

# overland

FEATURES  
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96



Rick Amor





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# overland

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SERGE LIBERMAN

## The Life That I Have Led

They are waiting for me at home. Aviva, Judah, Josh. In the dark, as by torchlight I seek out the Mahler's house, I can't recall their faces, even though Aviva and I have been married nearly twenty years and the boys are well on the way to self-sufficient maturity. I only know they are waiting, like Ziggy Mahler, the artist Ziggy Mahler, whose house in Stygius Crescent I cannot find.

It does not help that the street, in the nature of crescents everywhere, is abysmally lit, or that fog, already needled with frost, has settled early this evening, or that it is so unseasonably cold that I have to raise my collar and draw in my head to keep my chin and ears from smarting. And less still does it help that there is no-one about, not even a vagrant whose aid I may solicit, such nights being only for doctors who receive telephone calls to tend to ailing men confined behind mute walls in turn behind mute gardens in houses that, look as hard as one may, cannot be found.

It was Geulah Mahler who called.

"He is sick," I heard her distant anxious voice. "An infection, or worse. His face all burning up. And every part of him covered in horrible purple blotches and his eyes glowing, blazing red."

"As soon as I finish, I shall come," I said; then, hurrying through the last of the day's consultations – a child with tonsillitis, a woman with migraine, a footballer with ringworm – I set out to visit Ziggy Mahler.

But everything has conspired to block out clear vision – the darkness, the fog, my upturned collar – and even when in the mistiness I bend low, shining my torch upon the crumbling fences and rickety gates, I find no numbers to direct my way. For the district is old; the houses here have huddled one against the other through eras: colonial, Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian, their paint, coat upon coat, obliterating all numbers laid on by succeeding now-evaporated generations, peeling yet again and flaking and stained, their timber, brickwork and stone now chipped and cracked and crushed, whatever smells they yield, being not of lawn or flower or pine, but rather of mothballs, must and foetid blight.

This I know, simply know, for I have often visited just such houses before. But just now, cocooned within a clinging near-viscid wrapping of fog, enshrouded by layer on layer of pricking, even burning, frost, I cannot see any of the houses before me. The glow of my torch is too pale, its batteries nearly dissipated, the core of whatever light it yields, it *too* being nearly blotted out by what popular adage calls 'pea soup.'

Meanwhile, Ziggy Mahler is waiting. Geulah Mahler is waiting. In this street. Scarcely a breath from me. And I must get to Ziggy; must penetrate the seeming mist-locked impenetrability of those terraces and cottages I know are there; to pierce the lotused muteness of their ever-curtained secret within, from the inclement chill without, in which, unmoored, adrift, I find myself. And by the light of my torch, so dingy, so poor, I push open a gate, walk up a path, and rap on a door, once, a second time, a third, hoping, trusting that serendipity shall come to my aid and that the house may prove to be that of Ziggy Mahler himself, or that its owner will direct me to it with a certainty untrammable, or that, by giving me his own number, he shall lead me to deduce the whereabouts of the sick man's, the artist's home.

It is Willy Welcare who opens the door, balding, small-eyed, small-chinned sparrow, one-time city councillor and self-appointed ombudsman. He wears a pullover the dullness of lime and corduroys weathered at the knees. His face, so tiny, so elfin, folds into a smile.

"Dr Balsam! Hello! What a stroke of luck!" he says.

"I have been called to see a Mr Mahler, Ziggy Mahler," I say, preferring to defer familiarity to another time. "He lives around here."

Standing in the doorway, I swallow hard the foetor of sewerage, fustiness and rot that assails me here, foul legacy of decades, ages beyond counting, of stagnation. Whatever light falls is as bilious and turbid as water putrid with mould.

Does Willy Welcare fully hear? – He reaches out a hand to take mine. His minute avian eyes, patently cheery, frisk over me in an animated reel.

"You must come with me, Dr Balsam," he says, shifting weight from foot to foot. "You must. Back in there, in the back, there is something we're trying to settle."

The corridor behind him is thick with smoke and dust. From beyond, there rise the sounds of voices, voices that would seem engaged in argument, however muffled, however garbled.

"But it's Mr Mahler I'm after," I say. "he's waiting for me . . . He's sick . . . His wife rang . . . I can't stay . . ."

Willy Welcare has already turned.

"You couldn't have come at a better time," he says over his shoulder, tripping, bird like, down the hallway.

Go argue! Resist! Even as in their house, in my home, the Mahlers, and Aviva, Judah, Josh are waiting for me. I try again, in this thick dusty vaporous drift, to recall their faces,



but, for the life of me, I can't. Reach out to them now, all I should gather in would be handfuls of squalid void.

Caught, I follow. From the grime-encrusted ceiling hangs a light-bulb unhooded and fly-soiled; the leek-green walls are corroded with copper; and the carpets are tatty, worn to flimsy decomposition on the dully-echoing floor. The poverty of it all! The seediness! The rot!

The voices issuing from beyond the hallway become clearer. The dispute breaks off. They turn to me, the two men sitting at the laminex table there, one dumpy and flushed, the other thin-boned and severe, Charlie Workman, I recognise, carpenter and union-leader, and James Lethe Gossamer-St John, failed lecturer, failed politician, soap-box orator, ineffectual come Sundays, come Spring. Ever-loquacious patients of mine; a peculiar pair, Sancho Panza to Don Quixote, each nudging the darker Sheol side of seventy, yet seeking still to settle the questions of long-extinguished youth.

"Why, Dr Balsam!" says Charlie Workman, brandishing a hand orphaned of forefinger and thumb, then sipping at his beer.

"Now we shall know," says Gossamer-St John, theatrically, years of oratory behind him. "An educated man. A man of common sense at last. *He* will know."

"*This* is our dilemma," says Willy Welcare, scratching at a buttock as he reaches for his stubby. "Man dictates history; history dictates man. What is it? You, as a doctor, who has seen so much, will certainly know. Charlie here says . . . No, rather, Jim thinks . . ."

For this he has dragged me into his house, for dialectics and sophistries, for this, while out there, somewhere close, a man is sick, a man is burning, all blotches and blaze! For this?

"I am sorry, I have never thought about it," I say, tightening my grip upon my doctor's case in an effort to hold back irritation. "I must go . . . Perhaps some other time . . ."

"But just a word," Charlie Workman says.

"A man of your stature, Dr Balsam," adds Gossamer-St John, "Surely, surely, you must have some view on it . . ."

"Not now. I've no time for it. I must go," I say again.

"No time?" says Charlie Workman. "No time for a matter that is the essence, man, the core, the stuff of life . . .?"

"Whether a man moulds his existence," intrudes, elaborates Gossamer-St John, "or lets himself be moulded, whether he is to be a leader or led, whether he be participant, agent, doer, or dead cadaver on which the worms of history feast . . ."

What must I do to break away?

"Where is number sixteen?" I ask, turning to Willy Welcare. "The Mahlers' house?"

Where before, on my appearance, he may have eaten relish, he winces now as if he has fed on a jar of bitters.

"Cross the road, the other side," he says, green lemons scarcely more sour. "Three, four houses to the left . . . next to the lane."

Those seconds, that minute it takes me to steer along the corridor congealed in stench and foulness, are swallowed up in the words that pursue me.

"Hardly a sport, is he?"

"Could have offered some opinion at least, even a word."

"Or maybe for all his station he's really got nothing to say."

Maybe for all his station he's really got nothing to say.  
Maybe for all his station . . .

Once more I wade through the gelid pea-soup of Stygius Crescent, precious time lost and myself only the merest measure closer to the Mahler home where Ziggie Mahler, Geulah Mahler, are waiting, waiting for me to come, like Aviva, Judah, Josh, in my own home. I must get to the sick man. All the sooner, all the faster. The fog, the cold, the darkness all, be damned, be cursed, I hurry across the street, find the lane, and almost scurry up the path of the house the nearer side of it. But earlier error is compounded before I am yet wholly aware of it. No sooner have I pressed the bell than the door opens to an onslaught of a turbulent psychedelic whirl of yellows and emeralds, and scarlets, violets and blues, to a rush of cloying vapors of pervading incense, to a reverberating polyphony of guitar, saxophone and drum and the clarion and clamor of voices, quite apart from the long-haired loosely-caftaned girl, so beautifully stately, bangled and beringed who, placing a hand of pure satin on my arm, laughs through teeth themselves flickering, glittering rainbows, and says, "Dr Balsam! Welcome to the party . . . I'm Melody Cyrene, remember? Visited your surgery a month ago . . . You must come in, I'm sure there'll be others here you'll know . . ."

Whatever protest I make drown in the vaulting billows of noise that pound the walls, the ceiling, floor, as I draw Melody one way and she draws me the other.

"See who has joined us," she says to one, to another, each head-banded, beaded, ear-ringed or bearded, each in turn lit up and extinguished in the swirling gyrations of colored lights as, almost recklessly, we bundle through the incense and lurching drifts of smoke along the corridor of graffitied walls to the source and vortex of all light and color and din where, in huddles on the floor, on chairs, on settees, sprawl a mass of folk, young, not so young, long-haired, short, thin-boned, solid, rolling, swaying, singing, chanting, with clicking tongues and flicking fingers responding to the rhythm of a trio perched on stools at the very hub, each player himself oscillating and pulsating to the syncopations of his music.

"They're singing a song by Musette over there," Melody, rising on her toes, shouts into my ear. "You know Musette, of course. She says, she told me she's attended you . . . And the players, of course, them, too, you must recognise – Jamie Harper, Simon Fiedler and Andrew McBard. It's a pity, you've just missed a recital by Verna Liedler of her own poem and a lovely dance by Lily Jolly. Whoever comes here must perform, must do something artistic – play an instrument, sing a song, recite a poem, dance, even draw a sketch – that's one of our rules whenever we come together. What can you do?"

So near to me, she smells of blackberries, even above the incense, above the smoke. The image of bramble and briar comes to me, of undergrowth dense and tangled by the sides of country roads, and of yellow flowers and beet-fields seen from crystal-limpid heights where the breath, elsewhere so bridled, so fettered, so cramped, attains to release and freedom and flight but fitfully, so rarely, known.

In this pounding palpitating maelstrom of color and vigor, scentedness and voice, among faces familiar yet in a setting unknown, and confronted by a question never given thought,



red wine fuels the cheeks to fire and to fantasy the brain. "What can you do?" she has asked. What *can* I do? What *dare* I do? I dare do nothing; I dare not even stay, dare not, for next door, across the fog-bound lane, there, in trouble, a man and a woman wait. And somewhere else, Aviva, too, and the boys bent over their desks, as is only right, with their father's sobriety and doggedness wrestling with geography and mathematics, history and science. And towards Melody I bend and into her ear I say, "I must go, I really must, for there are patients whom I have to see;" but in the surroundings, the words sound feeble, they have lost their urgency, drift into void, unanchored, almost unreal. Out there, beyond the walls, there is a world, I know. Out there, there is solidity and certainty, as surely as at this moment there is blackness and frost. But distance has intervened, unreachability and illusion, as Melody claps her hands, bids all to quiet, come to announce the appearance of Dr Balsam who, as he must soon leave, shall also perform, the choice of act to be his alone, a song, a recitation, a narrative or a sketch.

The sea of bodies divides, lets me pass as applause and cheering transports me to the hub, as Melody Cyrene, all caftan, rings and blackberries, still holding my arm, leads me to that sanctum sanctorum within that swell of faces flaring and flickering under the reeling, rolling, revolving gyrations of color and light.

But what can I do? What *can* I do?

Long ago, a child in a school play was brought upon the stage to perform a part, recite his lines and vanish into the wings. In short pants, he came; the spotlight, an orb of white, fell upon him; out there, in the auditorium, all hushed and darkened and expectant, sat the audience, his parents in its midst, and a brother, a sister. But no sooner did his mouth open to deliver the lines than the words, so perfectly learnt, so perfectly rehearsed, perfectly known, they fled, and before that unseen swell, he was left to flounder, just as now, that boy, become adult, doctor, man of the world, founders yet again, declaring, repeating, protesting, "But there is nothing that I know to do . . . I'm sorry I must go . . . It's all a mistake . . . Perhaps some other time . . ." to which one and another at my feet cries out, "There shall be no other time!" . . . "The time for revelation is now!" . . . "Bare your soul!" . . . "Show us the real you, the hidden, submerged, suppressed, authentic you!" . . . "Open up! Open up! Poetry, music, art – these are of the soul! Let yourself go! Let us see!" But once more I plead, torn between flight and pillory under now-hard harsh glacial shafts of blinding white blitzing from flood-lights earlier given to warmer ardor, sensuousness, intimacy and color: "But there is nothing I can do . . . I must run . . . A man is waiting . . ." to which yet again in succession they cry, "But, doctor, haven't you ever written a poem?" . . . "Composed a song?" . . . "Perhaps drawn something?" . . . "Learnt to play an instrument?" . . . "Learnt some exotic dance?" . . . "What sort of a doctor are you? Tell us. What sort of a man, what sort of *man* are you?!"

I have fled once already tonight; again I flee, seeing, yet not seeing, hearing, yet not hearing, tasting, yet not tasting, as, stumbling over legs and brushing against shoulders, I evade the clawing grasp of hands that would take me hostage to expose my soul, career through the anarchy of light, voices, incense, smoke, bangles, rings, graffiti, and leering, railing

faces with Melody after me, pressing, urging, "Couldn't you have just given us something? Is there nothing of yourself you can give?" – her plaint ringing like Gossamer-St John's, like Willy Welcare's, Charlie Workman's, even as in the murky opacity of the night-encrusted fog, I cross the lane, rap on the Mahler's door, shuttle, scarcely bearing to hear, past a weeping hand-wringing Geulah along the corridor cluttered with watercolors, canvasses, sculptures and pedestals, to reach the sick man's room where the confirmation of a dread till now suppressed explodes with the virulence of gall and wormwood, of nausea and devastation, as, damnation, blackness, derelection and madness compounded, I fume at the knowledge, fulminate and curse at those who, bent after my soul, have caused a man to die, a woman to grieve, lives to be so sensuously crushed.

"I couldn't come earlier," I say to Geulah Mahler, "I'm sorry I couldn't get away," I try to explain. "There were demands . . . my patients . . . long consultations . . . I . . . I couldn't get away . . ."

Braving as best I can the racked contention of Geulah's acutely bleak, demolished, pulverised and ravaged face, I could choke on the bones of my fabrication.

"If only you'd told me how urgent . . . If only . . ."

She does not listen. Words – I know, I have learnt from circumstances as this before – have lost their power of penetration. Become blunted, emasculated, prostituted in the service if dissembling, they are the bosh and gibberish of Babel that can in no way meet her own adversity, the numbered shot perplexity lacing her every syllable.

"How . . . why . . . Just yesterday, the day before . . . he was well . . . healthy . . . sculpting . . . creating . . . Then the headache . . . fever . . . vomiting . . . and the blotches . . ."

Of what value to her the ready diagnosis – meningitis, septicaemia – saturnine bringer of ugly gargoylean premature death? I offer her a sedative, call the undertakers, inform by phone her son and daughter. I stay awhile. For decency's sake, I stay. Then, her family come, her children, a brother, a brother-in-law, all violet with cold and devastation and incarcerated breath, I leave, my condolences I know as vapid as dust, adding, "About further arrangements, there will be no trouble. The certificate . . . the certificate for the undertakers . . . that, you may trust to me."

Outside, Stygius Crescent is silent, my very steps humbled to near-extinction as I plough my way back to my car. Whatever noise, whatever tumult, turmoil there is, riots in furious helpless apoplexy in my own mind where, as I hurtle past Melody's house again and Willy Welcare's, as I now punish the accelerator back along the treacherously-turbid tram-lined streets towards my surgery, there to commit to officialdom the reality of a death, those accusations, reproaches, sneers, and questions surge with violence and urgency, storm-tossed and inundating to slap and cudgel, and the senses stun.

"Man dictates history, history dictates man."

"Whether a man moulds his existence or is moulded, whether he be participant, agent, doer, or dead cadaver on which the worms of history feast.

"Maybe for all his station he's really got nothing to say."

"But what can you do? Is there nothing of yourself you can give?"

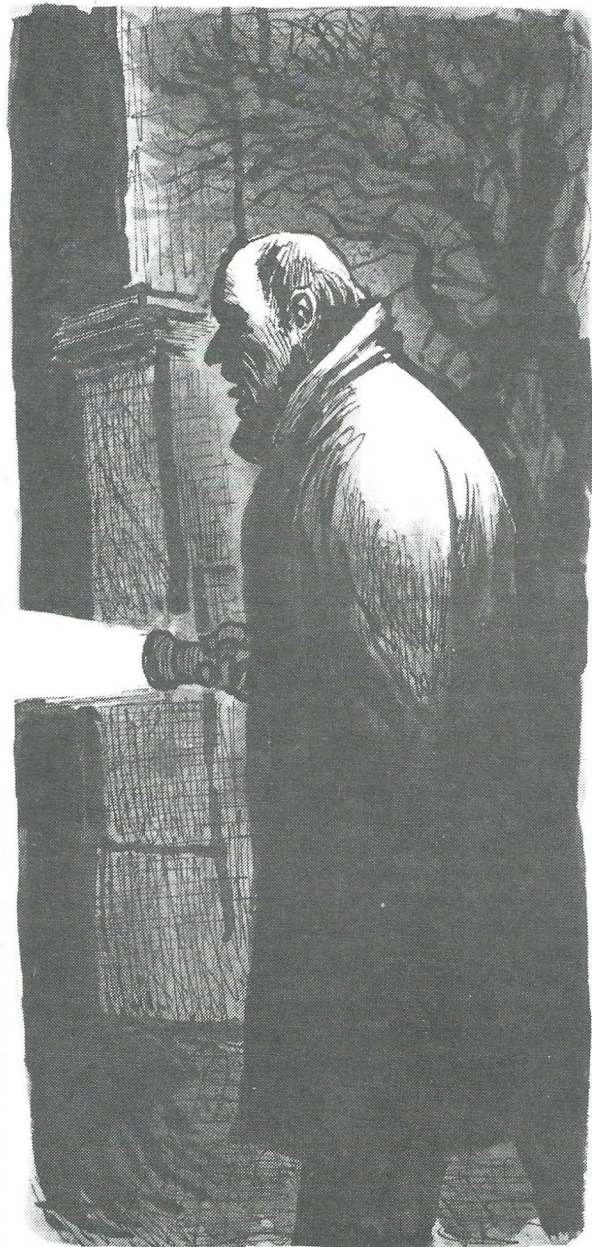


“What sort of doctor are you? What sort of a man are you?”

What sort of a man are you?

What sort of a man are you?

I know what sort of a man I am. I know. Even as they asked, I knew. But go, tell them, tell *them* with souls the readier to bare that, as James Lethe Gossamer-St John has said, I am a man of common sense; an man who, though on the favored side of fifty, has found dignified contentment in his present existence; a man who has always known and adhered to the sensible, the reasonable, the safe. Go say to them: “Friends, my friends, we are not of the same temper, I know; we circle orbits that may or may not cross; your homes,



so poor, so old, so narrow, are not my home. But surely you know me now, my patients, my friends. I have never been grasping; my demands even in relation to my abilities have always been modest. If I do drive a Mercedes, it is for reasons of comfort and safety, as is my wife Aviva's Rover; if I do have a summer house at Eden Bay, it serves as a getaway after long, sustained and wearying stretches of duty and as a healthy environment for my boys; and, as Aviva enjoys entertaining, our town-house in Olympus Court was built to serve this not-unworthy purpose.” Go, tell them that, my work-day over, it is to this home I return; that Aviva, on my entry, will kiss me and say, “Hello, Dudie darling, did you have a good day?”; that Judah and Josh, emerging temporarily from their studies, will, one or the other, say, “Hi, Dad! Did you hear – Smith scored a double century in record time” or “Should have seen old Smiling Death in chemistry today. Lost his dentures in a bowl of acid, poor bugger;” that I shall then sit down to dinner, my first substantial meal for the day, having till then sustained myself on coffee and chocolate wafers and, out of patients' sight, on cigarettes; that, as I eat, Aviva will sit opposite me, chin on hand, in her lively buoyant ever-jaunty way, tell me about Jessie the cleaning-lady whose Anne-Marie probably has another bun in the oven, or about the dishwasher that needs mending, her Rover in need of servicing, or about our friends, the Lees and Prydes, the Fallows and Sluffs with whom, come Saturday, we shall probably be attending a concert, the ballet, the opera, or a play; and that, dinner over, I shall read the paper or open a medical journal or watch the late news, and then, weary, yawning and rubbing my eyes, call Aviva to bed and settle in for another night.

I reach my surgery. Its red lamp above the stairs glows within a cold and gloomy halo. I enter, switch on the lights, sit down at my desk from which I take out the death certificate book to fill in Ziggie Mahler's name.

Go tell them this! Any of this! Go, tell them!

I unscrew my pen, bend over the certificate book.

The telephone rings.

Aviva.

“Dudie, darling, thank goodness you're alright. It's so late, I didn't know what to think. I've been trying to get you again and again. Did you forget? The Primms have come to dinner. We've been waiting for you, darling. Everything will soon be cold.”

Even across the cables I can smell the roast, taste the fresh asparagus in the salad, feel the velvet of Aviva's hand on my cheek, and see, clearly see, in all its brightness, the soft elegance of the living room, relish its very splendor, so spacious and stylish with furniture of mahogany, suede and chrome, with its lively-papered walls hung with prints and originals in what Aviva likes to call “our little Prado, Louvre and Hermitage in one.”

“The Primms?” I say. Harry Primm is a public accountant, Julie Primm sells handbags. They have been friends of ours for all of eighteen years. We have swum in each other's pool, played tennis on each other's court, and when we talk it is invariably of our children, investments, shares, holidays in Noumea, conferences in San Francisco, trips to Singapore.

