. Her last book of poems appeared in her ninetieth year and contains some of the finest things she ever wrote.

Here are two sentences written within a year of her death at 97: "As for me: I am full of halleluyahs over the A. and R. victory for the old management" (p. 368) and thanking Robert FitzGerald for an appreciative essay on her poetry: "I am writing from up among the stars down to the earth" (p. 370).

They are simple enough declarations; but their springiness of rhythm, even more than the expansiveness of phrasing, declares a mind still capable of experiencing delight. The constant play of that vital gift is one of the main charms of these letters. It is the more attractive because it is accompanied, improbably but harmoniously, by Mary's fidelity to the traditions of the dour Camerons.

#### Notes:

The four accounts of the Lambing Flat riots men-

tioned are: C. M. H. Clark: *A History of Australia*, vol. 4, pp. 128-134, and the three papers in the *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*: D. L. Carrington, "Riot at Lambing Flat 1860-1" (Oct. 1960), G. E. Walker: "Another Look at the Lambing Flat Riots 1860-1" (Sept. 1970), and P. R. Selth: "The Burrangong (Lambing Flat) Riots 1860-1, A Closer Look" (March 1974). Mary Gilmore's poem "Fourteen Men" is in her volume with that title, issued by Angus & Robertson in 1954. "The Men Who Did Their Work" is available in Colin Roderick's *Henry Lawson, Autobiographical and Other Writings 1887-1922* (Sydney, 1972) and "Shadows Before" appears in Roderick's *Henry Lawson Collected Verse*, vol. 1 (Sydney, 1967).

*Arthur Phillips is the doyen of Australian critics. Now 80, he is best known for his work The Australian Tradition.*

## MARXISM: THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE

Robin Gollan

Stuart Macintyre: *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917-33* (Cambridge, \$34.50); *Little Moscows, Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (Croom Helm, \$42).

I first came into contact with Marxism when I was an undergraduate at Sydney University between 1936 and 1939. By then the official version of Marxism, as interpreted by Stalin, commanded the field, but there were still vestiges in the minds of some older Marxists of the period about which Stuart Macintyre has written so effectively. So, for me, reading his books has been not only a worthwhile intellectual exercise but also a nostalgic journey. Under the gentle urging of Guido Barrachi we read not only Lenin and Stalin but what was available of Marx. We struggled with the complex arguments of T. A. Jackson's *Dialectics, The Logic of Marxism and its Critics*, and were even introduced to Joseph Dietzgen, by then unpopular in the upper circles of the Communist Party, but who had been, as Macintyre shows, a major influence in British Marxism from early in the century. We also, of course, read Laski, Cole, Bertrand Russell and others whom Macintyre positions within the spectrum of British socialism.

Laski I came to know in the late 1940s when he became my supervisor at the London School of Economics, as he was for a dozen others at the time, and had been for hundreds more over the previous twenty-five years. The first time I entered his study he put down the phone and said, "That was Clem Attlee. He thinks that all you need to



establish socialism is a strong sense of social justice. What do you think?" I sidestepped with, "It would not have done for Lenin." But enough of nostalgia.

Stuart Macintyre is an Australian historian teaching at the University of Melbourne. His two books are an exploration of British Marxism, and more generally, socialism, in the 1920s and early 1930s. *A Proletarian Science* is the more substantial work, with *Little Moscows* constituting a number of case studies. In them he attacks two main questions: why was Marxism less influential in the labor movement and in the intellectual life of Britain in the inter-war years than it was in most other European countries? and secondly, why did it have a strong influence, for a time, in a few relatively small communities in Wales and Scotland—the little Moscows. He sees the problem as one which can only be illuminated by a study of the ideas, the sociological context and political practice.

The first four chapters of *A Proletarian Science* explore the relationships between the socio-economic structure of several parts of Britain, the established political forms and practices and the operation of ideas. The remaining six are more specifically concerned with ideas and how they were interpreted in Britain at this time. The chapter headings, "Historical Materialism", "The Dialectic", "Economics", "Class, State and Politics" are a fair indication of their content. The final chapter, "The Moscow Road", speaks for itself.