“Aviva,” I say. “Tell me . . . Harry . . . Harry . . . does he have a soul?”



"A soul? Harry? Dudie, darling, are you all right?"

"I mean, does he know any songs, has he ever composed a poem, written a book, created any sculpture . . .?"

"Darling?!"

"Aviva! . . . Tell me! What sort of a man is he? . . . What sort of a man am I? . . . What sort of people are we? . . ."

"Has something happened? Are you ill? Do you . . ."

"Tell me, Aviva! Please! For once let us *talk!* Are we moulding our own existence, Aviva, are we, or are we cadavers, corpses upon whom the worms of history feast, while others out there, out there . . ."

"Shall I come to fetch you?"

" . . . while others out there, even in their dark draughty putrid tumbledown houses, in their cottages so decrepit, so humble, so ramshackle, they *care*, Aviva, have always cared . . ."

"Darling, Harry has offered to get you . . ."

" . . . have stood for politics, have been leaders of men, of workers after their rights, who even now already old, concern themselves with issues, with *issues*, Aviva, like history and man, and man and history, and others who *create* – music, poetry, art – and who dare, who dare to bare their souls and show the depths to which they run, while we . . ."

"Don't leave, Dudie, darling, Harry's on the way . . ."

"What light glows in them that we thought lived always in bleak uncultured darkness, what darkness consumed us whose lives we thought were bright with light . . .!"

"Shall I call Bernie to have a look at you, darling, shall I . . .?"

"And that I should learn all this, Aviva, a man has died, a

man has had to die. Are we worthy of it, are we worthy of it, are we, are we?"

Muffled voices, anxious, fretful, bewildered, issue through the receiver. Aviva is talking to someone in the background – Julie? Judah? Josh? Her hand, I know, is over the mouthpiece but sound is not wholly extinguished. "Something has happened," I hear Aviva say, "He was well this morning when he left, but now . . . I had better call Bernie . . . He's treated him before . . ."

I replace the receiver on its cradle. Let her call Bernie, though there will be no need. She shall have no more cause for concern, Aviva. When I return home, I shall explain. This will pass. Meanwhile, Harry is on the way. He's a good man, a good friend, even if he doesn't read much or particularly enjoy concerts, operas or plays. We shall, in the end, as always, spend a pleasant dinner together, talk business and travel over our supper, and put out of mind the fact that a man has died. At any moment he shall come. He will draw up before the surgery, he will clamber up the steps and press the bell – and I shall tell him everything's all right, there was never any cause for concern – I shall even crack a joke – and we shall leave, he in his Jaguar, I in my Mercedes, and, through the fog, however heavy, however thick, will return to the warmth and brightness and velvet comfort of my home.

And within its confines, I shall be at rest, at peace. If nirvana is to be known, there shall I find it, and I shall be beyond touch, beyond care, beyond concern, I know. I know. I have clear official confirmation of it. As I spoke to Aviva, I completed the certificate before me. I may have written Ziggy Mahler, but, on looking closer, it is my name that is there.

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## February 16th: Ash Wednesday

RICK HOSKING

The dust didn't get up (at least where I live) until about eleven in the morning, when Geoff the carpenter and I stopped for a cup of tea. We were working on the northern side of the house, and my glasses wouldn't stay on for the sweat. When the dust first started coming over, filling the air, I thought it was smoke. It drifted down the gully, not too high up, and pretty soon we couldn't see into my neighbor's valley, which would be a good half-mile away. The dust made me even more nervous than the heat—over forty degrees—or the wind, blowing over twenty knots.

We'd had three fire calls in three days. It was getting to look like *that* week of summer. I'm not a regular CFS type, but growing up in the country makes you worry about fires. Where I live the siren goes off enough times most summers for any decent dog to grow out of howling along with it. The first call on the Sunday night I must admit I ignored: it was Sue's birthday, and Sunday nights there's plenty of blokes around, so I didn't race off. It turned out to be a car fire on the main road, a Volvo. On the Monday when the siren went, I left the carpenter working, and we were out at the Devil's Elbow until late that night. As we pulled out, someone said he hoped all the stumps were out, it looked like being a bastard of a week. On the Tuesday there was a small fire in the National Park, and I missed it. I was having a beer with Brian and Youngie. Brian asked me if I'd remembered tomorrow was Ash Wednesday. The coincidence was too obvious, but I remembered the voice in the dark wondering aloud about the stumps at the Elbow two days before.

When the dust started coming down from the north it was just like the day of a bad fire at Port Lincoln when I was a kid. They were driving around the streets trying to find more volunteers. I wasn't allowed to go. The dust was thick in the air, top soil from way up the peninsula, laced with the smell of stubble and gum smoke. My brother and father were out at the fire. Next day we drove to North Shields, and then across towards Cummins. There were sheep in the fence wires most of the way, their wool burnt black, looking from a distance like some kind of crazy musical notation.

Geoff the carpenter came from Newcastle in England, the kind of bloke who asks if he can have your old hardware receipts, for the tax. He was a stropky, nervous individual, a bit of a whinger. As we drank our tea in the shade of the verandah, he told me that if he was working for a boss, he would've knocked off by now, and gone to the pub. It was too

fuckin' hot to work, he said. I just looked up at the gully and watched the dust streaming down our way.

When the siren did go, it was as if I hadn't heard it. I was scared, it was just too hot, too windy. My overalls, helmet and goggles were in the back of the Nissan, the smell of smoke still through them from the Monday. The vehicle's got a carby problem: if you push her too hard, she'll miss. I drove her up the hill to the fire shed sounding like the proverbial chaff-cutter. When I arrived, the siren still whining away high up on the ETSA pylon, one of the fire trucks was just pulling out, half a dozen blokes already aboard. I didn't have my overalls on, let alone my boots and helmet. Rod didn't stop. I was left hopping down the road with one leg in and one leg out, and Buckley's chance of catching them. The blokes on the back gave me a bit of stick.

I went back into the shed, with all the time in the world for getting the gear on. The second truck from the unit was still there, Di and Kerry were on the radio, and more blokes were rolling up every minute. I sat down and laced up the boots. Tony was doing the same beside me. He wasn't feeling too good: he'd got out of bed to come to the shed. He'd been out fishing the day before and had copped a touch of the sun. He seemed as jumpy as I was. It was a bastard of a day, he said. We could hear the wind in the ETSA pylons high above the shed, and the stringybarks across the road in the Park were thrashing around in the guts. And Tony would have to tell the story of the last Ash Wednesday fire, what it was like that day, how fast the fire had moved. One of our trucks had its sides burnt.

We listened to the radio. I don't remember exactly what was said. The drift of it was that there were a number of serious fires, all, it seemed, out of control. You could hear nervous and excited voices piling on top of each other, some hysterical. At least one of the fires was to the north-east of us, and that north wind was still blowing hard. I went to the public phone box to ring Sue. She was supposed to be going to a meeting later in the day, and even with the news of the fires she was still inclined to go. She'd got the pump going, soaking our place down. It was too hot in the phone box to shut the door, so I had the phone outside, watching the traffic on the main road as I spoke and listened: in the background the noise of the activity at the shed, the chatter from the radio. I said fuck the meeting, you should stay home this day of *all* days, my words self-consciously *serious* in my ears. As I



hung up, "use your judgement" my parting words, I saw Glenys's car with the lights on high beam turn into our road. They'd been burnt out two years before.

And right behind her was Youngie in his big Chrysler. He stopped right by me, cutting across the road. He'd been told to go home. He asked me what to do. Christ! How would I know? I gave him the usual business about filling the gutters, clearing stuff off the verandahs, shutting up the house. He pulled back onto the road in a shower of gravel.

Back in the shed, the blokes in charge were waiting for instructions over the radio. From the sound of things, it was bad, and still to the north. We didn't want both trucks out of the area, it seemed to me.

Then someone made a decision, and we were off. I always try to get as close as possible to the back of the truck. I'm one of those people who never trusts anyone else's driving, and a couple of years ago I had heard Don tell a few stories on the way to a fire. Most of us were inexperienced, and Don, a natural at these kinds of things, took one quick look around him at our faces when we saw the smoke and flames and told a couple of quick stories about fires he'd been to over the years. There was a lot of good advice in those yarns. One of them was about a 'gung-ho' driver all those years ago, a bloke a little too fond of rushing in. Don reckoned he'd always park himself by the back step, so he could abandon ship if necessary. Anyway, I managed to grab a possie by the pump motor. We got it started. I remembered that much about the business at least.

We were on the old truck. She goes like a beauty down hill, but shows her age going up. Lindsay was driving, and he wasn't mucking around. He even used the siren when the traffic got a bit heavy. By now a lot of people were trying to get home, there was some aggressive driving. Going up the hill towards the freeway another fire truck passed us on a blind corner, red light flashing, siren wailing, forcing some poor buggers right off the road.

For the first time we could see the smoke against the dust. All the sky to the north around Mt Lofty seemed stained with it, for some reason I thought of the bull-dust clouds thrown up by a road train. The color of this cloud, however, was disconcertingly unfamiliar, unsettling. Nobody said much. Some fires, the boys will joke, muck around, enjoy the outing. Not this one. It was very hot, and the sweat was running down my back – heat? nervousness? Most of the lads were getting ready, adjusting their helmet straps, buttoning up, wetting down the scarves and bandanas, cleaning the lenses of the smoke goggles. I soaked my nappy in the overflow from the big water tank. You can usually pick the blokes with small kids: nappies make good bandanas, the ordinary cotton ones are better than the terry-towelling ones. Tea-towels are fine too. Mind you, some of the boys have fancy little numbers, red scarves which stand out real well by the time your face gets filthy and the overalls similarly so. Just the thing for the cameras if they're around.

When you looked up you could see the sun through the murk of smoke and dust. It was an *angry* red, the old adjective right. On the first Ash Wednesday, a couple of years before, the eastern sky had been like that from our roof. And once, when I was a teenager in a small hills high school, and they evacuated us one day, we stood on the oval and watched as

the fire burnt to the back fence of the school. There is something about the color that makes you feel helpless, like blood in the water after a boat accident.

It looked like we'd been sent to Bridgewater. We were waved through the first road block, the police moving faster than you usually see them. There was a lot of smoke, but we still hadn't seen any flames. Then, one more corner, and the burning houses and gardens were all around us. Someone counted the houses, someone else knew the owner of a brick veneer already well away.

Lindsay stopped the truck just beyond a burning petrol station. Men were pushing cars out into the street, and even uniformed policemen were lending a hand with an E-type. They'd ignored an old Austin 1800.

The moment we stopped we were off the back of the truck with the hoses. Dave sent me and Mike off up a hill through a burning garden to check out a few houses some fifty yards or so back from the road. As I followed Mike, a bloke came running towards us, yelling about his place, his words near drowned out by the roaring of many small fires. We followed him, wetting down the ground to save the hoses from burning. As we rounded the corner of a shed, we could see the house. A lean-to alongside it was on fire, and tins of paint or whatever were exploding inside.

A long-dead gum, with ivy tastefully growing up one side, was burning strongly: we had to pass by it to get to the house. It took a fair bit of wetting down to keep the hose in one piece, a couple of times I had to back track to the road to call out for more hoses. There was another bloke on the roof of the house, hard at it playing a sad trickle of water from a garden hose on the burning shed alongside. Mike's not one to hesitate. He was straight up on that roof, with me beside him. My job was to back him up, keep checking the hose, and to make sure the exit was clear and safe. I've never been so hot. You check behind all the time, watch out for burning branches that might decide to fall, make sure you can get out in one piece. You have a strong sense of responsibility, look after your mate, very aware of the old legends. At one stage Mike had to get down pretty close to the eaves, to try and get water under the roof of the shed. I had to hold him to help him keep his footing on the steeply sloping galvanised iron. I was very conscious of that action. The bloke with the garden hose kept saying to us how grateful he was; the house was one of the first built in Bridgewater. All I noticed was that the galvo was old, buckled and rusted, and the gutters going. It didn't seem like a bit of our national heritage. By now the old dunny at the back of the place was well alight. It was made of asbestos, the sheets cracking in the heat. We had to pass within a couple of feet of it to get back the way we had come. Mike wet it down.

We saved the house. Lindsay came back to check us out, then called us back to the truck. We dragged the hose through the burnt garden: rhododendrons, camellias, lawns smouldering, the gums still burning, tongues of flame running up the bark.

The hose got caught around the Hills Hoist, and as I freed it I had to crunch my way through melted plastic pegs, the billy they'd come from lying on its side in the ashes of the lawn. My boots brought down a carefully constructed retaining wall and, as I tried to regain my footing in the mud and ash, I wondered what my feelings would be if it were my own labors someone else's boots were trampling down. My own were



sodden, black with dirt and soot, heavy on my feet, the laces dragging in the mud.

When we'd finished getting the hoses back on the truck, there was still the job of picking up the canvas hoses rolled out on the road. You have to run them out to get rid of the remaining water in them. I went down the bitumen a bit to where two or three blokes were starting to drag them up. A man came running from across the road, hysterical, wanting me to bring the hose to his house. I told him to see Dave, who was twenty yards from me, straining under just about two bloke's worth of wet hoses, his overall soaked. The man just disappeared, and we were all told to get back on the truck.

There seemed to be some urgency. The hoses were thrown in a pile beside the water tank, and Lindsay took off with barely enough time for everyone to settle down in the back. Someone remembered to take a quick head count. Dave hung on the back, his ear buried in the radio speaker right at the rear, listening to its discordant mutterings and exclamations.

We'd been sent to another street in Bridgewater. I didn't know where we were. The fires were scattered through the suburb, here a bit, there a house fire, so the truck drove at times through undisturbed, leafy streets, but always in the air was the smell of burning, not just the eucalyptus and grass fire smell, but a new one for me: the smell of burning houses, paint, timber, plastics, God knows what else.

The wind was strong and hot in our faces and, as the truck lumbered through the streets, we doused each other down from the tank, soaking our neckerchiefs, the smokers amongst us lighting up. There are always one or two blokes out of fags, caught short in the rush, or old smokers getting back in the habit. I remembered the old joke: two blokes explaining to the cocky they'd knocked off for a few minutes from fighting the fire in the crop, got sick and tired of the smoke, so they'd stopped for a fag.

No-one was saying much. Lindsay's driving suggested we might be needed somewhere, it all seemed a bit of a rush. One of the boys complained that his new CFS overalls were burnt: "Look at this," he said, "what a bastard."

The truck stopped on a small ridge road, houses along the hilltop, with paddocks either side, some with the buildings standing in the middle of acres. There were small spot fires

burning everywhere, and down the southern slope two houses, rather large, *I'm doing pretty well* places, surrounded by small fires that had burnt back up the hill against the wind. Lindsay jumped off the truck to have a good look at one of them, while Alan drove the vehicle on to the second property. Again, off the back, feed out the hoses, do as Dave says. The truck had come to a halt in a safe area, clear of trees, with low dry grass underfoot, but some good distance from the fire front. We had to join the hoses together to get the distance. As I ran around the back of one house, the fire was twenty yards from the walls, and moving at a walking pace up the slope and into the wind. Lindsay came out of the smoke, and asked for matches. I gave him mine, he started a little back burn in the remaining few unburnt yards between the fire and the house. *He* knew what to do, had the wit to do it. I wished I was more confident, more experienced. Your sense of who and what you are takes a battering in times like these.

The owner of the house was doing his best, despondently waving a garden hose from which a trickle of water ran. His wife and someone we took to be a friend were pretty upset, concerned for some horses. The women were dressed in shorts and T-shirts. Dave told them to keep clear, but still one of them ran backwards and forwards in the smoke, searching for some sign of the horses. Across the valley to the south-west we could see the main fire front, high in the gums, trees exploding in flames, the tops flapping and tossing in the eddies from the fire winds. The strong northerly, however, was beginning to play up on us: even as the front moved away from us, cooler gusts from the south-west checked its progress, the ebbing and flowing of that front getting more and more pronounced. Then the cool change arrived: a roaring sou'westerly gusting at what must have been fifty knots. Before I had time to take in the significance of the wind change, the fire came back at us, faster than I could have imagined a fire could move, and yet mostly burning over country already blackened and smouldering. When it began its gallop towards us, I was some distance from the truck, busy retrieving one of the lengths of hose we had been using around the houses. When the flames went past me I lost sight of the truck, the smoke worse than I had ever seen it. What can you do? All I could think of was the need to keep doing something: the urge was there to drop the hose and run back to





the truck. So I made a point of rolling up the hose, standing there in the falling ash and burning bits and pieces, determined not to panic. In a couple of minutes the smoke had cleared enough for me to see the truck: when I got back there the boys were putting out small grass fires underneath, we had to shout to each other to be heard over the roaring of the flames in the trees behind us. One of the sheds had caught fire, and that took a few minutes to bring under control.

When things had quietened down a little, and we had time to think about the significance of that wind change, we knew that it was all just starting for the day. The south-westerly wind was even stronger than the northerly that had preceded it, and it could only mean that many fires would now race away out of control again. Before the truck pulled out, one of the blokes described how, while I had been collecting the hose when the fire came back at us, the owner of the house and the two women had been forcibly encouraged to leave the property: Dave had even thrown one of them into a small truck, and they made it to the road just seconds before the fire went through. Would I have had the presence of mind to do that? Dave's like that. The horses, needless to say, had made it up the hill ahead of the flames, and even as we prepared to leave they were there, unharmed, running round and round the truck, their tails high, eyes wild.

Alan moved the vehicle back on to the road, and we stopped to pick up Lindsay who had raced off to check another nearby house, and then we were off after the fire front, the task ahead obviously mopping up in its wake. We soon came upon a number of small spot fires in gardens and around some houses. It was obviously a good neighborhood: more pine bark and native plants than you'd see around our neck of the hills. Pine bark mulch burns very well. While we were at it, Rod appeared out of the smoke, his face black, radio to one ear – seeing how we were doing. We hadn't seen our other truck for a couple of hours, and there was quite a bit of to-ing and fro-ing amongst the boys as we did our best with the pine bark. The houses were obviously in no danger, so Rod decided to take both trucks away to refill with water, and then head off to where we'd be needed more.

While we were backed up to a stand pipe in Bridgewater, the two girls in shorts went past. Dave sang out to them, the horses are safe. One thanked God, strain on her face.

The truck then nosed out on to the freeway, curiously deserted because of the road blocks, and then it was off towards the west, in the direction of home. Most of us were still concerned about how far the fire had got before the wind change: Lindsay stuck his head out from the cabin of the truck with the news that although the fire had crossed the freeway, it had stopped two or three miles from home. The news cheered us up, as did the gesture of the publican who brought us out two cartons of soft drinks. One or two of us wouldn't have minded swapping them for beers. Me for one.

Lindsay headed the truck up towards Mt Lofty. To begin with, there were few signs of damage: the odd small area of burnt grass, some stringybarks with the smoke trailing up the trunks, one or two sheds just heaps of old galvo. But as the vehicles climbed, we realised that we had only seen the edge of the main front that had swept up and over the hill: we drove into a black world, nothing left, nothing. The fire had taken everything: English or Australian trees made no difference,

power lines, telephone lines across the road, scraping the bitumen, along one stretch of the road the wires suspending the burnt stumps of the poles, they danced in the wind, some still showering sparks. Gardens a hundred years old were gone. Eyes moved from sight to sight. Nothing much was said. Behind, someone swore quietly over and over again. Fuck. Fuck: the slow drawn-out, lingering way of saying. Iain's place, I thought. The fire had done so much damage that I didn't recognise the familiar. What had been rhododendron hedges were licorice sticks; a once-flash brush fence now nothing save the twisted and blistered colorbond that used to hold it together. We drove straight in to Iain's drive: our other truck was already there, with Rod, the boss, in charge. Iain's shed was walled with flames, with regular and muffled explosions coming from behind the besser-brick walls. Next door, his neighbor, Bob, another bloke I knew, was outside taking a look around what had been a magnificent garden. A Honda was burning in the drive. He sang out to us – anyone want to buy a good used car? We heard later on that when the fire came through, he had started to pack the car – starting with a Gleghorn painting – but it got too much, and the car with the painting was all he lost.

As we pulled up outside Iain's shed, I yelled to Lindsay that I knew this house, there was a sprinkler system installed. Iain and I had talked often about the best way of organising one. Lindsay sent Mike and me to find it, get it going if possible. We ran hard through the smoke, round the back, but all we found were the remnants of the petrol pump. It had done its job, the house had been saved by Bob across the road. Even after the fire Iain's careful, workmanlike plumbing was obvious.

Then we were called away from Iain's burning shed to move immediately to a big house nearby. For some seconds we couldn't get the truck into the drive. The owner was manoeuvring an old and very distinguished motorcycle out of the way, lining it up alongside a very expensive sports car that already sat incongruously on the side of the road, its backdrop the ruins and debris of the fire. Someone noticed a wisp of smoke coming from the roof of what must have been the gatehouse – coach house? Ladders out, up on the roof again, jemmy off a piece of tin, hose under. Someone yelled out about not pouring too much water into the ceiling.

Lindsay then took the vehicle into the garden of the big house, stopping behind Rod's truck. On this day I had seen houses burning, houses as I know houses, but this place was different. It was a large, ivy- and glory-vine covered Victorian three-storey affair, with the usual verandahs, turned wood railings, and the bell tower with a flag pole. It was a splendid place, its magnificence dramatically out of kilter with the lurid wall of flames that poured out from under the roof, and the sounds of falling debris inside. As we did our best to run out the hoses we said nothing – I for one feeling helpless, depressed by the scale of it all. Two Fire Brigade officers with breathing apparatus came out of the main doorway, their heads shaking from side to side, the movement of their heads exaggerated by the masks they wore, the air hoses bobbing as they walked past me back to their truck. One took off his gear, packed it back on the red fire truck, casual, unruffled: we looked to them for advice, for the word. A house fire touches you even more than a fast-moving grass fire: how destructive, unstoppable fire is; the bigger the fire,



the more helpless you feel. Rod had been inside with the Fire Brigade officers. He now stood with them, his khaki overalls in contrast with their black uniforms, his hand-held radio against their brass helmets. We stood around, waiting for the result of the conversation. The heat was breaking the windows of the top storey, and glass was showering down, tumbling through the glory-vine, long baubles of paint coming away from the guttering, sheets of roofing iron buckling and twisting above us. Iain directed water through one of the windows, thirty or forty feet in the air, it made no impression, seemed a waste of water.

The owner of the house seemed unconcerned, watching like the rest of us. I heard his voice: calm, even joking, putting on a good show? I wondered how I would react if it were my house. His voice seemed familiar: the voice of a hundred jazz shows on the radio. The man who owned one of the best collections of paintings in Australia, the record collection, here, in this house. I asked Rod if we should bring some of the paintings out from the rooms accessible to us.

We went into the house, through that main, formal doorway, into a passage with rooms leading off from it. The sounds of the fire above us were very loud, disconcertingly loud, things

moved. Outside on the gravel path a small collection mounted up, standing forlornly amongst the tangle of hoses, the activity, paintings quietly gathering a covering of ash. We did our best: but that feeling of helplessness struck me again, how inadequate it all was. Dave kept saying its our heritage burning. Our heritage. A young bloke in overalls, nothing underneath, moved from group to group. Why don't you put it out? We've got a big tank, take the truck down, get more water. He was speaking to me. I didn't know what to say. You can't put it out because you can't. I suppose that was the answer.

There must have been ten or fifteen of us inside when the staircase collapsed, sending a gust of heat-laden, acrid smoke down into the only two rooms we could enter with any safety. All of us moved as one, grabbing hold of each other, heading for the door. We all made it, look after your mates. I haven't moved so fast in years. Paul twisted his ankle in the rush, but we all made it, we came out holding each other.

Rod wouldn't let anyone back in. We watched from a distance, the main doors to the house wide open. Iain filled Paul's boot up with water.

Just inside the door, some ten feet inside, and off to the right, stood a life-size deer – a stag – a sculpture in wood.



falling, small explosions, crackling. There wasn't much smoke: the hallway was obviously acting as a chimney for the fire above, you could feel the draught. We started taking the pictures down from the walls, passing them along to the others outside. We worked quickly, aware of that confusion of sounds above us.

The walls were covered in paintings, every square inch, it seemed. After the accessible ones were taken away, we had the problem of getting down those high up on the walls. All we could do was jump for them: I couldn't reach high enough for one, I had to break the picture wire. The nail ripped the painting from top to bottom. It was the best I could do. Along the top of the wall were what seemed to be colonial works: to my eye, they were more valuable than the abstracts closer to the floor. Dean and I briefly debated whether I should get on his shoulders to reach them. We decided against it, in case we had to get out in a hurry. Dean disappeared into the next room, snatching up the few family photographs he could find. A couple of other blokes staggered out with a Chinese lacquered chest, and a few odds and ends that could be easily

Through the frame of the ivy-clad doorway, we watched the deer burn, behind it the wood-panelled wall rippled with flames, shimmering in the draught that the fire created as the open doorway fed the main blaze in the rest of the house. Rod stood closer than any of us, watching. He walked up to the double doors, and without ceremony, closed them. The draught immediately burst them open. He closed them again. He couldn't watch it, he said. He closed the doors *once more*. The fire won. He gave it away.

We got the call to return to the shed. Lindsay drove back through the evening, the air now cooler with the change, the feel of the rain in the air. Where the worst of the fire had been, here and there a house stood intact, but usually with gardens in ruin. But for every house that stood, there were three or four others just piles of bricks, ash, smouldering timbers, twisted galvo. We passed several heaps of furniture in the road or on the footpaths, and at one house we saw the charred remnants of what had obviously been a full quota of household bits and pieces, even a chaise longue standing forlornly

in the middle of a tennis court, the house from which they had obviously come still intact and undamaged. At another place, the shed had gone, and all that remained were the burnt skeletons of a number of old motorcycles and an MG-TC. People poked around the ruins, or gathered in small groups, the animated exchanges of experiences still obviously a day or two off.

The flashing blue lights of police cars, cops in uniform black with soot and ash, the yellow flashing lights of the ETSA crews working on the power lines, cement trucks with water spilling from the chutes, one enormous tow truck, other CFS vehicles, even the odd car, most laden with belongings. A woman stopped us to ask if we'd seen her geese. Television crews and radio journalists' cars. No one said very much. You wanted to talk about it, to relive and relieve the tension. Dean said it was the closest we'd ever get to war, to the experiences of our fathers. He chose his words carefully, his tone thoughtful, serious. I couldn't think of anything to add. He used the phrase "the digger spirit." I remembered the falling staircase in the big house, the way we'd grabbed each other. Rod's sensitivity revealed in his attempt to close the doors on the wooden stag's last moments.

Back at the shed, the relief crews were ready for their stint, the production line churning out the sandwiches and the cordial, the radios still chattering. Di and Kerry counted us off, and Rod spoke to us. His eyes were red, his voice hoarse, and not just from the Viscounts. He thought it likely that other relief crews would be needed throughout the night, and prob-

ably well into the next day. We went home for a couple of hours' rest.

The trucks went out again that night, and all the next day, and the day after. The fires were still burning strongly twenty fours later. I went home: Sue and Joan were there, and we watched the TV reports. Our own experiences had been echoed over half the southern states, it seemed. The South-East, and Victoria: we knew they were for it when that wind change hit sometime later that night.

I went to work on the Friday morning. Fay, the tea lady, kissed me. Friday afternoon, I got drunk with Dean and Brian. Brian had been out around Echunga and Meadows and had his own story to tell. He reminded me of the conversation in the pub on the Tuesday: "Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday."

Geoff the carpenter showed up for work a week later. He described driving home down the freeway on that Wednesday: he'd left with his mate just after the siren went off. He saw the Eagle-on-the-Hill pub burn down. He wanted to get home. His mother had rung from England that night. The TV had announced Adelaide was ringed with fires, and that five hundred were dead.

I wrote this six months after, most of it in Calcutta, of all places; the rest in a twelfth-storey room in a flash hotel in Singapore. I had good reasons at the time.

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## floating fund

STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH writes: I am very happy to report another very substantial contribution to our Floating Fund since our last issue, amounting in all to a total of \$1751. Many thanks indeed to all who have helped: \$250 Anon.; \$200 V.L.; \$184 K.S.; \$109 P.L.; \$100 S.M.S.; \$84 B.&A.B.; \$50 M.P.; \$40 N.K.; \$34 M.W. E.C.; \$32 B.D.; \$20 B.R. B.S.; \$18 G.B. G.H.; \$15 A.&D.B. J.H.; \$14 M.M. G.T. S.McC. J.M. J.D. C.H. J.D. I.McI. D.A. R.B. I.P. Anon. A.H.; \$10 C.J. D.P. J.W.McK.; \$9 R.C. C.M. F.B. K.S. V.C. J.R. J.A. I.McI.; \$8 M.L. R.G. D.G.; \$5 E.K. G.M. E.K.; \$4 P.M. R.R. M.M. L.C. N.A. W.K. M.D. D.G. G.S. I.G. R.B. J.McN. R.S. T.G. H.M. M.D. L.F. L.B. E.W. G.L. P.S. B.G. M.E. B.R. J.&L.S. P.N. J.R. E.R. P.W. S.J. C.G. A.B. S.D. G.P. S.B. S.C. T.K. P.B. P.W. R.T. R.O. D.A. H.S. K.F. H.J. M.W. J.S. D.R. R.S. W.W. P.W. B.D.; \$3 A.B.; \$2 J.A. K.H.



KENNETH DAVIDSON

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### *Three Recent Studies*

David Martin: *Armed Neutrality for Australia* (Drummond, \$14.95). Jim Falk: *Taking Australia off the Map* (Heinemann, \$17.95). Michael Denborough (ed.): *Australia and Nuclear War* (Croom Helm, \$29.95 and \$12.95).

These three books discuss four of the most important questions facing Australia today: Can Australia defend itself out of its own human and material resources at a politically acceptable cost? What are the direct costs and benefits of the ANZUS alliance? Are the US bases and facilities vital to the US ability to deter a potential nuclear strike by the USSR? Would Australia suffer the indirect consequences of nuclear war even if it were not a direct target in the event of nuclear war between the USSR and the US?

While the three books overlap, Martin focuses on the first two questions, Falk on the third, and Denborough on the fourth.

Both Falk and Denborough outline, convincingly in my opinion, how the US has moved away from deterrence as the only role of its vast nuclear arsenal. The US is addressing itself now to the tempting delusion that it is possible to develop a defence against nuclear attack which in turn opens up the possibility for engaging in a winnable nuclear war.

The principle of deterrence is simple. The USSR knows that if it destroys New York with a nuclear attack the US will respond by destroying Moscow, and the US knows that if it destroys Moscow in a nuclear attack, the USSR will respond by destroying New York. So each superpower is capable of deterring the other from using nuclear weapons.

Thus nuclear wars cannot be 'won' while the other side has a second-strike capability. In this situation, nuclear warheads are not really weapons, because they cannot be used to achieve political ends. If one superpower threatens to use nuclear weapons to achieve some end, it runs the risk that its bluff will be called and then it has the choice of capitulation or national suicide.

Is there any way out of this impasse? Theoretically, what is required in order to make nuclear war an instrument to achieve political ends is (a) the ability to limit the damage from an adversary's second-strike through the development of (b) a first-strike capability which knocks out the deterrent capability of the adversary by (c) counterforce targeting designed to destroy the adversary's missiles and command, communication, control, and intelligence (C3I) systems rather than the adversary's cities (countervalue targets).

The present arms race can be seen as an attempt to break clear of the constraints of deterrence.

Falk points out that the US is ahead in the move away from deterrence, in terms of strategic thinking as well as in missile

accuracy, continuous detection of USSR submarines and satellite reconnaissance.

These developments do not promote nuclear stability. They increase the likelihood of nuclear war. If one side is perceived to have a "first-strike capability" the only defence the other side has is to pre-empt the first-strike and launch its own missiles. But the other side with the first-strike capability will be aware of this possibility, so that it will have an incentive to launch its "first-strike capability."

Development of an effective defence system against nuclear attack is virtually as destabilising. For instance, if Russia perceives the US will be able to develop a total ballistic missile defence (total BMD) and an effective anti-submarine warfare system to operate effectively at some date in the future, the USSR has an incentive to strike preemptively, before the defence system is in place, rendering the USSR deterrent helpless and allowing the US to 'win' a nuclear war.

The Hawke Government believes Australia can modify superpower behavior by being part of the Alliance, and that it can play a role in limiting nuclear proliferation by selling uranium oxide under strict conditions.

I think it is fair to say that the authors of these books find this idea ludicrous.

It is possible to argue that North-West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrunga have a deterrent role, but is that deterrence vital in maintaining the nuclear balance of terror and preventing nuclear war?

Martin points out that minimum deterrence could be "enforced by a couple of Poseidon submarines" which are each capable of carrying enough nuclear warheads to knock out every Russian city with a population of more than 250,000. Falk points out that as US nuclear strategy changes from countervalue to counterforce, from deterrence to war fighting, the nature and purpose of the bases will evolve to reflect those changes.

Thus, for instance, the North-West Cape was a communications centre for Polaris submarines which are now being phased out in favor of Trident. These missile-carrying submarines are the ultimate deterrent, because of their second-strike capability.

But North-West Cape is now being used to communicate with hunter-killer submarines whose purpose is to seek out



Russian missile submarines and thus undermine the Russian capacity to deter a US nuclear attack. Given the huge missile redundancy of nuclear missiles which gives both sides the ability to destroy each other many times over, it is doubtful that removal of the bases from Australia would interfere with the US ability to deter a USSR nuclear attack.

According to an official document released in July by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Hayden, "Uranium, The Joint Facilities, Disarmament and Peace," the bases "Contribute fundamentally to deterrence . . . by providing timely knowledge of developments which have military significance."

This suggests that the timing of the response to a nuclear attack plays a fundamental role in deterrence. If the USSR bombs New York: is the fundamental deterrent the certainty that the US will respond by bombing Moscow; or is it the fact that the US will respond in minutes, hours or days? The Hayden document also argues that in the case of a general nuclear exchange between the USSR and the US it does not matter whether we are a direct target or not.

The document states, "even if the war was confined to the northern hemisphere, even if Australia was not hit by a single nuclear weapon, we would still suffer a nuclear winter effect in the southern hemisphere. So, since Australia would suffer the consequences of nuclear war, whether or not we have the facilities, we cannot become immune by removing the facilities."

This is a powerful argument for inertia. We are damned if we do, and damned if we don't, so we might as well enjoy whatever benefits can be derived from being part of the US nuclear war machine. It is unfortunate that this argument gets some support from those who are against the US Alliance and who believe that support for nuclear disarmament can be drummed up by magnifying the horrifying consequences of nuclear war.

In Denborough the chapters on the climactic effects of nuclear war give qualified support to the Hayden document. The true position is given in the same volume by Ball and Mathams who state that, "there is no substance to suggestions that Australia would be grievously affected by radioactive fallout resulting from major nuclear conflict in the Northern Hemisphere." This conclusion is based on a report by Mathams in his capacity as Director of Scientific and Technical Intelligence in the Joint Intelligence Organisation of the Defence Department.

"The immediate effect on Australia of a major nuclear exchange in the northern hemisphere would be negligible; in the longer term, the level of radioactivity in the southern hemisphere would increase as a result of fallout transferred from the northern hemisphere, but the effects of this could be relatively easily reduced by the appropriate protective measures. In any event the amount of fallout would probably only be about twice that received in Australia from the combined atmospheric testing in the northern hemisphere during the early 1960s."<sup>1</sup>

What benefits does Australia derive from being a nuclear target? As Martin points out, the ANZUS Treaty was the *quid pro quo* for Australian and New Zealand acceptance of the peace treaty with Japan after World War Two, which enabled

Japan to be built up as a major power in the Pacific, a bulwark against Russian and Chinese communism.

ANZUS provides no military guarantees. It does not mention the use of armed force for the mutual protection of the three members. It is silent on the question of the bases and the fact that they constitute a potential nuclear target. And what does it really mean when the original country against which it is directed, Japan, is being actively encouraged to arm by the Reagan Administration?

According to Martin, ANZUS commits Australia too far, and America not far enough. "ANZUS leaves us uncovered where we could most need cover. It exposes us to the risk of nuclear war, which has dimensions that were not understood when the treaty was written. It lays us open but it does not protect us against the consequences."

The alliance provides no guarantee that the US would back Australia in a regional dispute. The US backed Indonesia against Australia over annexation of West Irian, and closed its eyes to the invasion of East Timor, because of the importance to US nuclear submarines of the straits between the Indonesian and Pacific Oceans which are controlled by Indonesia.

The US bases on Australian soil provide no guarantee that the US would support Australia against a regional invader. The US stood aside when Turkey invaded Cyprus, in spite of US and NATO facilities on Mount Olympus, because Turkey informed the US that the status of the bases would not change as a result of the war between the two countries.

The Alliance makes Australia a nuclear target without providing any guarantee against regional threats. Under the Guam Doctrine enunciated by President Nixon in 1969, the US would come to the aid of Australia if it were attacked by Russia. But America would do this whether ANZUS existed or not, because it would not be in US interests for a change in the balance of power in the region which would occur if a Russian attack was successful.

Can Australia go it alone? As Martin points out, successful non-alignment or neutrality requires a credible deterrent force and, above all else, political willpower.

Australia enjoys a favorable strategic position. It is an island continent with vast empty spaces, so invasion is difficult. It can only be invaded by sea or air, and enemy forces must be assembled a long way from assault points.

It is a fantasy to believe an invasion would come from the north. During the wet season such a force would be bogged down, and in the dry it would have to carry its water. During World War Two, General Blamey said that if the Japanese invaded from the north all he would require would be trucks to pick up the enemy bones.

An invasion of Australia is more difficult than most Australians think. It is now known that in 1942 the Japanese high command considered and then rejected the idea of an invasion of Australia, because they estimated it would require twelve divisions, one and a half million tons of shipping and the naval support of the entire Japanese fleet. When Japan was defeated in the battle of the Coral Sea, the Japanese fleet was heading for Port Moresby, not the Australian mainland.

According to US Army field manuals,<sup>2</sup> with the advantages of concealment, selection of ground on which to fight, reinforcement of terrain and choice of firing first, a defending force should be able to beat an attacker superior in combat



power by a ratio of 3:1, and an attacking force should aim at a combat superiority of 6:1 at the point and time of decision.

A country attacking Australia would have to move its forces across a 200 to 2,000 mile water gap, and provide for attrition at sea en route to the target area.

The advantage of defence compared with attack is being strengthened by the new technologies of warfare, particularly the introduction of 'smart' weapons which mean that if you can 'see' the target you can hit it, and if you hit it you can destroy it.<sup>3</sup>

Offence requires large weapons platforms, concentrations of men and material, and movement which creates vulnerability for smart weapons. The British expeditionary force to the Falklands came within a hair's breadth of disaster, even though the Argentinian airforce had only seven Exocet missiles and the Falklands was right at the edge of the range of the Argentinian fighter-bombers.

Australia will shortly take delivery of about 200 Harpoon missiles which have a range of a hundred miles compared with thirty miles for the Exocet, twice the explosive power, greater reliability, and a dual guidance system. And they can be fitted to Australia's submarines, surface ships and aeroplanes, including the F18. According to Australian military sources, no invasion force, including a Russian force, could penetrate the Harpoon barrier once it is in place.

In a very short space of time the moat around Australia will be sealed off from an invasion force, and there is nothing on the technological horizon to change the balance back in favor of offence against defence.

Harpoon, and its strategic implications, are not discussed in Martin's book, but it seems to me that Harpoon answers the big question that most critics of proposals to scrap the Alliance will put: won't such a policy be expensive? Given new technologies, Australia should be able to provide a credible deterrent to a major invasion force without increasing the present level of defence spending, providing the money is spent sensibly.

And of course, while we have the so-called security of the ANZUS Alliance, Australia's military brass will continue to have a penchant for ships, weapons, or planes which may make military sense only in the context of a larger US force, rather than thinking about the most cost-effective way to defend Australia.

Martin's basic argument, that Australia's security would be improved if Australia opted out of the ANZUS Alliance, is being accepted by an increasing number of Australians who have studied the issue, but so far the arguments appear to have made very little impact on Australian politicians. Mr Hawke believes in the Alliance as fervently as anybody in the Liberal or National Parties, and Mr Hayden's questioning attitude about the US bases, particularly at North-West Cape, has given way to vapid attempts at justifying the status quo.

As Leader of the Labor Party, Mr Hayden said in April 1981, "We would seek to renegotiate the North-West Cape Agreement to provide: first, that Australia's consent is mandatory for all orders to initiate military action which flows from the station; and second, that we be given firm and convincing assurances that the station will not be used to send orders for a first-strike nuclear attack, nor to initiate a limited strike."<sup>4</sup>

Mr Hayden's response, as Minister for Foreign Affairs in July 1984, is to state that, "agreement has been reached between the United States and Australian Governments on new arrangements to ensure that the Australian Government is able to make timely judgements about the significance for our national interests of developments involving the North-West Cape . . . Furthermore North-West Cape is not a command and control centre. It is only a communications relay station. Because of its limited capabilities and the limited role that could be played by submarines in so-called nuclear war fighting, this means that North-West Cape's functions are essentially limited to defensive and deterrence purposes."

Does Australia know what signals are passing through North-West Cape? Do we have access to the US National Communications room or not? Can Australia veto messages sent through North-West Cape or not? If Australia can veto particular messages, does this seriously degrade the value of the base to the Americans?

It is clear that Hayden's assurances on consultation are pure flannel designed to placate Australian public opinion, and that if North-West Cape is to play its part in the US nuclear strategy then it must remain under the exclusive control of the US.

The claim that North-West Cape is "essentially limited to defensive and deterrence purposes" is equally uninformative. Effective deterrence is undermined by effective defence against nuclear weapons. If the US can bomb Moscow, and the USSR cannot bomb New York because the US has developed an effective defence system against nuclear attack, then the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), on which deterrence is based, has broken down.

The fact is that North-West Cape was exclusively concerned with deterrence when the base was used to communicate with Poseidon submarines which carried submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), which were the US prime second-strike weapons, ahead of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear-armed B52 bombers. Poseidon is being phased out in favor of Trident which is bigger, faster, and more accurate, and thus more capable of playing a war-fighting role than Poseidon.

Thus North-West Cape is not being used for deterrence. It is being used to build up the US capability to neutralise part of the USSR second-strike capability, and so is adding to global nuclear instability rather than contributing to the maintenance of the balance of terror on which deterrence depends.

The case against Nurrunga and Pine Gap is more evenly balanced. Nurrunga gives the US a thirty-minute warning of a Soviet missile launch, which is sufficient time to get nuclear-armed bombers in the air and ICBMs launched from their silos. In other words, Nurrunga provides protection for the two most vulnerable legs of the US strategic second-strike capability.

But is Nurrunga vital to deterrence? There are alternative information systems. Bombers can be kept in the air, and silos can be hardened. More importantly, neither ICBMs nor nuclear-armed bombers are vital to deterrence. More than half of America's strategic nuclear warheads, totalling some 10,000, are carried on missile launching submarines, which are the least vulnerable element in the US deterrent capability.