Macintyre distinguishes three main trends within the ideology of the labor movement: Marxism, Labour Socialism and Labourism. There is an extensive discussion of pre-1917 British Marxism, the outstanding characteristics of which were that it developed outside the mainstream of British intellectual life and that its proponents were working-class people.

Within the Social Democratic Federation, the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labour Party, the Plebs League and the Labour Colleges were self-educated polymaths (autodidacts), of whom T. A. Jackson was a notable example. They were remarkable for the range of their reading and their respect for the printed word. Their intellectual achievements were formidable, but this in many cases acted as a barrier between them and the working class—if their message was not received then the working class must be stupid. Already isolated from the cultural mainstream by their social origins, they generally failed to in-

fluence the broad mass of working people.

British Marxism before 1917 was far from homogeneous, conflict between the sects being endemic, but the October revolution clarified the differences without eliminating the sects. From 1920 onwards Marxism may be identified with the Communist Party, although its doctrine, too, changed over the next decade under the influence of Bolshevism, and later Stalinism. The positive influence from Russia was the idea that Marxists should adjust their tactics to the level of consciousness of the working class—to abandon the elitist attitudes common in earlier times. The negative influence was the increasing dogmatism of Russian Marxism in the later 1920s and early 1930s, interpreted for the English by powerful but narrow-minded men of whom Palme Dutt was the exemplar.

A second aspect of the clarification produced by the Russian revolution was the clear distinction which became evident between the Marxists and what Macintyre calls the Labour Socialists. The distinction was based on two quite different approaches. Marxist socialists believed that their theory was scientific. Labour Socialists took their position on ethical principles. Marxists sought to develop class consciousness and class struggle as the means of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism. Labour Socialists looked forward to an integrated "Co-operative Commonwealth". As one of them put it in 1925:

Labour's effort, politically and industrially, must of necessity recognise the *fact* of class warfare and does recognise it. . . . But our fundamental task is a creative one. We are not seeking simply to wrest control from the class that exercises it today in its own narrow and selfish interests. We are engaged in a positive effort to bring the Co-operative Commonwealth into being.

Labour socialism was expounded in the windy rhetoric of Ramsay MacDonald and the evangelical appeals of "Coom to Jesus" Snowden, but also in the much more sophisticated writings of Tawney, Cole, Postgate, Laski and others. Macintyre has, I think correctly, described the Labour Socialists, but where they begin and end is of necessity ravelled at the edges. Laski and Cole, as he points out, were by the mid-1930s moving towards a more Marxist position. In 1948, although chairman of the Labour Party executive, Laski wrote a brilliant introduction to the centenary edition of the Communist Manifesto.

Marxism, as then interpreted, and Labour



Socialism were the two articulate ideologies, but the political practice of the majority of the working class (at any rate those who were not supporters of the Tories) was the 'us' and 'them' pragmatism that can come under the description of Labourism. Labourism could co-exist with Labour Socialism but not with Marxism as understood in the period being studied.

Does Macintyre answer the questions which were suggested at the beginning of this review? Perhaps not, but he has thrown a great deal of light on them. His books throw further light when the problem is looked at from another angle which has so far not been considered—the regions in which Marxism did have considerable influence. *Little Moscows* is an examination of the socio-economic structure of three such communities in Wales and Scotland. The details cannot be set out here but they provided the social circumstance in which the Communist Party became the leading political force. It did so because,

in the place of constant criticism of the local labour movement, the Marxists offered leadership, instead of costly campaigns against the Council, the Guardians and the School Board, they were sometimes able to turn them into citadels of the local working class. But British Marxists effected such a break-through in only a few cases, and in the vast majority of working-class communities, as well as nationally, they were fated to be the perennial critics.

These are exciting books which carry the study of the British Left well beyond such works as Kendall's *Revolutionary Movements in Britain* or Klugmann's *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*. I hope that they will be a stimulus for the same kind of work in Australia.

*Robin Gollan is professor of History at the School of General Studies, Australian National University. His books include Radical and Working Class Politics, Revolutionaries and Reformists and The Coal-miners of New South Wales.*

## PORTRAIT OF TRUE VIRTUE

R. G. Geering

Shirley Hazzard: *The Transit of Venus* (Macmillan, \$19.95).