Pine Gap collects intelligence through Rhyolite satellites which can be focussed on particular areas of interest, for



instance Lebanon or Iran, during periods of crisis, as well as monitoring Soviet missile telemetry. It does not have a deterrent capability. It could conceivably be used as an aid to prevent accidental war as well as verifying Soviet compliance with strategic arms limitations agreements.

It is doubtful if the Rhyolite satellites have been turned on Australia. There would be no point. But if Australia came into conflict with Indonesia over the Papua-New Guinea border there would be a motive, and there would be no guarantee that some of the information obtained would not be passed on to Indonesia if the US thought that its interests would be better served by supporting Indonesia.

There are positive as well as negative aspects of Pine Gap and Nurrunga for both the global nuclear balance and for Australia's security. However, if Australia cannot have access to all areas of the bases, especially the section of Pine Gap which lines up the Rhyolite satellites on areas of interest, and to all signals which pass through the bases, then Australian sovereignty is fundamentally infringed and the US should be told to close down the bases.

According to Martin, a policy of armed neutrality would require the removal of the bases, or the bases being placed under international control, to be used purely for verification of arms limitation or control agreements.

The policy would prevent Australia's entering a military pact with Papua-New Guinea or New Zealand. Apart from questions of history, sentiment or 'blood,' it seems to me that there are strategic reasons for assuming that, for the purposes of defence, Australia's borders include Papua-New Guinea and New Zealand.

Economically, Australia is better served with a market of nineteen million rather than sixteen million, and New Zealand is better served with a market of nineteen million rather than three million. Whatever improves Australia's (and New Zealand's) economic strength also improves the defence capability of both countries. While New Zealand has more to gain economically from integration of the two countries (because it is poorer), Australia has more to gain militarily, simply because New Zealand lives in an even more luxurious strategic position than Australia.

I cannot imagine a more gross act of strategic irresponsibility by an Australian Government than the proposal, apparently now being contemplated by the Hawke government, to threaten New Zealand with our signing a separate military treaty with the US while New Zealand is allowed to become neutral. It seems not to be understood in Canberra that New Zealand is not fearful of the Indonesians, nor that given New Zealand's awful economic problems, Wellington might welcome the chance to save money by disarming.

Australia has a strategic interest in Papua-New Guinea, even though the Hawke government is doing its best to deny that interest as part of its policy of appeasement towards Indonesia. Because of proximity and access, Papua-New Guinea provides an important buffer for the defence of Australia, but the lesson of World War Two is apparently forgotten: Japan could not contemplate invasion of Australia until it had secured a safe base in Papua-New Guinea from which to launch operations.

In May 1942 the Japanese navy attempted to invade Port Moresby, and was thrown back at the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Attempts were then made to take Port Moresby by land operations across the Owen Stanleys, attempts that failed, in part because a commando force of some two hundred on Timor was able to hold down a force of some twenty thousand.

Papua-New Guinea security is important to Australian security and we ignore what happens on the Papua-New Guinea border with Indonesia at our long-term peril. What happens on that border will ultimately be determined by the Javanese migration program to Irian Jaya, which we are helping to finance through the World Bank.

As Martin has shown, Australia is a difficult and expensive country to invade. But it is vulnerable to low-level incursions which could be expensive to deter unless Australia is prepared to engage in counter-harassment. But Australia is in the same situation in regard to low-level attacks, whether we remain in alliance with the US or not. As the Guam Doctrine clearly states, Australia is expected to look after itself in the case of low-level harassment, or even attacks by other countries in the region.

The Air Force and Navy, operating as a co-ordinated maritime defence, armed with Harpoon, will provide a credible deterrent against invasion for the foreseeable future.

Major threats do not develop overnight. Australia could build up its defensive capability faster than any other country in the region could build up a credible offensive capability. The Army core force is adequate in the circumstances. While prospects of a major invasion are remote, the possibility of low-level harassment and guerilla activity are more likely. This means that the first priority for the Army must be the further development of the rapid reaction force, able to operate on land or water anywhere around the Australian coast at short notice.

Diplomatic support and more military aid should be given to Papua-New Guinea, and no military equipment such as patrol boats, nor economic aid such as money for the migration of Javanese to Irian Jaya, should be given to Indonesia, because of the potential of that aid to destabilise Papua-New Guinea.

The 250,000 Palm Sunday marchers have been ignored by the Hawke government, because the aims of the marchers and their supporters are seen as far too diffuse to make any political impact. The government, and other supporters of the US Alliance, have tended to dismiss the marchers as dreamy-eyed unilateral disarmers and opponents of nuclear energy in any form or context.

If the peace movement is to have the political impact that its numbers warrant, its aims must be focussed in a way which is logical, easily understood and acceptable to a majority of Australians.

Such a movement will not be successful unless it can show to the Australian population that removal of the bases and the direction of the Australian defence effort towards the defence of Australia, rather than as an auxiliary of US forces, will improve Australian security. And the peace movement must be able to show that this additional security can be bought for Australia at no extra cost.

The central message will have a better chance of success if it is not confused with subsidiary messages. There is no point in magnifying the horrors of nuclear war or the threat of nuclear power generation.



The consciousness-raising has been achieved, especially with the younger generation who have incorporated the nuclear danger into their pop culture with hit songs such as "Luftballon." Spectres such as the possibility of 'nuclear winter' engender hopelessness. Australians have available a strategy for survival; insofar as the nuclear age is concerned, Australia is still the 'lucky country.'

Opposition to the export of uranium oxide is seen by many as a major moral crusade, but it has tended to obscure the priority issue for Australia's security, which is the removal of the bases.

The issue of nuclear power will be resolved by the market. Unless nuclear power can be produced at an attractive price compared with other energy sources, and until the problem of waste disposal can be satisfactorily resolved, the future of the nuclear energy industry will continue to look grim, and the demand for, and the price of, uranium oxide will continue to fall.

Rather than trying to block all sales of uranium oxide, the peace movement should focus more specifically on the linkages between the nuclear power and nuclear weapons industries, which means demanding that Australia should not sell uranium oxide to countries with reprocessing facilities which can turn heat-generating nuclear material into weapons grade material.

And those who wish to build up Australia's defence capability in order to adopt a credible non-aligned position should be wary of so-called 'defence experts,' who talk in terms of inputs rather than outputs. Those who want to see more money spent on defence, or more defence money spent in Australia, usually have a vested interest in the additional spending rather than a concern for security.

*Kenneth Davidson, who lives in Canberra, is the economics editor of the Melbourne Age.*

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Desmond Ball and J.O. Langtry (eds.): *Civil Defence and Australia's Security in the Nuclear Age* (Sydney, 1983), p. 147.
2. Quoted in J.O. Langtry and Desmond J. Ball: *Controlling Australia's Threat Environment . . .* (Australian National University, 1979), p. 48.
3. See Ross Babbage: "Technological Trends on the Conventional Battlefield . . ." Reference Paper no. 8, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University.
4. Quoted in Desmond Ball: "US Installations in Australia . . ." Reference Paper no. 119, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, p. 9.

### NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The aircraft dropped its bomb and made thru' cloud  
For home. The aircrew did not fear pursuit.  
This masterstroke gave them a line to shoot  
Which now might well be tacitly allowed.

Seniors to them in rank had first endowed  
This dream with feasibility – salute  
The pioneers! – One should not feel a brute  
At wiping out the enemy, but proud.

It was exciting, thinking of the scene  
At their reception. They would stand up tall,  
Superior to their obsolete machine . . .

The navigator sketched a very small  
Gesture, for where their airfield should have been,  
Was nothing, *niente, nada*, nothing at all.

JOHN MANIFOLD

## comment

*Richard Krygier writes:*

While very grateful to my friend, Peter Coleman, for having written to you in response to Stuart Macintyre's attack on me in *Overland* 92, the latter's repeated attack forces me to answer it myself.

To prove a non-existing conspiracy Stuart Macintyre has to draw far-reaching conclusions from non-information. I answer his points (*Overland* 94/95) in order:

1. Coleman's statement is correct. Macintyre quotes me saying that "Congress funds come from various foundations in the US." But the connection of the Australian Association was with the Congress in Paris and no one else.
2. Macintyre makes a great play of the fact that the office in Paris banked with a New York Bank (in fact – Chase Manhattan *Paris* branch) and operated all over the world in one currency, viz. US dollars. So what does this prove?
3. I was a very grateful recipient of assistance in our work from the United States Information Service, as well as the British Information Service, the Information Service of the West German Embassy in Canberra, the French Information Service and, last but certainly not least, the Cultural Branch of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. So what does this prove?
4. The idea of having applications for membership vetted by ASIO was certainly foolish, but it appeared "a good idea at the time" (1954), in the famous words of Senator Evans.

In the last sixty-seven years there have emerged in the world three kinds of Fascism: Red, Black and Brown. The last two have been annihilated as a result of the Second World War, but not the first. All of them have contributed to the physical destruction of several hundred million human beings. I am proud to say, that I have never been on the side of the torturers and always on the side of the victims.

It has been said that every Communist has his *Kronstadt*. For very few it happened at *Kronstadt*, for others – at various times and for various reasons. I suggest that what is called for is some humility. Those who applauded the greatest murderer in history, who excused his misdeeds, should, I suggest, have a feeling of some responsibility for their life *before their Kronstadt*.

*Laurie Hergenhan (Editor, Australian Literary Studies) writes:*

Donald Grant's polemical article, "To Know Ourselves: Canada and Australia" (*Overland* 93) was a welcome attempt to stir consciences about Australia's comparative backwardness in fostering Australian Studies. Let's hope it reaches beyond the converted, a growing number I believe, whose efforts are frustrated perhaps more by the shrinkage of tertiary funding than backwardness and apathy.

Given his polemical purpose, in his conclusions Don Grant strays from the facts to darken his picture and to suggest the cringe. He claims that "much the same situation exists in *Australian Universities* [my italics] today as was described ten years ago by Geoffrey Serle in *From Deserts*," namely that "[all] graduates depart without more than a nodding acquaintance with . . . one or two of Australia's best writers and painters" or with scholarship about them. I doubt whether this is any longer generally true but it is certainly inaccurate in its failure to take account of regional differences.

In Queensland, because of pioneering work by Cecil Hadgraft (literature), and Gordon Greenwood (history), for the last twenty years many students, including those destined to be teachers, have had much more than such a nodding acquaintance. I believe that Brian Elliott taught a pioneering course explicitly in "Australian Studies" at Adelaide University for many years. (Bruce Clunies Ross pays belated tribute to it in a recent issue of *Kunapipi*.) I am not claiming that the Universities of Adelaide and Queensland "led Australia," but simply drawing on what I know best to suggest that things are not as bad as they seem to Don Grant. Has a survey of the history of Australian Studies at *all* tertiary institutions ever been undertaken?

By way of this rhetorical question, a postscript. It is good that a pioneering work in this field at WAIT should be mentioned by Don Grant, who has contributed so much to it. It seems a pity, though, that other efforts are passed over: "there were very few *successors*" [my italics]. More recent and independent courses at Deakin are fairly well known, for instance, while those at, say, the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, less so. The University of Queensland initiated an Australian Studies *Centre* in 1979, primarily as a research centre (the first so far as I know), though as such it is



developing undergraduate courses (with help from such models as the WAIT course). I mention this not only because of my association with the Queensland Centre but because it is a collaborative effort and one which grew out of a long-standing interest in Australian Studies, of a kind no doubt not unparalleled but not allowed for by Don Grant. It was made possible partly by the building up, over many years, of outstanding library resources by such persons as Cecil Hadgraft, Nancy Bonnin (previous Fryer Librarian) and Margaret O'Hagan (present Fryer Librarian), not to mention the development of the University's Anthropology and Art Museums.

Don Grant mentions such well-tried warhorses as Meanjin, Overland and Westerly as having contributed to an interest in Australian Studies which the universities haven't harnessed.

Given that these magazine were meant as a sample, one misses other examples, such as Historical Studies, the Journal of Australian Politics and History, etc, and the more recent Journal of Australian Studies and the New Literature Review, all of which indicate a wider range. Apropos of the last, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) is also a relevant and promising recent development, one of whose aims is to unite, in the cause, CAE's and universities, instead of leaving them divided, as they tend to be in Don Grant's article. There is good reason for this. Universities have not been noted for collaboration, even with one another. The more welcome, then, signs of change. Yet another is the Australian Studies Association initiated by Don Grant and Stephen Alomes.

### THE WARD

She's as white as a movie screen  
Tastes like orange  
Shadows my travels  
Speaks like a window  
Kisses like a flower

She contains a bit of everything  
And she leaves her mark all over the world

She falls like the night  
Her thoughts make me dance  
She touches my temples like a shock machine

She's a clamp  
She's a stretcher  
Her dress is like a lampshade  
She illuminates the ground on which she walks

MICHAEL GOODISON



*Linocut by Rick Amor, from the new edition of These Are My People (Currey, O'Neil).*



JOHN MORRISON

## The Happy Warrior

Early in 1950 I received a letter from John Bechervaise, then editor of *Walkabout*, telling me that he was running a series of short profiles of Australian writers, and asking if I would like to do one on Alan Marshall. I welcomed the assignment, and that same year my article appeared in the December issue of the magazine. I feel I cannot have a better beginning here and now than by quoting the opening sentence of that *Walkabout* article: "Alan Marshall writes well of the Australian scene because he is forever exploring it with delight."

To make my point I went on immediately to quote a paragraph from his first book, *These Are My People*, where, prowling on his crutches through "the country of little trees" in north-west Victoria, he came upon a mounded nest of the rare Mallee-hen, and "sat down beside it filled with an ecstasy of awareness."

Awareness? Well, not always ecstatic, but it was, nevertheless, the quality which enriched Alan Marshall's whole life. He was a romantic, imaginative, intellectually enterprising, and enjoyed speculating on the three great questions which have plagued mankind throughout the ages: Where do we come from? Why are we here? Where do we go? But he lived body and soul in the present. He was a great observer. Everything excited his interest. He wanted to know everything, try everything. He never stopped probing the physical boundaries imposed by his two crutches, a dangling right leg, and a heavy leather spinal jacket. The crutches developed in him powerful arms and shoulders. On one of the many trips I made with him we got badly bogged in among the Hattah Lakes in north-west Victoria. It was in the days before tourism, when few people went there, and Alan was driving his big Bedford caravan, a monster of a thing, built on to the chassis of an industrial truck. It had a double bunk at one end, an office-sized, teak desk with swivel chair at the other, and full kitchen equipment, including a kerosene refrigerator and a hand-pump for lifting fresh water from a tank slung under the chassis.

It took us three days to get out of that bogging and back onto firm ground. I did all the axe work, felling saplings in the nearby scrub and cutting them into short lengths to make a corduroy track. But it was Alan who scrabbled in the wet sand under the chassis, jacking up, and bedding in the treads. And Alan who, after the spinning wheels had ploughed in a ton or so of firewood, came up with the idea of laying long lengths of timber fore and aft, a change of technique which eventually got us out.

He took that Bedford into some strange places. Again in the days before tourism, when going to Ayers Rock was still an adventure, it went there as mobile kitchen and laboratory for a party of scientists, "an expedition to study the geology, fauna, and flora of the three great tors in the Red Centre." Travelling alone, Alan also took it up Mount Kosciusko. The operation of turning it around at the top to bring it down again was evidence of his ingenuity and readiness to take quite crazy risks.

There was a day also when, out at Moorabbin airfield with a pilot friend, he was invited to take a short flip, and accepted with alacrity. It was a single prop, open-cockpit plane. Thousands of feet up, the pilot asked Alan if he would like to try a few stunts. True to form, the answer was yes, he'd be in anything. He was, even when it came to looping the loop. That was one of Alan's best stories, always related with great glee. "The bastard hadn't strapped me in tight enough, John, and right at the top of the climb the cushion I was sitting on came loose and fell out. It scared hell out of them on the ground when it came spinning down. They thought I was a goner."

He was always probing for a new experience. One day, sitting in the lounge of his home in Bamba Road, Caulfield, he told me, rather disconsolately, that he had never ridden on an escalator. "You know, John, I think I could do it. I've stood for minutes on end in Myers watching people getting on and off. I could get off all right, but getting on I'd need a mate behind me, just in case I did come a gusher. I'd have to make a three-point landing, two crutches on one step and one foot on the step behind. I'd have to be leaning forward . . ."

He was easy to read. "You're trying to talk me into it."

"Yes. How about it? Look, we could go in early one morning . . ."

That, however, was as far as it went. Neither of us was aware that his mother had just entered the room. She was standing now in the doorway, regarding me with stern disapproval. "John! How could you! Are you trying to have Alan get himself killed?"

I squared off immediately, assuring her that I'd had no intention of encouraging him, but I doubt if she ever quite trusted me with Alan after that day. She was a fine woman, and lived into her nineties, retaining full intelligence and a feminine sweetness right to the end.

Meditating on Alan Marshall in the few weeks following his death I often found myself lingering over the question of



what would have been the pattern of his life with two good legs instead of crutches. Not substantially different, I suggest. In any event he would have been a writer. He was bush-bred, and did have in him something of the wanderlust of the Aboriginal. His caravan peregrinations in Australia took him all over the eastern coastal fringe with occasional penetrations out beyond the black stump. He was a born adventurer, but it was the adventurism of the innocent wanderer. He had a fine independence. Getting around the bush with him I soon learned not to offer him a pick-a-back over a difficult piece of ground. Boys make little allowance for a cripple who demands to be one of them, and the need to fight his own battles was learned at an early age, in the school playground. He grew up with an increasing need for that. He was a tough man. If you have any doubt about that toughness you don't need to look much further than the second chapter of *These Are My People*, where Alan and Olive, his young bride, on a honeymoon trip, and travelling the bush in a primitive horse-drawn caravan, woke up one morning and found that their two horses, even though hobbled, had wandered away during the night. Olive also comes out in the book as a happy warrior. I met her only once, just before the marriage broke up, and never have any difficulty in relating her to the good companion of *These Are My People*.

I go back now to a remark made to me many years ago by a respected senior: "People don't really change as they grow older, John, they just become more-and-more so." The words made little impression on me at the time because I was just a boy, but somehow they got filed away and have surfaced occasionally as I grew up. They come back to me now as I think of Alan Marshall. I suggest that in them lies a clue to his way of life and, as a corollary, to his writing. The need to battle on, to assert himself, to stand on his personal dignity hardened to a point where he was ready to dig in, even when he was caught in a situation not strictly within the law. Take the following episode.

Travelling alone in the big Bedford Alan found himself late one day coming down a narrow cutting in the Grampians. For safety's sake he was keeping close to the cutting wall, although by the rules of the road it was his wrong side. Suddenly he was confronted by a light car which was keeping well away, as was the driver's right, from the crumbling edge of the falling ground. Both vehicles stopped. The stalemate lasted for a minute or so, then the opposing driver gave a short toot on his horn. "I knew then what I was up against," said Alan. "One of these bastards who's going to stand on his legal rights even if I go over the side. He could have got around me easily, inches to spare."

There came a second toot, a bit more prolonged, then a third, very peremptory. "I just sat tight. He got out then, and came up the road. I rolled down the window. He was middle-aged, red-faced, and sore as a boil. 'What about it?' he wanted to know. I tried a soft approach. 'Look, mate, I can't take this thing on the outer. I've got over three tons under me!' 'That's your worry!' he said. 'You shouldn't be sitting there in the first place. I'm no more ready to break my bloody neck than you are.' I pointed out that there was no risk in his going around me. I even offered to get out myself and drive his car past. But nothing would satisfy him. In the end he tried to bluff me, told me he had a flask of coffee and some sandwiches, and he was prepared to sit the whole bloody

night out. Just like that. He was walking away then, but I called him back, 'How many nights?' I asked him. 'Two, if it comes to it,' and he started walking away again. So I played my trump. 'Listen my friend,' I said, 'I can hold out for a week. If you're still there when the sun goes down, I'll lock up, light my pressure lamp, cook myself a hot dinner, and turn in with a good book.' I was going to give him the menu and tell him I had some spare blankets if he wanted to join me, but he didn't give me time. He just gave me a dirty look, called me a bastard, sized up the state of the outside edge, and went back to his car. He got around easily and went off with a long blast on his horn. I thought it sounded more like a raspberry than a goodbye-and-God-bless-you, so I pushed my buzzer down and kept it down until I lost sight of him in the rear-vision mirror."

Back to his writing. With two good legs I think he would certainly have moved in a wider world. Being the man he was, he would probably have wanted to climb mountains, to cross deserts, go up lonely rivers, mix with strange races, but there is little evidence to suggest that a life of high adventure has much to do with the making of a creative writer. I believe that the life-style to which circumstance did indeed confine him was well suited to the special nature of his talents. He himself was well aware of at least the end result of this, because he once declared that, "As a writer I have strict limitations. Some people have tried to push me onto the larger canvas, but I've stuck to the small incident, and that's what I write best."

In these small canvases he achieved a success which could hardly have been bettered. Rarely stepping far outside autobiographical material, there is little heavy drama in his work, little of the quality which I like to define as 'confrontation.' The piecing together of selected units in order to present a personal or social dilemma didn't appeal to him. He was content to let his philosophy, deeply imbedded in the material, come through all bloody from the block. His narrative style was excellent, good straightforward English, but with a distinctively Australian idiomatic flavor, whether he was dealing with a Carlton lodging-house keeper or with a battling cocky up in his beloved Mallee. It was the writing of a man wholly absorbed in what he wanted to communicate. He used the technique which could well be described 'close-up,' vividly evoking the Victoria of his time, mostly inner-suburban Melbourne in the autobiographies, and mostly the bush in his short stories. His collection *Hammers Over The Anvil* is a veritable fruitcake of potted profiles of rural characters. See, for example, "East Driscoll," a classic image of the Wild Colonial Boy. Alan never severed the strings of his bush childhood. Always, from the days of that first horse-drawn contraption, he had a caravan, and every now and then, as the spirit moved him, alone or with a mate, he packed up tucker and headed for the scrub. Some of his best writing was done far from the madding crowd.