In her two previous novels, *The Evening of the Holiday* and *The Bay of Noon*, Shirley Hazzard

presented studies of love through the consciousness of her heroines. In the former, Sophie is to experience the fragility of love; in the latter, Jenny has to learn that love is the most conditional of all things, that "A word, a tone of voice, a moment's silence can change it irrevocably". *The Transit of Venus* is a wider-ranging, more ambitious novel, which pursues and extends these themes through and beyond the experience of its heroine Caro (Caroline) Bell. This book has been seven years in the writing. The result is a tightly organised novel, written with a scrupulous concern for detail as it explores the different forms that love takes in the lives of its six main characters. In its feeling for the complexities of human relationships and the moral dilemmas issuing from them it may remind the reader (who has to work for full enjoyment) of the mature Henry James. Perhaps the best way of indicating, in a review, the density and richness of its organization is to look at the opening scenes, in which the theme first appears, clues are planted for its future development and allusions scattered for the reader to reconsider when he returns to the book for full and enriched understanding.

*The Transit of Venus* opens, ominously, on a stormy English countryside as the young scientist Ted Tice makes his way up the hill to the largest and highest house, Peverel, the home of the ageing astronomer, Professor Sefton Thrale. Tice, a working class lad who has achieved academic distinction, is to help Thrale write an opinion on the site of a new telescope. His first sight of the young and beautiful Caro is looking up to her on the stairs as he stands bedraggled in the hall below. This opening scene prefigures the decades to come in which Caro remains longed for and unattainable. "Tice's future ascendancy could not, like Caro's beauty, be taken on faith." As it turns out, Tice is to achieve fame as an astronomer even though death (as we are told here at the beginning) is to halt him short of the highest peak of achievement. His personal story, on the other hand, confirms the truth of Paul Ivory's words (Paul, his early and successful rival for Caro's love) acknowledging, with characteristic envy, the man's essential virtue "His ascendancy has come twenty years too late."

The symbolic core of the novel, as the title suggests, is astronomy. The pompous Professor Thrale tells Caro (she and her sister Grace are Australians recently arrived in England) that she



really owes her existence to astronomy because Cook sailed in the Endeavour to observe, at Tahiti, the planet Venus crossing the face of the sun in June 1769 before going on to discover Australia. Thrale thus establishes Caro as "a child of Venus" but Tice, speaking with a prescience he is unaware of, interjects "The calculations were hopelessly out . . . Calculations about Venus often are." Thrale continues:

"There were distortions in the disc of Venus. A phenomenon of irradiation in the transit." It might have been his own expedition, or experience, he defended. "We call it the Black Drop."

The girl marvelled. "The years of preparation. And then, from one hour to the next, all over."

The young man explained that there were stages. He said, "There are the contacts, and the culmination."

They both blushed for the universe.

The Venus image is to recur with varying connotations: when Caro, after their initial separation, surrenders again to Paul ("The light was turning his figure supple yet metallic, the colour of pewter. It is not often that Venus passes before, and occults, so bright a star."); when she laments the loss of her love at old Thrale's funeral, as the minister reads Corinthians on the glory of celestial and terrestrial bodies; and when, thinking back in middle age of her life as places glimpsed in transit, she echoes Adam Vail's remark that travel is often just dislocation. Tice's explanation of the stages of the transit also supplies the novelist with headings for the four sections of her book, Part II "The Contacts", falling between the Old and New Worlds, and Part IV "The Culmination". Speaking of eclipse the Professor goes on, "Venus cannot blot out the sun", but Caro despairing of her life later, in "the Black Drop", is to learn that it can. Tice breaks in to say:

"Another astronomer crossed the world to see that same transit, and was defeated." The inward tone in which men speak, casually, of what moves them. Tice could not teach a lesson, but would pay tribute. "A Frenchman had travelled to India years before to observe a previous transit, and was delayed on the way by wars and misadventure. Having lost his original opportunity, he waited eight years in the East for that next transit, of 1769. When the day came, the visibility was freakishly poor,

there was nothing to be seen. There would not be another such transit for a century."