The point should be made that the autobiographical stamp which characterises most of his work is not unduly subjective. There is little of those tedious, inconsequential meanderings that mar so much of this kind of writing. There is, correctly so, much about himself. But always it comes as the reflections of a healthy mind taking stock of itself, while shrewdly assessing the parade of human motivation and idiosyncrasy



passing by. The range of his close friendships was extraordinary, from highbrow academics to gypsies and petty criminals, all of it underpinned by an unshakeable faith in the fundamental decency of humanity.

The autobiographical trilogy leaves little to be desired, but Alan once told me it was a pity that *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* was written before it. That interested me, because I had already, in reviewing the book for Meanjin at the time of its publication, commented that it was written too soon: "Marshall was so taken up with his material that he couldn't wait to properly assimilate it." Alan's regrets, however, were more soundly based. At the time he made that remark, the first two books of the trilogy were completed, and he was engaged on *In Mine Own Heart*. He explained that the book would have been better if some of the material used in *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* were still freshly available to him. I myself was well pleased when, after being almost lost sight of, *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* came back into print. The crippled accountant in that book is a good portrait of Alan himself, gentle, thoughtful, compassionate, and easy to relate to the man who already was attracting a special following through his advice-to-the-lovelorn column which he ran for a long time in a Melbourne women's paper. He was always resentful of any suggestion that the column was for him no more than an easy road to a few quick quid or, more hurtful still, a foxy way of getting stories by prying into people's private affairs. He took the assignment very seriously indeed. His sister Elsie, lifelong confidante and indeed caretaker, would be my best witness to the truth of that. Authors can be quite bloody-minded in defence of their time, but no letter or phone call from someone in distress was likely to be taken frivolously by Alan Marshall.

The American writer William Faulkner has gone on record in declaring that, "the writer will be completely ruthless if he is a good one," and went on to a recklessly extended definition of that ruthlessness. But ruthlessness, in common with all other vices and virtues, takes on many forms. Alan was human – and, under handicap, did indeed raise a few friendly eyebrows in his climb to the top. I once remarked to a fellow writer that Alan was too busy living it up to fully realise his potential as an author. To which I received the answer, "The trouble with Alan, John, is that he is excessively concerned with the promotion of his public image."

Well, there are two ways of looking at that, and we can't have it both ways. In the drive to assert himself, to rid himself of that special sensitivity of the cripple (see the early pages of *In My Own Heart*), Marshall developed talents which meshed in well with the basics of writing: talents for rapidly making friends with complete strangers, for winning the confidence of people in trouble and desperate for a sympathetic and comprehending ear, for 'yarning' in the best Australian tradition, for public speaking from platforms large and small. It was the unabashed exploitation of these talents which gave him the richest of lives.

He loved an audience. The biggest I ever saw him face was at the International Conference of Writers for Peace, held at Weimar, East Germany, in 1964. He and I were part of an Australian delegation of eleven, and I can't recall any disputation over the question of who was to speak for us at the closing assembly. Statements had, of course, to be brief. Every

delegate was provided with headphones, receiving instant interpretation from a battery of linguists behind the scenes. I found it an almost emotional experience, as the diminutive figure from Australia came out from the wings and, in long swinging reaches of the crutches, made its way across stage to the microphone.

I've heard him at upwards of a score of small halls and schools around rural Australia, beefing out his two favorite reading pieces: "See the White Feather Fall," from *Ourselves Writ Strange*, and that dramatic accident in the machine shop – "the thump – and the thump – and the thump" – from *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*.

He would read aloud at the drop of a hat. "How I Met General Po," the story of his farting pony, must be one of the funniest ever written in this country. One night, as guest speaker at a well-attended meeting of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, he read it out with great gusto, farts and all, to a slightly bemused audience.

There was a day when, with a friend, I was visiting him at his home in Black Rock. Sitting in his artifact-packed study, conversation turned to English poetry. Coleridge was mentioned, and Alan pulled a book from the shelves, looked up "The Ancient Mariner" and, in a muted voice perfectly tuned to the sombre mood of that strange masterpiece, read out to us one of the early stanzas. He knew immediately that he'd struck a responsive chord in us, and went on to the very end. On that day "The Ancient Mariner" took on a new dimension for me.

On another occasion, when I was alone with him in the same room, he picked up a single sheet from the confusion of papers that always littered his desk. "Listen to this, John. I came across it yesterday. Somebody in Sydney sent it to me years ago. I had almost forgotten it." It was a copy of a letter written by a convict back in the early days of Governor Phillips. The man could hardly write or spell. The letter, which probably never got posted, was addressed to a sweetheart left behind in Ireland. Almost unschooled as the writer was, it was a most moving little document, a cry from the heart if ever I heard one. And Alan, well aware that the convict would never see his Irish colleen again, knew how to read it.

One memory which I particularly treasure is of a night in the Grampians. Once again we were in the big Bedford. Alan's two young daughters, Kathy and Jenny, were with us. Late in the afternoon he pulled off the Victoria Valley road into a small clearing close to the foot of the steep climb up to Mirranatwa Gap. Kathy and Jenny wanted a barbeque. It was a safe season, with the undergrowth still green, so, helped by the enthusiastic children, I gathered dead-wood from the surrounding scrub and soon had a roaring fire going. We grilled chops and sausages and boiled a pot of potatoes, followed by some of Elsie's apple tart and finishing up with billy tea and buttered toast. Then, lying around on ground-sheets and cushions brought out from the truck, we remained talking for hours amid the usual commotion of birds settling down at the end of the day. I can still capture the magic of that night, the rapt faces of the children in the firelight, the nostalgic smell of burning eucalypt wood, and all those well-known sounds coming to us out of the deep darkness: the surly rasping of a possum, two boobook owls calling to each other, and the grunting of a koala in a tree almost overhead.

And Alan's voice: his travels in the north, Arnhem Land, Melville Island, crocodile hunters, the big inland stations, feral buffaloes, horses, camels, and the Aboriginals, who took to him, danced for him, told him some of their myths, and gave him the name Gurrawilla. He could hold his own in any literary company but, for me anyway, he was never more entertaining than when he was on pure Australian: famous riders and buck-jumpers, great droving feats, tall timber and axemanship, the music of distant bullock-bells. He was at his best that night in the Grampians. Jenny was the first to keel over as sleep overcame her, so I carried her into the caravan and put her into the big bunk which she was sharing with Kathy and Dad. I myself was quite comfortable on the floor, but I lay awake for hours, well knowing that it was one of those times which Alan liked to categorise as 'moments,' experiences which we must be ready to grasp and hold on to

because they would probably never come our way again. One of those prolonged 'moments' of which I wrote in my story "The Big Drink." Yes, Alan was there too.

Much more will be written about Alan Marshall: his readiness to help young writers, his generosity in things material as well as his time, his concern with the plight of the Aboriginals, and his abiding conviction that only in a socialist form of society lay any prospect of mankind continuing to inhabit the planet Earth. At a more personal level: his sense of humor, ranging from the fey and subtly ironic to the rumbustious Rabelasian, his sartorial elegance, his many love affairs. He was a prolific letter-writer and, if you write letters, you must also receive them. I envy the biographer who one day is going to have access to the Marshall documents, now in the archives of the National Library at Canberra.

#### ALAN RUNNING

Reaching to festoon the distance  
you find your legs Alan  
running, running again:  
the weightless carriage of  
youth whose dream is  
beautiful beyond imagination  
and crutch real:  
while massive death now  
swerves towards the apex of this  
sensational triangulated vision.

CARRILLO GANTNER



# Alan Marshall's Last Interview

PETER BASTER

*The last interview given by Alan Marshall was tape-recorded by Peter Baster, to whom we are grateful for permission to publish these extracts.*

PB: *Alan, do you consider yourself old yet?*

AM: I consider myself the age of the person I am talking to. If I am talking to a little boy I feel that I am the same age as him.

PB: *Of the ages that you have passed through, which one was the most significant?*

AM: The most significant was when I was forty. I felt I was in my prime. I felt I would never know more than I knew then. Anything, I would have no new knowledge. The age of youth is the age when I suffered most. There is a stage in youth when you would like some girl to be in love with you. And that is the stage that I think is the most painful. I suffered during that stage.

PB: *You have jumped a lot of puddles – were they worth jumping?*

AM: Well no, they weren't. I jumped a lot of unnecessary puddles I think. I use the word 'cripple' with complete satisfaction, in that it describes what I am. There was a stage when I realised that I would never walk again. It was a terrible revelation and it hit me like a blow, because I had always been under the illusion that I could be cured. I had to tell myself that. "You will never walk again." I wouldn't believe it. I shrank from that.

PB: *Was this a puddle you didn't have to jump?*

AM: Yes. It worried me a lot. It was a painful period and it was a puddle I could not cope with.

PB: *Would you have been the writer that you are, if you had not been crippled.*

AM: My sister says with complete conviction, "No matter how you lived, you would have been a writer." But I have doubts whether I would have ever had made a writer. I began to realise that this is something that sensible men don't in, but suffering helps you to be a writer. When I have felt what I have been writing, then I have written better.

PB: *Have you achieved the target, the ambitions, that you set yourself years ago?*

AM: No, I haven't. I'll tell you the reason. I haven't discussed this but I always felt, when in the presence of writers, that they were *always* better than I was. I realise what was lacking in me was scope, a breadth of vision, and I used to put it this way in my mind. A writer is like a man going into a dark room. He can't see anything. Then he has got a torch and

flashes it on. The beam goes straight over to a mantelpiece and alights on a little brass god. Now that is a short story. That little god is illuminated, he sees everything about that little god and he can write about it. But if I was to go over to the window, pull up the blinds or switch on another light and illuminate the *room*, then that would be a bigger vision. A great writer would pull back the shades and look out over the top of the hill and see the world. I never had that type of mind. Tolstoy had it. I used to say to myself, "You will have to be content with being able to describe the isolated beam of light that is on that little god. That is your gift, to make that vivid. Be content with that. But resolve that you will do it very well."

PB: *Do you agree that you do it?*

AM: I agree that I am good at that. But my ambition would be to write a novel; I have never been able to do that. Every book that I have written has been episodic, it can be divided very easily into short stories, and basically it is a man telling yarns. When you analyse my books you will find that I am a yarn spinner disguised as a writer.

PB: *Alan, you had a very loving, caring, family and friends too, could you have achieved what you have without them?*

AM: No, never. It amazes me sometimes when I think of the help that I have received. And how people just at the moment when I need them most, come out of the darkness and say, "Hey, do that, do this, write this." I have been very fortunate in my life, I really had a happy life. Especially with my family. You can tell in *I Can Jump Puddles* how I worshipped my father.

Now when I was in the Soviet Union, I am talking about that because my books were very popular over there, and they gave me a dinner, one of the men at the head of the table got up and we all filled our glasses. He said, "I want to propose a toast. This is to the memory of Alan Marshall's father." And they all drank it. It had a terrific effect on me, because here were strangers in a foreign country drinking a toast to my father. It was an image that they were seeing, the image that I had created.

PB: *There are many young people today who are disadvantaged socially. Have you any advice for them?*

AM: Yes I have. The point is this. That as you view yourself, so will others view you. And I have thought you must have confidence in yourself. There is one thing that every man can

do, any person can do, however handicapped he is. If you can talk and you can read, you can travel the world. You can go with Scott to the Pole, you can go to the Equator, and you can see all the things that other men have seen, made more vivid by your imagination than by their words. Once a man loses his interest, he loses all that makes life worth living.

PB: *I particularly meant the young people who today are out of work and have very little chance of getting work, and also a lot of these kids don't have very loving or understanding families,*

AM: I feel terribly sorry for those young people. I think that there should be a meeting place where they can pour out their worries. I think I would start with a thing like that. That's totally inadequate, but when you have people that you can talk to about your worries they are not so heavy.

PB: *Would you say that there is any essential difference in the character of a city person to a country person?*

AM: One of the amusements of a country person is reading books or magazines, and he gets a wide knowledge by doing this. I think that in the end they are more likeable. A man born in the city, brushing shoulders with boys his own age, has got to fight his way clear, he has got to survive, and I think to survive in the city you have got to be tougher than to survive in the country. Now this toughness can breed an arrogance.

PB: *Your mother was born at Castlemaine, do you have any other association with Castlemaine?*

AM: My work was writing and many's the time I have camped at Castlemaine. At one period I camped for a year over the hill going to Maldon. I had a hard job to pull the caravan up Fogarty's Hill. But I got up there to the top and I camped there for over a year, writing *Ourselves Writ Strange*. I had an aptitude for picking horrible titles, so my publisher told me. *Ourselves Writ Strange*, was a quotation from a poem by Judith Wright, and told of my experiences with the Aborigines. Nobody would buy the book. Then another publisher said, "Let me change the title and I'll sell it." He called it *These Were My Tribesmen*, and it sold very well after that.

PB: *You play the mouth organ backwards I believe, how did that come about?*

AM: When I wanted to play the mouth organ I was friends with a fellow at school called Jigger McLeod. They called

him Jigger because he could play jigs. On his advice I bought a little single-reed mouth organ, put it into my mouth and started to learn. But I didn't know that I had put it in back to front. I learnt to play on it until I was with a very good player one day and he said, "Just a minute, what are you doing. I can't put my finger on it, but it sounds different. Play that bit again." I played it. He said, "Good heavens, you are playing it back to front."

PB: *And now they have printed instructions?*

AM: Yes, when I look at these strange diagrams it is just like I used to look at the Boys Own Annual. It was a big magazine that came out when I was a child and it had pictures of a man learning to swim, and this is how I learned to swim. The man in the diagrams was dressed in a striped swimsuit that came right below his knees, and he was standing with his arms straight out like that. Now with both arms straight out there was a curved bow from his finger tips going down like that. So I knew you had to do that. Well, I went out into the lake and there was what they call the holes. It was where the lake bank had gone back in a series of terraces which gradually had dried up. The terraces continued under the water and went on and on down to the bottom. Well, if anybody went over the first terrace and couldn't swim, they would drown. I knew that one day I would have to go into deep water, and I was practising in the shallows on the first terrace, and I went up and down and I thought, now I will have to go out into the deep. Now I was on my own. Nobody there except myself. I had come down in the wheelchair with handles. It was standing up there and I crawled into the water and I swam out until I reached the edge of the holes, that's the first terrace. I took a deep breath and I thought, *now*. I struck out and suddenly felt the trailing of water weeds just stroking my feet. I knew that it went down, down, and I could drown, I suddenly became panicky, and I thrashed the water. Then I pulled myself together and thought, "Now you have got to swim," and I went slowly on. I swam out, right round in a half circle and came back, and I kept going evenly, and I got out on the bank and I could swim.

PB: *How do you feel about being interviewed?*

AM: When you first interviewed me I was hard to stop, I enjoyed myself because I knew what I was talking about. I'm not sure of anything now. I'm not quite certain about life or death or politics. The older I get the less certain I become.



GRAHAM ROWLANDS

## On Manifold's Selection

*A discussion of John Manifold's On My Selection (Bibliophile Books, 68 Grenfell Street, Adelaide, \$6.95).*

I prefer to write on poetry in historical and biographical contexts – the context of its origins. David Malouf has pre-empted my preferred approach in the case of John Manifold (“John Manifold: Life and Work,” *Overland* 73). Although I disagree with much of Malouf’s version of Manifold, refutation is impossible in a short article. Suffice to summarise Malouf’s Manifold and outline an alternative. This should serve as an introduction to controversial aspects of Manifold’s poetry. For the rest, I concentrate on a handful of his best poems. While achieving their goals they also pass every relevant aesthetic test.

Manifold was born in 1915 into an established pastoral family, Malouf tells us, but became a rigid Communist and later an officer in the British Army. Different kinds of elitist camaraderie replaced the first. His Byronic romanticism, albeit in set forms, parallels his other elitisms and rigidities. His celebration of bushrangers is backward-looking, mindless and sentimental. Although he’s capable of praising both Stalin and weaponry, his best (and fine) poems express humility and sympathy for human limitations. From 1949 he’s welcomed only disciples to his company, preserving the form of both the party and the army. Everyone is the poorer.

Perceptive. In part, unarguable. The main problem, however, is that Malouf’s *ideal* Manifold mightn’t be capable of writing anything. He may be a flexible university tutor, having hidden his fencing sword and Bren gun. But I wonder whether he’d have made much of a soldier against Fascism – particularly one who can write about soldiering. Moreover, I find it quite unremarkable that an ex-soldier would love weapons. It’s possible to loathe Fascists without being a Communist, of course, but would “Garcia Lorca Murdered” be so strong without the god that doesn’t seem to have failed the poet? This poem that refers to Fascists as “Black, and lecherous for blackness” starts with the wonderful introduction to blackness, “Night by nightfall more benighted.”

It’s hard for Malouf’s Manifold to do anything right. When he’s a Communist he’s elitist. When he’s deeply Australian, he’s only a bushranger’s fellow traveller. I see the poet’s obsession with bushrangers as rebellion against his pastoral family. And even if all the bushrangers *were* gangsters, does Australia have a better revolutionary tradition?

Most importantly, Malouf stresses the humility in Manifold’s best work. True. But not the whole story. Malouf implies that the best literature is written from humility. If that were the case, where would we place satire, social protest and

didactic poetry generally? What would happen to all those personally demanding odes and lyrics? And poor old Shakespeare’s *sonnets*!

Specifically, I think Malouf’s wrong on this crucial point about “The Tomb of Lieutenant John Learmonth, AIF,” Manifold’s best known poem. We can’t know whether or not the poet would have written this masterpiece without also writing some arrogant poems. What we can know, however, is that “Learmonth” is *tempered by* humility while at the same time not being humble. As I’ll try to show later, it *has* to assert and make claims. It *has* to instruct. The poem begins:

This is not sorrow, this is work: I build  
A cairn of words over a silent man

It doesn’t begin, “I’ll *try* to build.” And if it ends with Learmonth having filled Manifold with affection for the human race, the poet still feels the need to instruct the “Mountains of Crete” to remember Learmonth.

I’m for choosing critically, then, among Manifold’s poems; not for obviating the choice. He aimed to write clear, accessible and often witty poems. Here, I’m more concerned about recurring banalities, trivialities, archaisms and bad rhymes than about his endorsement of Stalin and “Mad Dog” Morgan.

Manifold’s best poems are intellectual arguments about other people or things where emotions or emotional reverberations are understood by the distanced (but not uninvolved) poet. His presence is evident in the rhymes and sequence of statements. Poems are flawed when the basic argument won’t carry the material or when the material won’t carry the argument. They’re flawed when the tension between the intellectual and emotional breaks down and when the rhyme scheme fails to express the mode of distancing.

The flaws at the edges of his poetic range must have stopped him from going beyond. Arrogance? No. Rigidity? Possibly. But why not accepting one’s limits? After all, he wrote whole poems about that. I’ve no idea why he omitted “Ration Party” from *On My Selection*. In endorsing Malouf’s praise for this poem, I note the unconscious irony of a critic condemning poetic rigidity while praising a poem about how liberty was won by army discipline.

“Learmonth” is, of course, about Learmonth. It’s also about Manifold – not just Manifold the poet writing his eulogy, but Manifold’s background, Geelong Grammar School, soldiering values and special heroes. Learmonth is

compared favourably with swagmen and bushrangers. The “old heroic virtues” of rural tradition are even seen as general, “Australian blood where hot and icy meet.”

However, Learmonth’s “bitter joy” in facing death is:

courage chemically pure, uncrossed  
With sacrifice or duty or career

He possessed army discipline without the army. The argument, then, moves from background and politics to the best way to die. For Learmonth this meant refusing to submit to overall muddle, defeat and pointlessness. Albert Camus would have enjoyed the poem. Moreover, it could be seen as a reply to Macbeth’s “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,” speech which occurs, of course, *after* military defeat. And isn’t it as much about the heroism of a *non-hero* as Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*? If so, that leaves food for thought about bushrangers too – no matter how unfashionable. A great poem, I think. Certainly a great *statement of a poem*.

The political ballad “Makhno’s Philosophers” uses the poet’s knowledge of philosophy and Russian history to tell the story of the bandit-anarchist, Makhno, who spares some unemployed philosophers during the Russian Civil War. In an otherwise hostile environment:

Symposia were held, whereat the host  
(Taught by Hegelians of the Left)  
In stolen vodka would propose a toast  
To Proudhon’s dictum: Property is Theft!

Eventually, Makhno is caught. The philosophers return to work, trying to hide their bandit pasts. Just as they’d longed for and accidentally found a suitable environment for thought, however, they now long for revolution. Or so the poet speculates.

It’s funny and clear – despite one or two difficult references. Moreover, it’s so perfectly pitched for its deeply conservative Australian audience that it should be seen as a revolutionary poem *in the Australian context*. Preserving apparently irrelevant culture is a pre-condition for thought leading to revolutionary action.

The poem’s verifiable location in Ukrainian history doesn’t exempt it from location in Australian history. Expressing political hope in the late 1960s, its genesis was Manifold and his disciples preserving culture at North Wynnum throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. The tone and narrative form prevent a reader’s possible over-reaction. No need to call the Special Branch to the bayside suburb! The poet was well aware that at least half of his potential audience were to find political extremism in a Gough Whitlam.

New poems comprise half of *On My Selection*. Despite a savage re-writing of Blake’s “Jerusalem” to account for the Arab-Israeli conflict, most of the new poems aren’t concerned with war or revolution. They’re lighter pieces. Like much of Manifold’s writing, however, the best are lighter pieces with bite. And they tend to be about ageing and death – during peacetime. (Not, at any rate, during a *world war*.)

“Don’t Tell Mrs Bennett” isn’t a lyric. It’s a self-deprecating “address” on age differences:

When you were nothing, I was thirty;  
Now you are thirty, I’m a wreck  
Of sixty-five.

But there’s a bonus, “Having you looking now like you.” The “wreck” is a wreck; not an agonized cry. A stylish poem.

If “Mrs Bennett” is about ageing, “Death in the Old Men’s Home” is obviously about death. The poet holds off the emotional charges by writing about someone else, real or imagined. There’s empathy; the short lines and amusing rhymes, however, keep the subject at arm’s length. A perfect poem of its kind. Not a *Lear* of old age; but a “Learmonth.” And probably saying as much about Manifold as “Learmonth.” The poet thought that “Learmonth,” written in a war situation, *was* going to be his last poem; perhaps, in peacetime, he might *choose* this recent poem as his ideal last poem:

His grip grew lighter,  
Till of some blight  
He died, poor blighter.

*Graham Rowlands is a freelance writer and poet living in Adelaide.*

### ON A PANEGYRIC OCCASION FOR JOHN MANIFOLD, A.M.

*Remembering Our Celebrating the Beauty  
of a Young Woman Present.*

We may never see her again, the  
surrounds of yesterday’s garden. Both  
there in beauty for us. Our eyes  
took pleasure from them – only our  
eyes. Flesh lay no claims to her touch,  
no intimate scene for a room’s  
screening of selves. We aped no rights  
to her, or to that beautiful  
garden except our eyes’ treat in a  
free country; so we could say to her  
“You are a beautiful woman,”  
fenced as we were from her bloom by  
our age: a safe fence within which,  
yesterday, we viewed the garden.

JOHN BLIGHT



STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH

# swag

Just thirty years ago a slim, sixteen-page magazine called *Overland* appeared for the first time. Although printed on newsprint, it had an elegant cover, distinguished by a vigorous sketch by Noel Counihan of two diggers off overland to make their fortunes. Nobody's made their fortunes from *our* overlanding, but we have nearly a hundred issues up our sleeves. And I reflect how pleased we would have been in 1954 to know that thirty years later we would still be appearing, never stronger in support and – I hope – in achievement. The original motto still stands, adapted from Joseph Furphy: "Temper democratic, bias Australian." The original editorial statement still stands also: "It will aim high, but has no exclusive or academic standards of any kind."

On our first editorial page we had messages of support from a grand company: Mary Gilmore, Vance Palmer, William Hatfield, Clive Turnbull, Frank Dalby Davison, Clem Christesen, Guy Howarth and Alan Marshall. Clive Turnbull warned that "Overland will have as tough a task as the people who coined that word." Frank Davison said "There appears to be room always for a new journal of opinion provided it has a character of its own." Alan Marshall said that he hoped the new magazine would get "a hand-out from every good Australian."

Well, it hasn't quite happened that way – yet – but we're not complaining. We've had magnificent and, I like to think, unparalleled support from writers and readers over those thirty years, and I'm continually getting letters from names that are today well-known, thanking *Overland* for support in their earlier years.

Our first feature article was, appropriately enough, by Brian Fitzpatrick who, although he has been dead nearly twenty years, was honored the other day at an enormous dinner of some 320 people in Melbourne, organised by the Victorian Council for Civil Liberties. Brian wrote on "The Writer at Bay" – it was the peak of the Cold War, and he dealt with attempts to suppress dissident writers and their work in Australia. We published John Morrison's waterfront story "Nine O'Clock Finish," a poetic exchange between David Martin and A.D. Hope, Nettie Palmer and Katharine Susannah Prichard on Henry Handel Richardson, and a spirited article by John Manifold on Banjo Paterson: "I can think of no other poet, even among the Communists, who has been so con-

scious of the economic basis." I see that we were also complaining that each issue cost almost two shillings to produce, while we sold it at one shilling. Our readers of today will be familiar with the drift of that argument!

All in all it wasn't a bad start. I'm very proud of the fact that in the *next* issue we printed a comment on the first issue by Miles Franklin, written just before she died: "Today came a most interesting magazine, alive in every pore. That is the way to do it when the population is not big enough to support pompous glossy affairs full of rhetoric, notes on minor issues and sawdust. I shall subscribe to *Overland* if I live."

## OVERLAND

*Incorporating The Realist Writer*

NUMBER ONE, SPRING 1954

ONE SHILLING



Off to the diggings, 1854.

Drawing by N.C.

### WRITING BY:

*Nettie Palmer, John Morrison, Katharine Susannah Prichard, John Manifold, David Martin, Brian Fitzpatrick, Senator Donald Cameron, Elizabeth Vassilieff, Eric Lambert, Professor A. D. Hope and others.*

We've arranged no great celebrations for this thirtieth anniversary, no fireworks on the Yarra, no special issue of the magazine, not even a mutual-admiration drink for the editors. Instead we have been devoting all the time we can spare this

year to celebrate the anniversary in the best way it can be celebrated: by producing better issues, and by building subscriptions. And this is a form of celebration in which all our readers can play their part.

We publish Iris Milutinovic's moving story of her mother in this issue. In 1978 Iris published that splendid and important book, *Talk English Carn't Ya*, based on the experiences in Australia of her Yugoslav husband. At a women writers' conference in Melbourne not long ago, Iris was on her feet talking about her problems with the book. "What's it called, what's it called?" cried an impatient woman delegate somewhere behind her. Iris turned and said "*Talk English carn't Ya?*" Well, the conference fell to bits in two ways: first, when the lady so addressed sprang to her feet and, appealing to the Chairwoman, said "I have never been so insulted in my life – what's wrong with the way I speak?"; secondly, when Iris took time off to explain to the conference just how the misunderstanding had arisen. Iris, the most kindly of souls, told me afterwards that she really felt terribly sorry for the woman.

Much talk these days about the Australia Council, its organisation and its future. I've seen the Australia Council go from a modest enterprise that was supposed to facilitate the work of the small working group, or 'boards,' that actually handled contact with discrete sections of the arts world, to a monstrous enterprise which, like so many others one could name (starting with the field of education) has as its prime object the maintenance of its own institutional logic and existence. The same thing, of course, has happened with UNESCO.

The sad mistake, as I see it, was in the days of Whitlam centralism (why blame Gough only?) to establish this institution under the one roof in Sydney. (It would also have been a mistake to establish it under the one roof in Melbourne.) This has not only created an appalling superstructure weighing down the arts in Australia but has encouraged the individual 'boards,' once modest enterprises genuinely devoted to spreading the butter on the people's bread, to create bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake. To take one small instance, the Literature Board recently demanded from the literary magazines the submission of *two* financial statements each year, one in December, one in June. Knowing the trouble it takes to get our books in order and adequately vetted once a year, I vehemently protested. The Auditor-General, I was assured, wanted it, and had to have it. I told the Literature Board that I would not, indeed did not have the time to, obey. Silence. Yesterday a letter saying that it was all right, I needn't provide two financial statements after all. (I wonder if other literary editors protested? Knowing the gutlessness of Australians when faced with authority's demands, I doubt it.) So – a victory if you like, but much time wasted which should have been spent on meeting the needs of writers and readers.

I shall waste further time by stating my solution to the Australia Council situation. Work towards reducing the Australia Council's own administrative apparatus to a mere facilitative core, and put these people in a few rooms in Canberra. Having done this, put the 'boards' back where they belong, in the community itself. Put the Community Arts board in Perth, the Literature Board in Hobart, the Visual Arts board in Brisbane – any way you like. Rotate them if you like from time to time. This way they work closely and intimately with the real world, and to each new centre they draw from time to time all the travelling salesmen, the board members and others who orbit each board, who themselves will benefit from the experience and will give value in return. In other words, don't try to fight the distance and isolation that will always be part of Australia, but work with it, make a virtue of it. Any takers? I think not. Vested interests have already gone too far.

Overland is running a major subscription campaign at the moment. We are offering new subscribers, as a free gift, a copy of Ian Turner's posthumous book *Room for Manoeuvre*, a collection of his articles on Australian society, history, sport and play, including the famous "Barassi Memorial Lecture." Published a couple of years ago at \$15.95, but poorly publicised and distributed, *Room for Manoeuvre* never achieved the success it deserved. Indeed one leading Australian publisher called it "The book I would most have liked to have published."

So we have bought all remaining copies and, as I have said, are offering them as an inducement to new subscribers. In addition, however, we will send a free copy both to any existing subscriber who introduces a new subscriber, and of course to that new subscriber also. (Please *mention* this offering if taking advantage of it.) Now, one existing subscriber has protested that we are rewarding *new* subscribers with a free copy but leaving old faithfuls out in the cold. So, if anyone who is already a subscriber wants a copy of Ian Turner's splendid book, we will send them one, not free, of course, but at the highly favorable concession price of \$5, post free.

In our last issue I mentioned the possibility of an Alan Marshall memorial fund. I have no further news on this at the moment, but I am in the position to say that an Alan Marshall Fellowship is now being set up, under the aegis of Overland. This will provide, for a selected writer from any area of literature, the use of a pleasant seaside house at Sorrento, Victoria, for three months of each year (probably around May to July), together with a stipend of \$3000. Applications for the first Alan Marshall Fellowship, for 1985, will not be called until later this year, but I should be happy, now, to hear from any interested in applying.



## SUNSET, BONDI

Night is a cloudy curtain  
Falling with a show of  
Reluctance over the beach;  
Tin cans, technology's insects,  
Stick their snouts out of the  
Sand. All flesh is not grass  
Here, where communities of  
Laughter and intimacy  
Spring out of the crackling air.  
Aeroplanes move like crawling  
Stars into darkness.  
People drink in here a curious  
Shelter or play casual chess,  
Or peacefully caution their  
Children, while the sea laps  
Its deep heart asleep. The  
Safety flags fold in on  
Themselves, clasping salt,  
Preparing color for another sun.  
Scott Fitzgerald would not  
Be unexpected here, walking slowly,  
Composing another letter  
To his daughter, trying to  
Decide between bravery  
And bravado, the lighted hotels  
In the background a perfect  
Landscape. Here we sit,  
Perhaps stereotyped as lovers  
Must be, and convince ourselves  
That each love is as different  
As each wave, and know  
That if we sit mid-way between  
City and sea, we can never  
Drown.

SHANE McCAULEY

## BACKYARD LESSON

*(For Kevin)*

I show him rocks  
to feel the hardness of inanimate shapes  
and he touches the earth in darkness.

I show him a circle  
and he measures the circumference of his head,  
the tin man spinning in the galaxies.

I show him leaves  
and he sees the stars sparkling, wink  
at his sleeping face, a boy in the moon  
who has no imagination!

SILVANA GARDNER

## THE DAUGHTER

At twelve  
her ugliness became public property.

Her double chin began to sink into  
the vile eruptions on her chest.  
The whole leering world  
saw her round-shouldered need  
to feel smaller than her mother  
for a few years more.

The handsome father  
liked dainty women.  
Bewildered and embarrassed  
he invested in a Lady's Education.  
She learned to sit, stand, cross legs,  
smile and compensate for shortcomings.

She finished,  
a brittle  
fat-faced hunchback with big tits  
who could walk across a room  
with a book on her head.

KRISTIN HENRY

## AUTISTIC CHILD

For a time absorbed completely  
in an empty cardboard box;  
what does he see  
inside?

Always to be  
within walls?  
Unable to escape  
through heart or word?

Flat eyes watch,  
hint disturbingly  
at perception.

MICHAEL DUGAN

## BEGINNINGS, AUTUMN

the young people in the park  
have made their anger public

he assaults her  
words, blunt instruments

break open the silences that surround them  
she pulls away, spits

he picks up something  
dark & dull, strikes her

she hits back  
he hits her

she throws herself to the ground  
he covers her with his tears

her tears  
they feel the hollowness of their bodies

the stinging of their flesh  
empty resolutions, the afternoon drags

we watch the final scene  
assured of frailness

of vulnerability  
& tread over the fallen leaves

that surround them  
that surround us

RORY HARRIS

## WATER REPORT, SYDNEY

*An arm was discovered floating in  
a fish tank at Coogee Aquarium.*

Can walls talk?  
When the pathologist disconsolately  
placed his words in formalin  
and meticulously peeled off his  
laboratory jacket,  
the sky twitched like a kinky strand  
from the skein around the boats,  
in and out, in and out,  
at Sydney Harbor.

*A slice of life he must write.  
The noses against the pane  
are meticulously counted,  
the rubber stamp's indelible ink runs over  
the skin, University of Sy . . .  
At Coogee Aquarium  
an arm was discovered;  
tattooed, it had voyaged  
in the stomach of a shark.*

It floats up in formalin,  
slowly, to the surface of the eye.

Who cries out in the night for this arm?  
Bondi Beach broods the shark-thick  
waters. A pyjama-girl languidly  
tries to find her grave.  
The old man with a cane  
can switch eyes quick.  
The air flogs the trees,  
Typhoon Tracy awakens  
in a whirlpool.  
Bits of a life ripple in the depths.  
Identification is being established.

HEIDI VON BORN

## BREAKING DROUGHT

My bones are cursed by centuries  
Of Scottish mist and wild Atlantic gale;  
So now in this dry land they still remember  
In pain those far off days when never a tree  
Could flourish, though black rock  
Came gold with lichen on the southern steeps.  
Small wonder that I long for the odd flood year  
When all is bloom and paper daisies snow  
From beery Bourke to mutton-chop Balranald.

MARY FINNIN



## INTERRUPTED PLEASURE

First Summer after turning eleven  
school just resumed dawdled  
going home stopped in shade of  
Methodist church wattle trees  
stuffed my mouth with sticky  
quick-gathered gum

Suddenly surrounded  
giggling girls grabbed arms  
hanky-tied them behind a tree  
undid braces poked and played  
pressed lips against  
gum-dribbling mouth

Virginity retained  
needs unsatisfied they  
picked up cases  
cast over-shoulder  
'don't you tell' threats

Decency re-buttoned  
incident erased  
found great gold lump  
lasted all the way home

CHARLES RIMINGTON

## DESERT ANGELS

I saw them from a plane  
The way the ancient dreamers  
Must have seen them in another time  
When their spirits rose  
And travelled through their land;  
Mile-long angels with bannered wings,  
Almost hidden by their enormity,  
Sleeping, spread heraldic on the desert floor  
Outlined with the round black spots of distant shrub.

The hard winds that fiercely tend their sleep  
Had burnished their vast feathers ochre and argent tipped,  
Emblazoning them with wind blown arabesques.  
Sable and cracked from centuries of watching.  
Their huge sad faces are dried out pools  
Flared round with dark gold haloes of sunburned sand.  
But in the shadows swim the giant green eyes  
Following our flight with strange intent.

I saw a distant figure spread with clouds.  
I saw his eyes grow cold and pure  
Arising, streamered, filling all the sky  
Bearing gonfalones in the rosetained heights.  
He saw us pass and spiralled gently down to rest.  
Whose dreams are guarded, blazing still,  
What messages from other realms?  
The desert is the angel's sleeping ground.

NADINE AMADIO

## THE BOX

Today my armpit smells  
like the old black box  
my Mother kept her linen in

(and before that my Grandmother  
used it for potaoes)

it was wonderful to lift that lid  
my brothers hid in there  
on wet days

the woman who minded us in the afternoons  
had a whole ceiling of boxes  
yes truly  
strung up in a net  
hundreds of many sized boxes  
she kept them simply for the children  
I took visitors in to see them

don't worry  
I realise a box is also the name  
for a female part  
we can't help that  
that's the way some men are

I would like to have that black box  
probably lost in some move somewhere  
it's a wonder we didn't lose a child  
in a move  
I think my Father might not have minded much

(trails of cotton reels and drawers  
left behind)

we are always going somewhere  
boxes piled up in a waggon  
in the case of my Grandmother  
a truck in my Mother's  
and for me a van  
last time I left I took a suitcase  
and finally of course  
I'll leave in a box won't I.

KATE LLEWELLYN

## OLD POSSUM

*A recent report in a South Australian newspaper indicated that an old man had been living the life of a recluse in the bush beyond Renmark for many years. He apparently shuns all human contact and attempts to contact him have proved futile.*

somewhere an old man slides into the river  
a bucket in his hand  
dipping the rusty pail he disturbs the sky  
watching his face flutter  
he ignores what has been changing  
and sniffs the wind  
soporific after all this time  
on something he cannot recall  
he wets the cracks around his eyes  
a fortnight since he had a fox or wild cat  
the water cold  
he knows the way it eddies  
shivers in the water-grass  
winter leans his way again  
alone  
and he has forgotten why  
only aware of movement in the grass  
the gelid river glides away  
he watches for the stir again  
cat-like for that motion  
against the vagaries of nature  
he creases his eyes against the bank  
his bucket poised drips back the stream  
he senses something close  
a diary stolen from his tree  
the hollow logs and waterways disturbed  
corner him here at last  
he lets the bucket go  
plunging away  
and stands akimbo  
there is a light rain glistening  
on his old felt cap  
he waits  
wanting the second  
poised on a creature's panic  
breathless  
and in a moment he is gone  
somewhere after what he threw away  
just as the rustle in the trees  
precipitated shouting  
with a big man in a brown coat waving  
beside a woman in red and green  
a black box pressed against her face

JEFF GUESS

## A PERSON TALKS TO HIMSELF

I throw up the slivers of the heart to  
the beating of the clock ; night  
becomes a detailed inebriation a matter of fact  
a point beyond nihilism ; my wish for survival  
is a different story . You are her  
i want to be that woman too . Presuming you are bits  
of everything / i suck  
on a menthol cigarette ; the hours & the clock  
thump like clods of constant mud in the arteries of sleep .  
I wonder about this function / sleep ; dreamstates &  
the like/ humanity at peripheral knowledge / voices  
that push the mind over tumbling it over threads of  
music & mathematics ; the mind unyarning itself  
the quiet way  
it retreats from consciousness / one hesitates  
to leave the pulse ; identification & a pale odor are one  
& the same on the streets where you journey .  
The moon's half grin up in the sky / like a kite ;  
you are making a kite / shaped like the moon . What you have  
created is a panorama of aestheticism / i have no quarrel  
with your hats & hairpieces you' ll find no argument here  
just a secure homage in sticks & sand / moving  
in all terrain ; you are moving in all terrain  
your perfume in the raindarkness  
in the eyeslit the sinews of hair  
like inksquirts of beard down my neck .

than a continent ;  
The house  
is getting larger  
the red earth of  
hands glow  
under the horizon of the  
windowsill .



You shake me up in the middle of the night's claw  
 give me this your vision a murdered whale's stomach cut out  
 in mid sentence instead 'get me this a drink of water' / you ask  
 about the dead souls in the water ; what we leave behind  
 or what evolves into the moisture of daily heavens / Christ  
 & his feasible story " take this bread & eat me . Take this  
 wine & drink me . " I too am just as bewildered  
 as you ; exactly  
 how did Noah drop off the kangaroo  
 the wombat the laughing jackass the dingo ?  
 A dog walks ;  
 a dog is walking along the street  
 its claws like the ticking of a clock . The clock beats  
 you breathe  
 deep ; it is happening in other places / a symposium  
 of anecdote / observation / indulgence / fear & inscape / clocks  
 falling off their mantle ; hearts faltering .  
 A schism eventuates . ( anyone could visit here / to this room / a  
 landscape of teabags . ) What is surely the siege mentality ;  
 persons unknown blaming their farts on known persons .  
 In the lounge room are weapons of survival  
 a 6b pencil & a clock with metal ears .  
 I stare into the dawn . Into the dim gaslight of  
 stars / the trees in the wind swordfighting each other .

I resume  
 the many politics of existence ; the ones we walk thru  
 with bits of dumbness & bits of hate ( how by the open window  
 you read the weather report ) . These are the particles of wisdom  
 of which we inherit ; the sun is familiar / it is the manner  
 thru space that i envy  
 its affluence of heat i celebrate .

Vanity is not linked to this / i want to declare  
 i was part of that city  
 that perturbed adolescence of the sixties / i didn't realise  
 this personality was waiting ; tightsagged / aching  
 moaning  
 eyebrows like a centipede . I wake with a drain  
 of the bones an ache in every vertebrae / the clock  
 going for its life ; every morning . You and those inkwell eyes .  
 You rant at me pulling to your breasts the clock  
 pulling at it like a grenade / " Be in it " you say  
 " up to your neck & up to date like a pig  
 in shit  
 make the conversation articulate . "  
 ( An old man stands at the front gate  
 carrying a pumpkin under his arm . ) I take this image.  
 I take it seriously . I place it in the poem .  
 I notice you have rubbed yourself down with orange juice.  
 I notice many things ; & neglect everything .  
 You are her . I want to be that woman too.  
 You  
 & footballers & headless chickens  
 follow the same rule / go until you drop .  
 We did not own possessions in this city / shifted  
 the furniture ; that's all we did .

The clock . Louder than the traffic .

ROBERT DRUMMOND

## ARCHITECT

### *The Architect's Wife*

A rotary hoist in the front garden  
 and he's an architect. She's glad  
 he's rarely home, has even learnt to pardon  
 a plaster Atlas staggering sad

under a crushing ball among the ferns.  
 She founders over broken toys,  
 a rusted cycle in the grass, and yearns  
 for order. They are childless. It annoys

the neighbors when she nightly sings  
 "O neighbors, neighbors, I am growing old.  
 My husband built a house and gave me rings,  
 The house is dark, my child within grows cold . . ."

### *The Architect*

She always wanted it, that line.  
 Against my will I put it in  
 to please her. Things were fine  
 till Mum gave us that statue. Always thin

I couldn't bear the load. I stayed out late,  
 came home to find her tripping and falling  
 in grass I couldn't tend. My mate  
 was heard crying and angrily calling

about some child and a house. We had  
 no kids. I really don't know why  
 she made a fuss and it's too bad  
 to think the neighbors heard the cry . . .