He was telling this to, and for, Caroline Bell. At that moment he and she might have been the elders at the table, elegiac. She said, "Years for Venus."

"His story has such nobility you can scarcely call it unsuccessful." Ted Tice was honouring the faith, not the failure.

In honoring the Frenchman Tice is speaking his own epitaph, as the novel is to show. When Shirley Hazzard rounds off chapter 2 with "They were like travellers managing an unfamiliar tongue, speaking in infinitives. Everything had the threat and promise of meaning" she is describing both the scene just enacted and her own practice as a novelist working by implication and allusion, and a reverberating imagery.

*The Transit of Venus* is built on a series of parallel and often contrasting narrative units, which offer their own dramatic comment on one another as, for instance, the two confessions made to Caro — Ted's about saving the German officer during the war (an echo of *Great Expectations* and pointing to Ted's own later expectations); Paul's about the gratuitous revenge he takes upon his father on the latter's return from Changi Camp. The different kinds and stages of love and love-supposed are revealed in the interlocking stories of Caro and Paul, Caro and Adam Vail, Caro and Ted, Grace and Christian, Christian and the young typist Cordelia, Grace and Dr Angus Dance, Dora and Major Ingot, Ted and his wife Margaret. Caro's marriage to Vail comes of admiration for him as a fighter for humane causes and of desire for peace and security after her rejection by Paul. Vail's death in late middle age leaves her adrift once more. He is never much more than a shadowy father-figure but his relationship with Caro poses no real difficulty for the reader.

The Paul-Caro relationship, I believe, does. Paul is almost the complete egotist, vain, callous, arrogant and domineering. It is hard to believe that Caro, even allowing for the independence she now enjoys, just freed from the tyranny of her whining, self-pitying half-sister Dora, gives herself to him (and so quickly). Caro has been presented as strong-willed, perceptive, honest, a seeker after truth and excellence, the last person, presumably, to be snobbishly impressed by Paul's upper-class confidence. In fact, she immediately senses the deceiver in him. Why then is a strange



collusion suggested between her and Paul as soon as her projected visit to the primitive Avebury Circle is mentioned? The allusions (for once) become intrusive, as Caro invokes Stonehenge and the d'Urbervilles; Tess-like, she is suddenly maiden no more. The novelist seems to have pushed her in the interests of the book's design into a sacrificial role foreign to her nature. And, though Paul himself is convincing enough as a character, it is difficult to recognize in him the powerful charm he is supposed to exert over others.

These reservations apart, I have nothing but praise. *The Transit of Venus* is written with an economy and elegance that are rare indeed in contemporary fiction. The miniatures are done with that sensitive, often ironical touch that marks Shirley Hazzard's short stories. The portrait of Major Ingot, for instance, is perfect; so too are the many evocative scenes where the emotional nuances are rendered with marvellous tact and delicacy—such as that in chapter 33 where Grace, now in love with Angus Dance, is joined at the piano by Rupert, the son, who, unwittingly, was the reason for her meeting Angus in the first place. The underlying irony, moreover, of this love affair is that Rupert is the child whose conception marked the return of Christian to the marriage bed after his one lapse, with Cordelia.

With all its insight into the complexities of human behavior this novel is unequivocal in its moral judgments—Paul, Dora, Charlotte Vail are the death enlusters; Caro, Adam, Tice (Caro's true lover) the life enhancers. Others, like Christian, are too weak to be so categorized, sharing features of each group. In Ted Tice Shirley Hazzard has succeeded in one of the most difficult of all the novelist's tasks—the creation of a convincing, unsentimental portrait of true virtue, an unidealized man of ideals.

Ted and Caro meet briefly at the end in full truth of one another and arrange to come together in Rome but the elegiac note sounded in the opening scenes is caught up once more. The book's final sentence echoes the recurring image of disaster, the sinking ship (the sisters' parents drowned in a ferry accident), and the attentive reader knows (from an earlier clue) that Caro's plane will crash and that Ted will want to live no longer. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* could be the subtitle of this profoundly moving book.