### *The Neighbors*

We don't know why  
 our neighbors cry . . .

FAY ZWICKY

## WORLD ECONOMIC RECOVERY

the 1st woman  
in the 99 year ol' History  
of the  
Melbourne Stock Exchange:  
LYN HEAP  
stood on the floor  
of the Exchange  
(alongside about a 100 shirt-sleeved males)  
& hollered  
"as loud as a fishmonger's wife  
at the market"  
to the "chalkies" running up  
& down  
the catwalk  
for an END to the "recession"  
the voices  
(on the floor)  
reaching a crescendo  
around 3pm.

my desk calendar  
tells me  
there are 362 shopping days left  
till Xmas  
& that money, like manure,  
isn't worth a c  
unless i spread it round  
cos the single most important turbine  
in the world: the U.S.\$  
(on which  
my food & rent depend)  
is gearing up for  
"economic World recovery"  
& unless i spend  
i won't enjoy

## A GALLERY OF MIRRORS

When General MacArthur stayed in Melbourne, his habit was mirrors. He could be seen to take a level look at himself, to search the assembly of faces behind him, for one who could seek out and state his truth. Every man needs his Messiah, thought MacArthur; every man needs a montage of faces and incident for his biography, and mirrors in a strange city can never be denied. They will be honest with you. They will glint significance at appropriate moments. They will flash sunlight back at you. They will provide a nimbus when needed, when confidence most (if ever it does) declines. In Melbourne, MacArthur stopped thinking defeat, began braggadocio in front of glass. I will, returned

Easter  
as an  
"added bonus"  
to Truth, Justice, & the  
American-way:  
"Sieg Heil!"  
tours  
of the Exchange are open to  
the public  
starting today  
at 10 am  
(till the 27th)

but today  
is the 3rd of January  
1984  
& the preserve  
of your average Joe Blow, Missus & Co.,  
is the beach  
at St Kilda, Brighton,  
or Sorrento  
where you can bung-on  
a gas-mask  
& rummage about  
the plastic-bottles,  
cans,  
½ submerged cars, & the  
effluent  
that stimulates growth  
in seaweed  
on the foreshore

EXTRA! EXTRA!  
LILLE QUILTS TEST CRICKET  
!OH, !OH, !OH

T.T.O.

the mirrors. I will, practised the accents. I will, the mimeographs applauded in reams. Machines and mirrors puff men up, let light decide on the facets it will celebrate. MacArthur looked into the mirrors of Melbourne, liked what he saw, alleviated for a while that city's dismal property. His greatness had the assurance of himself, and he could see, in mirrors, greatness returned. The bevelled edge of fashionable glass could be ignored, where distortions crept and splintered and spun. Edges revealed the planes and thinness of make-believe, the sideways creep of charlatans, the pearl uncertainty of words and truth and light. General MacArthur passed, then, into his glory, and Melbourne grasped the image, for a while.

JOHN GRIFFIN



## ZOO WALK

The satin bower bird  
gleams like a cushion  
in a dream forest  
and rushes round  
getting sticks  
to build a tiny love verandah  
so much work (he's a real believer)  
I am shy and being watched

we walk down into the aquarium  
here the puzzles of the heart  
pump like gorgeous fish  
among the coral and the rocks  
and weed  
don't show me snakes  
I know they're beautiful  
but I'm half bent from love  
and trying to look normal  
the giraffe baby collapses on its knees  
as I would like to do

here it is love's Zoo  
I'm included

flamingos hang on pink string  
wrapped up like feather parcels  
a present sent by chance

is it true it's chance  
what chance brought us here  
your finger in my waistband  
tugs like a little tune  
you can't forget  
if you pull me back again  
you will see my face  
and know the secret of the pit  
where monkeys climb on bare brown trees  
and stare  
and do not speak to you or me

KATE LLEWELLYN

## WHAT A DRAG

What a drag  
In my Freudian slip  
A tampon wedged firmly in my anus

A night as cold as the moon  
As drizzling as my clinging dress

I walk like scissors  
Sheer to the waist

Cut across the park  
The slippery slide  
And I'm on the monkey bars  
I'm upside down  
And a boy can see my knickers

I blow him a kiss  
But I think he wants me to blow something else

He has his whistle out  
And we're playing football

And it's raining like an orgasm  
We're falling into puddles  
Pushing  
Kissing  
Holding the man

MICHAEL GOODISON

## SAVE THE OWLS

there is a new nest of owls  
below the projected water-line  
of the near completed soon to be  
dam-flooded valley

whose soft fringed flight-feathers  
won't make the dead-line of July  
although their plight  
got headlines in the evening press

and a television team this morning  
has created in the public mind  
a sense of shame intense  
but likely to be short lived

the company has had slight regard  
for 'issues' in the past  
the union's hands are hampered  
by industrial legalities

and the conservation lobby care  
but lack the staff and funds  
for long drawn out campaigns  
although they're selling badges

that only leaves the owls  
nestling unaware precariously  
above the rising tide of mediocrity  
soft talons that know not what they kill

JEFF GUESS

## THE CALL

Still, I lay awake in the dark . . .  
I thought pretty lusts had some ugly results  
and that the world's bright trash was occult.

And carnage steals us from the eye of summer,  
we cannot explain; but sometimes  
the cockatoos are upset,  
the flock miss one of their number.

And still I lay awake in the dark,  
that was where I would have to fall –  
out there somewhere in consequences,

in a desert become too hostile for survival;  
if by weapons, disease, or auto design,  
a cipher subjected to die for enormous grudges.

A cigarette answered that I was alive  
where it seemed I had waited for centuries  
becoming sure the dark itself was active.

And counting, too, a propensity to misfortune  
back to great-grandfather's funny ways.  
He worshipped a spurious architect of nothing

and walked on his hands on ordinary sundays.  
But He who drained the cup once for all  
and did so under hell's lowest stair,

Christ called me through from the other  
side of lightning  
Now I would seek out a comelier praise;  
then I felt like one in a room of crimes

as the blind rattles up, and the light crashes in.

ROBERT HARRIS



# The Man from Telecom

BRUCE GRANT

Waiting for the man from Telecom, Sheila read the Age with her usual off-handedness, as if nothing in it could attract her attention or, if it did, that it would annoy her. She flipped over the pages at arm's length. Her mind was on other things, for instance Donald's behavior. He had been annoyed last night, which was so unusual that she had been forced into an eerie silence.

"Well, I'm not sure that I give a damn, frankly," he had said, about the impossibility of getting away this winter.

She had looked up sharply, expecting, in spite of his tone of voice, to find him glancing sideways with that peculiarly sweet smile with which he often made light of disappointment. But his face in profile was flushed and the set of his jaw even a little grim. He stared at a copy of the Bulletin he was reading.

She had never seen him in this mood before and she was intrigued. He put down the magazine and appeared to be concentrating with difficulty on something neither distant nor close. She was used to what she called his 'way-away' look, which meant that he was dreaming about a project. This was different. Almost sad.

They had settled down later to watch a television film. It was a 1930s revival which they both enjoyed, and he seemed his usual amusing self afterwards.

Donald was such an extraordinarily light person, she reflected, that no mood could depress him for long. They had never quarreled. It would have meant – he would have said – taking themselves too seriously.

Even when he had felt strongly about a public issue, like the demolition of old buildings in Collins Street, he had been imperturbable, arguing with a civilised assurance that made his opponents seem crude and selfish.

That was why, she realised, she had changed her name.

He had never said that he disliked Deirdre; indeed, he had once said that it was basically a strong name. But in a pleasant, impartial way he had placed it with other basically strong names like Judy and Rita which, in a burst of inspired flippancy, he had somehow managed to suggest were names chosen for children by parents who had wanted to go on the stage. Utterly without malice, he made no judgement of the talents of the thwarted parents and he was, in particular, nice to her own parents and impeccable in public about them. Yet she knew that the name did not fit his mildly insistent scheme of things; it represented an aspiration which just might irritate him.

"I think I'll call myself something different. I'm sick of Deirdre."

"Why not?" He drew back his head to see the drawing board better.

"I'm going to call myself Sheila."

"Triffic!" He did a soft-shoe shuffle to a ditty about sheilas on Circular Quay. Then back to the drawing board.

She knew he liked it. It had the inverted touch he loved, the touch of classless style. Sheila meant . . . a slim body, a grin, good legs, the timelessly modern women.

Of course, it was easier then. They were young and their friends were young and always changing. Donald simply introduced the new name as a piece of fun at a party and it stuck. The columnists quickly caught on. Even her parents used Sheila when talking about her to others.

Donald was like that. He had a gift of persuading people that life was a game anyone could play. Some of their friends thought he was the most remarkable man in Australia.

While she waited for the man from Telecom, the mail came, including a letter to her in his handwriting.

It read: "My dear Sheila, You will have noticed lately that I have not been myself. I wanted to talk to you, but found it difficult. Forgive me for troubling you this way, but I feel I must put into words what is bothering me and I cannot do it easily in your presence."

"I have begun to think that everything I have lived for has become unattainable. I have plenty of work to do, as you know, but it is my name they want, not my work. My work is now regarded as one aspect, possibly interesting, of a phase that has passed, when public civility and private integrity supported each other and it was possible to agree on what was unreal and ugly. I am now an expensive relic of those times, sought by clients who are desperately holding on to a vanishing world. Young people no longer come to me for advice."

"Yet I feel I still have much to do and that what I have stood for, if you will excuse for the moment the adamant quality in that description, is as relevant now as it always has been. The difficulty I see is that to assert this today is to engage in public controversy. The tide of public comment is all flowing the other way."

"Reluctant as I am to make the claim, I think I may have to make decisions which could be upsetting for us. Our life together has such ease and grace that I am fearful of disturbing it. So this letter is meant as a kind of warning – and

perhaps it will provide us with a chance to talk the whole thing over.

Much love, Donald."

Sheila read the letter again. It seemed clear, but what on earth was he talking about? His name was always in the press, everyone liked him, the institute was proposing an annual lecture in his name, the children were doing well at university, they were well-off, almost wealthy, they were still fond of each other.

She looked quickly around the room. It had taken ten years and a lot of money to put it together. She could now close her eyes at night in bed and see it as a whole. The Boyd painting, startling at first, had blended well, and the two Williams' were a perfect tonal fit, which was remarkable because she had moved the furnishings imperceptibly over the years, with one house change, towards an effect which now had almost the finish and intensity of stained glass.

Sitting in the room, even now, waiting for the stupid man from Telecom, she felt immeasurably at home, complete, as if the pleasure of their life together had become fixed and material. What was Donald talking about?

She saw the Telecom van draw up outside and double-park. A young man uncurled himself from the driving wheel and squinted up at the house, as if ruefully estimating its height. He stepped out the distance between the wrought iron gate and a street pole, after which, leaving the van double-parked, he strolled up the path, leaving the gate open, and knocked on the door, neglecting the bell.

He was taller than she expected, black-bearded, wearing overalls which were baggy from the weight of tools and implements secreted in them.

"My husband left strict instructions which he asked me to pass on as soon as you arrived," Sheila said firmly, while he was still outside.

"Yeah," he said, looking worried. He pushed past her, leaving the door open. She closed it and followed him, as he produced a long screwdriver from a trouser leg and opened up a small box on the hallway wall.

"I'd better take a gink before we pow-wow, all right?"

He tapped several wires in the box with his screwdriver and then extracted from another part of his overalls a portable telephone dial which he successively attached to points in the box, dialling each time.

"Suffering Jesus!" He tinkered about, exclaiming as he dialled. "Was this Grand Central Station once?" He laughed suddenly. "Or maybe an SP bookie's?"

"It was an architect's office," Sheila said, "if that is what you are getting at."

His eyes ran mournfully up the staircase.

"The partners in the big front rooms, the workers down the back and bloody telephones everywhere. Oh, well, no use crying over blue blood, as the Irish aristocrat said to the hangman." He dialled. "Is that you, old pal, old pal? Can you give me a number, old pal, old pal?" He winked at Sheila, repeating a number. "OK, I'll work back to the cabinet. Bye, old pal, old pal."

Whistling loudly, he went out to his van, leaving the door open. Sheila closed the door, after depressing the latch, and awaited him.

"I'd like you to know what my husband thinks," she said sharply when he returned.

"Christ, I forgot." He sat on a Chinese grandfather's chair they had shipped from Hong Kong, lit a cigarette and looked at her.

"My husband thinks the box outside on the balcony is the trouble. The water gets in. And for some reason we share the box with the people next door."

"He's right, you know, dead right." The man from Telecom was impressed but also controlled. "There's lead cable going back to the street. Lead is very sensitive. An eyedrop of water knocks it out."

"So what do you intend to do?" she asked with authority.

He looked pleased with himself. "I'm thinking of something different. I'm thinking of getting you another B-pair."

He flicked the ash from his cigarette elaborately into his other hand and rubbed the ash into the knee of his overalls.

"B-pair?"

"Dazzling you with science."

"I don't especially like being dazzled," she said, "with science or anything else for that matter." The way he disposed of his cigarette ash made her tense.

He did it again, rubbing the ash heavily into the knee of his overalls. The crudity of the courtesy repelled her, yet also fascinated her so that she did not think to offer him an ashtray.

"Yeah, well, it's not strictly legal," he said, "but I've got mates. There's no point in ripping up the lead now. We'll be doing the street in a year or so."

"I still don't follow what you are doing," said Sheila, who was preparing her explanation for Donald.

"Just a minute." He wandered around the hallway, muttering "I see it all," said the blind man." With his finger he traced a wire down to the floor, removed a lacquered cabinet by pushing it with a hip and returned to his dialling instrument.

"I can do it now, old pal, old pal. When you get the clearance, just give me a buzz."

Seated again in the Chinese chair, he lit a cigarette, raised his eyes to the high ceiling and said to Sheila, who was standing: "Set you back a bit?" He surveyed the black marble mantelpiece, ran his heel along a wide floorboard. "A couple of hundred grand?"

"I've no idea." She was only mildly irritated by his curiosity. It was more than that. He obviously did not know East Melbourne.

"I paid fifty nine for mine. I'd say it's the best value in the street. Three bedrooms." He looked evenly at her.

"That's nice."

"I had a two-bedroom unit. Bought it for thirty-five, sold it for fifty. Put forty down on the new place. So I owe nineteen." He flicked the ash directly onto his knee. "Nineteen grand's not much."

She waited, aware that he had not finished.

"I've got a mate owes nearly forty grand." His face flushed. "Forty grand! He's got this big house. He's got a Commodore and his wife's got a Mazda. I'd say it's crazy owing forty, crazy."

He pointed to the newspaper, lying where Sheila had left it. "The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. He doesn't get much more than me. He's on about twenty-five. I told him: 'You're crazy owing forty.'"



“What does he say?” asked Sheila. The problem was a real one.

“He says you’ve got to believe in the system. Spend, he says, and it comes back to you in the end. Jesus, I said, you’ve got to be joking. You think those bastards are going to give you something!”

“Which bastards?”

“The rich bastards, of course.” His reply was a mixture of emphasis and astonishment. “They’re rich and they’re going to stay that way. Where would they be if people like me had a penthouse on the Gold Coast, or a thousand acres, or a bloody Alfa Romeo?”

The telephone rang and he stood up, holding his cigarette upturned and cupped in his hand.

“Ready when you are, old pal, old pal, as the actress said to the bishop.”

“I think your friend’s right,” said Sheila.

“Yeah, well, you’re on top. You would think like that. But it’s crazy for him.”

He paused gloomily, then brightened.

“I lived eighteen months on gambling once. Of course, that was before I married.” He glanced at Sheila. “I was pretty wild before I married.”

“I can imagine.” As she spoke, Sheila looked at the man’s face. His black curly hair, his beard, his bright eyes were part of his body, but his face was withdrawn.

“Oh, you can, can you?”

“It doesn’t strain the imagination,” she said drily.

“I won fifteen grand in Tatts once,” the man from Telecom said.

“Good heavens. Really?”

“That’s how I bought the unit. I didn’t get it from gambling. I said to myself, if I don’t put this into something, I’ll blow it. So I put it on the unit.”

He flicked ash directly on his knee and ground it in.

“You’ve got to be in it to win it.”

“You’re the first person I’ve met who’s won Tatts,” said Sheila.

He grinned at her. “Didn’t you know? Lots of people win the lottery. The people who bought my unit won eight-six grand.”

“Oh, come on.” She turned aside, surveying the reality of her room, but his raised voice pursued her.

“It’s the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. As the judge said to his young bride.”

“That’s enough,” said Sheila.

“No, really.” He was still seated on the Chinese chair, hands on knees, his withdrawn face mocking her earnest attention. “There were six kids. The parents kept forty-three and split the other forty-three six ways, seven apiece.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s Ripley’s problem,” said the man from Telecom, rising. He became preoccupied with leaving, collecting equipment, replacing the cover on the small box on the hallway wall, straightening a Bokhara rug with his heel.

Sheila stepped forward, one shoe on the rug, quickly correcting his arrangement. She stood near him, her legs apart and a funny smile on her flushed face.

“You’re a bit of a surprise,” he said, observing her pleasantly.

“Oh, yes.”

“‘Here’s a frosty morning’ I said to myself when I walked in. ‘Watch your Ps and Qs, fellow-me-lad’ I said to myself.”

“Well.”

“‘Very snippy-snap’ I said to myself.”

She saw the decision to act flick across his eyes, as he turned to the telephone and dialled. He winked at Sheila, replaced the receiver and the telephone immediately rang. He picked it up and extended it to her.

“Clear as a bell, as the great Alexander Graham said to the mirror.”

He held out the receiver towards her, shaking it. He avoided her fingers as she took it and moved behind her. By the time she replaced the receiver and turned her head he had gone, leaving the front door open and strolling down the path to his van, which she noted was, of course, still double-parked.

Sheila sheltered behind her front door as she closed it. She heard the van door shut, the gear engage and the sound of the engine fade. She closed the blinds and sat in the semi-darkness. The smell of his cigarette lingered, as did the memory of the crushed ash on his knee, but without his presence the room gradually regained its composure and she became angry that she had allowed him to occupy her house with such assurance.

Sheila rang Donald. She said firmly that if his work were now evidently of dubious value, it should not stand in the way of a long winter holiday. When he suggested that he wanted to talk over with her the matters he had raised in his letter, she responded forcefully that he could do it while they were away. She refused to put down the receiver until he had agreed.

TOM KENEALLY

## A GMH Morning, 1952

I was a strange boy. I always walked to school, even though the bus ran from Homefield Station right past St Kevin's. I cannot remember now what walking meant, whether I wanted to get some Renaissance sinner out of Purgatory where, on the temporal plane, he had spent the last dolorous years, or whether I wanted to feel the hard edges of magical GMH against my chest without being interrupted and asked to pay a fare, I do not know. It was two miles, and I always carried all my school books with me, a number of private books as well if, delayed by cattle perhaps or struck by a blizzard, I would find time to do some reading by the roadside. That was me. I wasn't sure where in the name of hell I was. I would never accept that cattle had long vanished and blizzards have never struck the municipality of Strathavon since the great glacier melts of the pleistocene had given its first substance and alluvium.

I would leave our flat on Graves Crescent early and – an athlete, a footballer, a prefect, a poet, the deal case leaden with Verity's Shakespeare and Catullus' poems and Robert's *History of Europe* being neither so heavy nor so light as the froth of crazy expectations bubbling under my brain pan – pass under the railway bridge. The railway line was, as in all romances and movies, a demarcation line. The workers lived our side of it, the white collars the other side. On their side the perennials on the pavement grew well and filled the street with the savor of peppercorns and other fragrances I could not name. On our side trees were not planted or else grew stunted.

Yet the east-west railway line was not only a border in botany. It was also a border in heaven. Our side was the parish of St Francis, run by a cranky hard drinking old celibate named Father Carroll. Their side was the parish of St Martha's, whose captain was Father Darcey, smooth-faced, more literate, capable of sermons condemning Graham Greene – "A lust-obsessed turncoat who uses his Catholic status as a vantage point from which to expose himself and to snipe at his co-religionists, especially God's own anointed." (In those days Greene had just published *The Heart of the Matter*, a novel obsessed not so much with lust as with the theological punctilio of contrition – whether a life-time sinner could be saved at the last second, whether a suicide could go into the Kingdom.)

The thing was that St Martha's had a more ritzy tone than Father Carroll's little hangar of a church. St Martha's had a mosaic of the Transfiguration behind the high altar, and

mosaic Stations of the Cross. Father Carroll's Stations of the Cross were minute and looked like bad Italian art from Pelligrini's. Father Darcey at least read, Father Carroll bet darkly on horses. Outside Mass, Father Darcey – if one was game enough to speak to him – would be drawn into theological discussion and might even offer an opinion on GMH. Whereas outside Father Carroll's rushed and muttered Mass, leathery members of the Holy Name Society talked about acceptances for the Caulfield Cup. I always went to St Martha's, but I knew that in God's eyes I was a citizen of the other place by a tragic margin of fifty yards and by the steel decree of the railway line.