Ron Geering was formerly associate professor

of English at the University of Sydney. His publications include *Recent Fiction* (1974) and *Christina Stead* (1979).

## AUSTRALIA IN HUNGARIAN

Patricia Thompson

Andrew Dezsery: *Neighbours* (Dezsery Ethnic Publications, \$4.95).

Native-born Australians, if they decide to live elsewhere, i.e. migrate, with very few exceptions choose another English-speaking country. What is more, they migrate from choice, not because their home community is too poverty-stricken to support them or because war and revolution have 'displaced' them.

Those people from the continent of Europe who have come to these shores since the end of World War II are here either because of poverty and lack of opportunity at home or because they have become discards of some new political order. The native-born, never having experienced such straits, though less intolerant than they used to be, are not notably sensitive about all this.

Our migrants tend to congregate in national groups. Some of the older ladies never learn a word of the local language and barely belong here at all. It is necessary to wait until the next generation has come through Australian schools, speaks with an Australian accent and, sometimes, has fought out its bitter domestic battles with parents, especially fathers, who fear and suspect what seems to them disgraceful local licence in matters such as girl-and-boy relationships.

From time to time, seriously or humorously, the native-born have written about the day-to-day problems of the newcomers; and some of the newcomers, heroically coping with the difficulties of writing in a foreign language, have tried to tell us what it is like for them here. I suspect (I may be wrong) that these latter are writers who came here when they were very young.

I sometimes think there is a whole generation whose thoughts and impressions are lost; these are the people who came as adults, perhaps not very youthful adults, who had already established a professional life for themselves in their lost homeland and were faced here with the need to start again on a very much lower level, first in a migrant camp and later as laborers.

As people often tend to confuse incomprehen-



sion with deafness and/or stupidity, those struggling with the intricacies of a new language have not always found the local particularly helpful or sympathetic. It is not surprising that the newcomers tend to huddle together in little clubs where they can speak their native language.

The intellectual and emotional struggle to become truly part of the native-born community can be too great for many, though of course there are those who have succeeded, whose 'foreignness' is camouflaged behind almost perfect English, unnoticeable clothes, Australian-style houses, hobbies, diet, sport, even politics and absolutely Australian-style children.

Dr Andrew Dezsery, born in Hungary though an Australian citizen for more than a quarter of a century, has published a selection of his short stories about the migrant experience. They were not written in English. I do not know who translated them but it has not been as well done as one would wish. Translation is surely more than a substitution of one language by another, because languages have their own idiomatic way of expressing things which are literally untranslatable; the translator in fact has a creative task to perform.

Dezsery's stories remind me a little bit of the stories of Chekhov; they are delicate sketches, sadly humorous for the most part, or humorously sad. (Chekhov, too, has suffered from heavy-handed translators who, I am sure, had the best of intentions.) Words as delicate as these need a very light touch indeed.

What do the stories deal with? Nothing. What

do they tell us? Everything. They seem to be little tales told by a lonely man, no longer a youth when he migrated, who has observed the experiences of fellow-Hungarians as they have striven to adjust themselves to our antipodean life. They are quite free from bitterness, sarcasm, bluster; they have a certain sweetness about them but they are by no means sentimental.

These are not great stories but they are moving and they are well worth reading. The little book, rather too fussily produced, is very modestly priced, at the equivalent of a paperback thriller and considerably better value.

Am I a minority of one in flinching at the use of the word "ethnic"? Like "environment", it seems to have given a new and entirely misleading connotation. People who change their dwelling place from one country to another have been known for centuries as migrants, a perfectly good English word. Even the Aborigines were once migrants to Australia. A person born elsewhere who has settled here is a migrant. His or her children are native-born. However did 'ethnic' which is derived from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning 'nation', get into the act?

Meanwhile, I beg of all *ethnics*, native or foreign born, to read Dr Dezsery's stories. They reveal a side of life in Australia that the majority of us know far too little about.

*Pat Thompson is a free-lance writer living in Sydney. She is a special consultant to the World Crafts Council, and is preparing a book for UNESCO on the crafts of Asia and the Pacific.*

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