One of the reasons the other side of the line beyond the railway underpass was magic territory to me was that there lived the two girls who bespoke the universe of women, both hemispheres of it. The steamier southern hemisphere was Helen Flannery, who tended to plumpness. Her features were sweet; yet strong features. She thought that GMH was a bit of a drongo and held the same opinion of me. She was brown-eyed, practical, motherly, had a nice chunky Irish face and an ironic nose for neurosis. She could sniff out the neurotic reef which ran down the fake grandiose contours of my sensibilities. She knew certain first truths that hadn't yet come to me. Life is for the living, not for the dying. That was one of her truths. The other truth she knew was that Broughton Road, Strathavon, in the city of Sydney, was Broughton Road, Strathavon, in the city of Sydney. She would never expect, as I was always expecting, to turn the corner into Meredith Street and find – despite the brazen sky and the Australian location – a season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. She knew you didn't get such seasons in Australia and wouldn't have wanted them. "Bugger of a thing," she would have said. *Bugger* was her only profanity. She was a virgin made to bring a horde of triumphant little Catholics into the world – you could tell that. Her parents had set the example by giving her six brothers and sisters, and there seemed nothing in her make-up, no fear, no hint of revulsion, that would stop her maintaining that warm tradition of begetting and mothering which stretched back without interruption to stony Sligo.

Old Flannery, her father, was a bit of a poet, a penitential Catholic, a cut-price aesthete. A skinny little man, wiry and handsome, he had that dark Irishness about him and could have been, with a little nudge, a mad monk or a black drunk.



He went out at night with the Industrial Groupers. They lay in wait for MacNab's raiders, who went around convents and hostels for girls from the bush, trying to liberate nuns or at least pregnant girls. MacNab's raiders were always hoping for the jackpot – to liberate a pregnant nun whom they could interview for MacNab's hate rage, *The Word*. There were no pregnant nuns – that sort of thing wouldn't be seen until the days of Vatican II – but if there had been, MacNab's blokes wouldn't have got near her. For squads of impassioned Flannerys armed with tyre levers and bike chains patrolled the cloisters.

When not guarding convents from MacNab's lunatic assaults, the Industrial Groupers – commandos of Murphys, Slatterys, McMahons, Flannerys, Whelans, Raffertys and so on – protected workers from Communist heavies at Union elections. Old Flannery had once been hit across the jaw with a crowbar but wore the bruising sweetly, since it evidenced a holy battle against materialism and bigotry.

Despite the warren-like musk which clung to the Flannery home, I loved that house in Broughton Street and spent so much time there that it amounted to cruel rejection of my own home and of my parents, Margaret and Michael Deagan.

They themselves keenly felt the judgement of the railway line but had sent their little bugger to school over there only to have him desert them for the Flannerys. At the Flannerys' you could sit in the radiant jolliness of Helen and talk to old Flannery of enormous subjects, history and GMH and Satan in the trade unions. And when you got too high flown, you could hear Helen murmur in her strong voice, "Stupid bugger!" and know you'd won an accolade.

The more temperate and yet more daunting hemisphere of womanhood was represented by Bernadette Fallon. She lived close to St Kevin's Christian Brothers', two blocks from Maurice Heaney's, my blind friend's place. You could therefore always call in at Fallons' on the excuse that you were at Heaney's anyhow, so you thought you might as well. You never knew what Bernadette was thinking. She came from a preposterously neat brick house to which no tribal odors attached. She had two sisters, both of them spectacular women even in childhood. She had a mother who looked like her slightly plainer elder sister. They were all of the olive Irish, the kind of deep yet translucent complexion that lends belief to the old fable that the survivors of the Armada, swimming ashore in Galway, coupled with the wild western peasants. Her eyes were green, vast and secret. She was head prefect of the Dominican Girls' College, Santa Margarita's, in the leafy Avenue. She never used words like bugger. She was a better student than Helen Flannery and than me. Success was not then thought of as much of a suitable goal for women. But Bernadette made you think of success. Also, though you could kiss Helen on the cheek (she was a familiar continent), Bernadette Fallon was not to be touched. She was like European art. I yearned for her in a way that was both less and more than sexual. I yearned for her like a knight. In return, she thought I was mad as a meat-axe. Cackhandedly I would pull the warped edition of GMH's poetry from the breast pocket of my Christian Brothers' uniform and try to read the "Wreck of the Deutschland" to her mother and little sisters.

"Thou hast bound bones and veins in me," I would de-

claim, seated by the Fallon bread bin, bringing the word of GMH to those four exquisite Spanish faces,

Fastened me flesh,  
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,  
They doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?  
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

Helen Flannery had once genially thrown a milk jug at me for reading GMH aloud. Bernadette Fallon said nothing, simply let her dark eyebrows jerk roofwards once. I would have liked better to be pelted with milk or a plate or a bread knife.

Past the Flannerys' place, near the Congregational Church in Meredith Street, I would on a GMH morning in the fragrance of gum-nuts pass the rank front yard of the Darnays'. Bernard Darnay would be up somewhere in there, wandering through the shambles of a house, making with his delicate hands that peculiar movement as if picking cherries no one else could see. He would be waiting in the dark hall for his father, three sisters and two brothers to let him use the lavatory. Darnay had always been an awkward friend. He was not only appalling at all the consecrated skills of football and cricket, but he did not care. In cricket, Darnay was always placed at deep fine leg, a point to which the ball was walloped only now and then. Sometimes he would forget to change position at the end of the overs, or when a left hander was in. The others would try to forget him – though I could not – and he would stay out there oblivious of all the passion at the central pitch. Occasionally a wild hook would send one his way. He would not have seen the stroke. He would not be aware that the red pellet was diving at him from the sun. Then, having shaken his head and returned to reality to see the brother, gentle confrere of Christ, glaring at him from the umpire's position at the bowler's end, he would look to the sky from which he knew the threat was coming and would be struck in both eyes by the fierce sun. So that while the ball still hung in its easy trajectory, the fielders closer in would begin to mourn the inevitable dropped catch. "Geez, Darnay! Strike a bloody light!"

Darnay had no sense of time. He lived in a divine *now* whose tides washed him in late to school four days of the week's five. Once, coming late, he'd hidden under the science desks in the feotor of gas escaping from the fixed bunsen burners. Everyone was busy around him, Brother Meagher and the rest of us, pottering with flasks and touch papers, the boys keeping the secret that Darnay was at our feet, arms around knees, brown eyes fixed. When Basher Meagher found him at last and hauled him out, thrashing him with the renowned weapon of the Christian Brothers of Ireland, the leather strap, he took the pain with the same equanimity with which – beneath the bench – he had plucked and feasted upon the unseen cherries.

Where he had it all over the rest of us was that he wanted to be a Trappist monk. Even to a pious Irish-Australian, the Trappists were remoter than Venus and less open to interpretation. They were an order of monks who did not speak except on Christmas day or when, suffering from peritonitis, they told the doctor where it hurt. The daily routine of the Trappists might well have suited Darnay better than the plebian time tables of St Kevin's Christian Brothers'. The Trappists



rose at three in the morning at the monastery in the Dandenongs to sing Matins and Lauds, and Darnay might find that an easier date to keep than to get inside the school gates in Elgin Street in time to say good morning to Brother McShane. The Trappists ate only bread, vegetables, fruit, a little milk and cheese. In such a regimen, Darnay's invisible cherries might be very welcome. All morning the Trappists sloshed around the Dandenongs in gumboots, their white and brown habits belted up high to avoid mud, and they did not even speak to the cattle. After that they sang the Minor Hours, studied, sang Vespers and Compline and fell asleep, on hard beds and under rough blankets, as early as the beasts of the field.

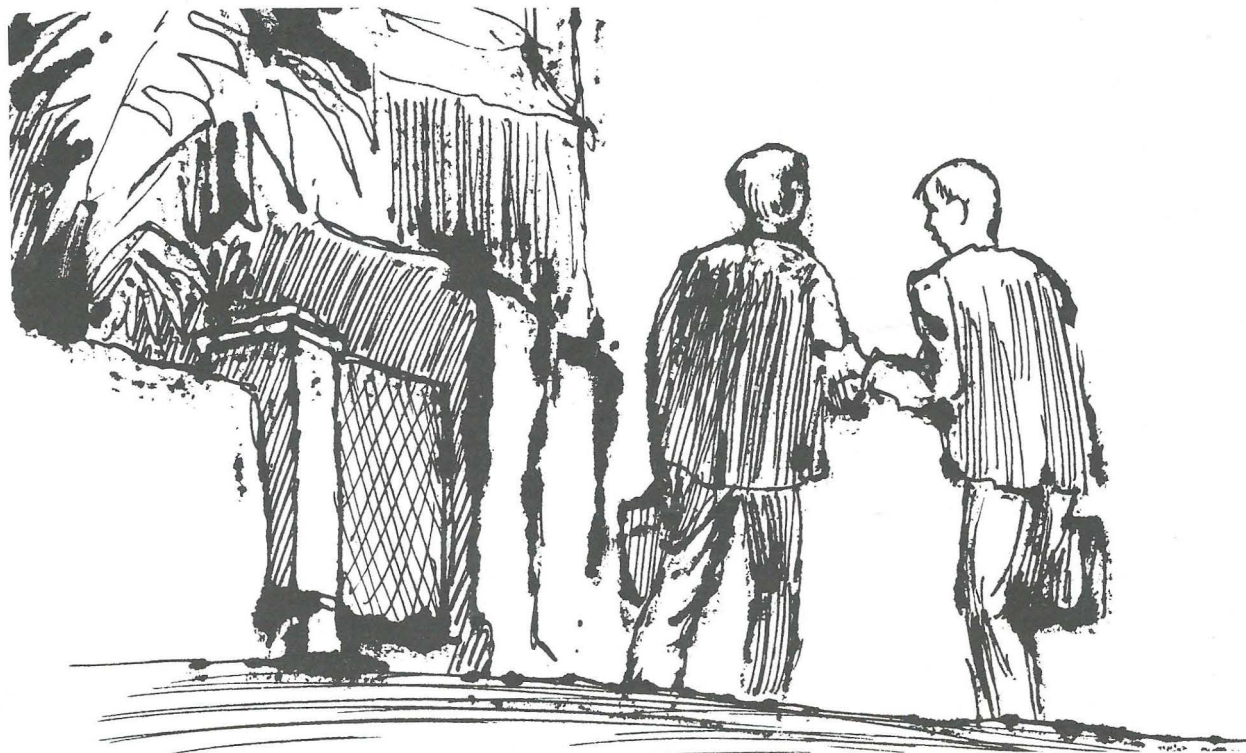
The idea of the Trappist monastery appealed to the crackpot medievalist in me. The monastery was the thirteenth century. It was not Australia. It was an altered time and its own place where Darnay would be under no pressure to take clean catches at deep fine leg and where his mental orchard would expand and flourish. Darnay had already been down to the monastery on the Spirit of Progress and spoken to the Prior – for Priors could speak if cause existed. The Prior was an Englishman, it seemed, with translucent and mysterious skin. He said that there *was* one aspect of Darnay's temperament which made him an unsuitable novice, and that was unpunctuality. "In this house of silence," the Prior had said neatly, "only God and the clocks speak." Darnay, the Prior advised, was to get his Leaving Certificate, go to university and practise being on time. If at the end of his BA he still wanted to join the monastery, there would be a place for him. Everyone believed that Darnay would always want to be a Trappist. That was what I envied, that he wanted it. Helen Flannery didn't want any such thing. She thought he was a

bigger fool than I was. "You're pretty bloody strange, but that bugger doesn't know if he's Arthur or bloody Martha!"

At the time I passed his house each morning, Darnay would be already fecklessly moving in meditation amongst his three loud sisters, who all worked in banks, and his two brothers who were average boys and found their mad sibling a visitation and a pain in the neck. He would follow behind me up the street perhaps an hour later, to be clipped on the lug by Brother Ireland in front of the Maths II class. The pain of hefty Ireland's fist always came as a surprise to Darnay, and he would frown and contemplate it while returning at a stately monastic walk to his desk.

By the corner of Meredith and Broughton Streets stood the finest house in Strathavon. It had been built by a politician in the late nineteenth century – he had been a Protectionist Premier of New South Wales and had gone into the cabinet in Deakin's government. The house was now St Blanche's School for the Blind, where Maurice Heaney had been taught braille and given his primary education. The old cabinet minister, long dead from overweight and brandy, mistresses and intrigue, had been Masonic and notoriously anti-Papist, but by the ironic processes of history the Dominican nuns had bought just that property and filled the hallways and grounds with statues of St Blanche, St Joseph and the Blessed Virgin to exorcise the old fellow's tormented spirit.

On the upper balcony of St Blanche's this morning as every morning sat old Mother Brigid, her brown scapular dwarfed by her bulk, her great carob-seed rosary beads in her fingers. Helen Flannery often went up there to sit on the balcony with her after school. Helen could talk to a nun as if she were just another woman. It was a gift which had evaded the rest of us.





Brigid had come to Sydney from Ireland before the First World War. Helen Flannery said that she'd confided that she was ashamed of her size, which was not due to the sin of gluttony but to the dropsy presently killing her. To me the old Dominican was an awesome mound of sacred womanhood and I never waved or did anything else familiar when I passed her.

I thought of Brigid as a monument and not as anyone's past and perhaps slim girl child. There was in any case a honeyed prickling in my chest, for I was now – passing the consecrated solidity of St Blanche's and Mother Brigid – only a block from Mrs Galley's new brick house.

If Helen and Bernadette Fallon were the hemispheres of womanhood, Mrs Galley was a strange and uninhabitable equator. She was a beautiful and – I could even tell then – strangely lonely woman. Her husband had played half-back for Australia just three seasons back. As a player he had been known to go the knuckle. He was dark and handsome and petulant. I would in time – it was to take me some decades – learn to avoid such men and their unhappy womenfolk. But I was still at a stage then when I thought that great footballers, being so gifted at the side step, knowing that they were the darlings of the race, must have sunny and willing souls. I thought that if I ever spoke to Frank Galley I would begin by talking Rugby League, ask him if he liked Clive Churchill as a bloke, whether the Poms were tougher than the French, why no one else used the crooked, negligent goal-kicking techniques of the great French full-back, Puig-Aubert. And then, I imagined, after he had given to me his special knowledge, I would whip out GMH, the Collected Poems. The book was bowed and warped from being carried in the breast pocket of my school coat. Even when I removed GMH, the pocket retained the phantom shape of the book which I would in the end return there. I would talk about GMH's stressed verse to Frank Galley, and by the flat and soulless brick house give him – Australia's compact knuckler and scrum magician – the word.

Now Time's Andromeda on this rock rude,  
With not her either beauties equal or  
Her injuries, looks off by both horns of shore,  
Her flower, her piece of being, doomed dragon's food,  
Time past she has been attempted and pursued  
By many blows and banes; but now hears roar  
A wilder beast from West than all were, more  
Rife in her wrongs, more lawless, and more lewd.

Anyone, I believed, who could pivot from the base of the scrum thirty-five yards out from the English goal line, fake towards Len Cowie, side-step the English half Bradshaw, wrong-foot the Pommie lock-forward, skip out of the tackle of the second-rover coming across in cover defence and score under the post in front of seventy thousand at the SCG was *certain* to be avid for the mystery of GMH.

But more than Frank Galley, I dreamed of meeting wan Mrs Galley in her garden too, and speaking to her. I was an inside back of promise to myself. I also had an instinct for public relations. I would suggest to her that her husband might like to come and give some coaching to the St Kevin's Firsts and Seconds. My daydream was that Frank Galley

would turn up, be engrossed – our Firsts were, after all, the New South Wales champions – and so he and his pale wife and I would be bonded together by the delicious sharing of Rugby League and of those sweet fruits which GMH brought back to us from the extreme limits of the language.

Mrs Galley never proved to be in her garden more than twice a year when I was going past, but in an innocent age that was adequate yield on months of fantasy and rehearsal. The few times I saw her she never looked at me. There was an awful indifference in her eyes, a flatness which I did not have the wit to recognise as misery. One day I believed there would be a coincidence of factors. She would be there, I would be passing, she would be receptive, she would smile, divining talent behind the brown cow-lick of hair, in the vast child-like eyes, behind the intermittent blemishes of acne.

Yet it was always with a sense of escape that I got past the Galley's place. It meant that now nothing too unlikely or exalting could happen. The road turned downhill now to Maurice Heaney's place. Mrs Heaney was without variation the one who opened the door. Although she smiled, there was always a trace of suspicion in her eyes. She had had what my father regularly called "a bugger of a life." When pregnant with Maurice she had contracted German measles, and Maurice had been born without any sight. It seemed, whenever I stole a look at his near-closed eyes, that they were muscular orbs but had neither iris nor pupil. His skin had no pigmentation, and that strangely suited him. He was a snow-white boy with his mother's tallness and handsome features. His hair was also snow-white. In those days when school boys spent hours at their combs, cementing their hairstyles this way and that with a glutinous fluid named "Hairfix," Maurice's hair had enviable waves. He was handsomer than Darnay, Ed Flannery, Jerry Toumey and Terence Bryant, and certainly handsomer than me. Yet it was his white perfection and his utter blindness which terrified girls away. The past year, when the nuns of Santa Margarita's agreed to the idea of a severely-policed dance at Strathavon town hall to be attended by the convent girls and by us, I approached the pretty sister of a St Kevin's footballer and asked her if she would like to dance with Maurie. She had shaken her head and when she uttered her, "No!" it was with a sort of pleading. My surprise proved again that the pervading delusion of my adolescence was that the beautiful are nearly always good and that the talented have no need for malice.

As for the suspicion which lay pooled in the handsome shallows beneath Mrs Heaney's eyes, she was right to suspect me. I was bent on helping her son, and she was wise enough to know that some gestures of kindness are to be treated with caution. I would walk with Maurie to St Kevin's each morning. I'd even got to know a passable amount of Ancient History, a subject he was taking but which I was not. I would quiz him about Pericles as we climbed Elgin Road together. Mrs Heaney knew what I didn't – that I would exact a price in the end for knowing all about Pericles when I didn't need to.

The price was that I wanted to be Maurice Heaney's coach. I could sense that the German measles had deprived us of a fine athlete. But for God's awesome will he would have been a lightning-fast, line-breaking, centre-threequarters. It was my plan, by running beside him rattling a shoe-polish can full of Braille type pieces, to guide him round the curve of the two-hundred and twenty yard sprint, to unleash natural speed.

The fact that Bernadette Fallon and all the Fallons would be there on sport's day, four sculptured olive women looking down with the coolness of Athena on fast enough Tom Dargan rattling his mate Maurice Heaney through the blackness of the dash, gave impetus to this project both kindly and riddled with pride, both selfless and ambitious.

Maurie, on my arrival at his door, would always come questing up the hallway, a sculptured white hand extended, his shoulder touching the wall for guidance. He was never ready. He was still always working either on his General Maths or his Braille edition of Breasted's Ancient History. These were the subjects which preoccupied him, not the subjects themselves, but the brothers who taught them. Brother Ireland for the Maths, Brother Munday for the Ancient History. Mavourneen Ireland was middle aged, ham-

fisted, irascible. Munday was young and handsome and cutting.

"G'day, Tom," Maurice would say. His voice was rich and pleasant, and he was impeccable in his grey serge suit. *Luceat Lux Vestra* said the school badge over his heart. *Let your light shine*. Once Maurie had his Braille typewriter packed in one bag and what he called his "sighted books" in the other, we would swing out the gate. We could feel – both of us I think – Mrs Heaney's doubt at our backs, but it did not impinge on us. I shook it off. For all adults were ambiguous, hesitant, regretful. All mothers had sorrow in their eyes when they saw their boys off. It was disgusting I thought, all that naked regret. If they'd shown their breasts in public it could not have been more embarrassing.

## **Soviet Politics and Society**

A conference to be held at the University of Melbourne,  
Saturday and Sunday, 20-21 October 1984.

The conference is intended to mark the 65th Birthday of Dr Lloyd Churchward,  
a pioneer in Australian studies of the USSR.

The conference will be organised around the following themes: • Lenin and the Russian Revolution of 1917 • The Communist Party of the Soviet Union • The Soviet State in Theory and Practice • The Intelligentsia in Soviet Society • Towards understanding of the USSR. Undergraduate courses and postgraduate research • Improving Australian-Soviet Relations

It is expected that the Conference will provide the opportunity for a critique of Australian writing on Soviet history and politics.

Any enquiries about this conference should be directed to Dr Leslie Holmes,  
Political Science Department, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3052.



# Mouthpiece of the Unruly

JACK LINDSAY

A discussion of Craig Munro's *Wild Man of Letters: The Story of P.R. Stephensen* (Melbourne University Press, \$27.50).

Craig Munro's book took me back at once, vividly, some sixty-five years. In 1919 I met P.R. Stephensen at the University, then situated in the old Government House by the Botanical Gardens of Brisbane. I had already been a student for a year. We took to each other at once. There was an eager energy about him that appealed to me, and his rebellious element chimed in with my own confused but strong opposition to the world. We never discussed our positions at any length; the feeling we at once had of emotional kinship made that unnecessary. I called him then and after Inky. The name Percy did not suit him well at all, and I never heard anyone use it.

From Munro's book I learn how the mixture of Swiss and Danish elements in his family had combined to give him a sense of being different from the other Australians of the Biggenden area, near Maryborough, and yet made him want to prove himself one of them by taking the lead in any commotions or struggles. I recall how he spoke of his grandfather with great respect, and he once took me, for reasons I forget, to meet him somewhere on the outskirts of Brisbane. I recall only the impressive and friendly character of the old man, who did not seem to fit in as Inky's grandfather.

Munro brings out how early PRS developed his rebelliousness and his need to thrust himself into the forefront of any group in revolt against authority. The cause mattered far less than the opportunity given to come forward as a leader, mouthpiece of the unruly. At Maryborough Grammar School he had already developed strong sympathies for the Labor cause and was on friendly terms with the trustees; yet when the latter came into conflict with a reactionary headmaster, he thrust himself forward to lead the latter's supporters and to oppose the democratisation of the school. At a meeting called by the head, he got up on the platform, defended the head, and called for a vote, to see if anyone wanted to attend the usual speech-day at which the head was to be snubbed. "And may God help any bastard who raises his hand." Nobody did. Munro remarks that here at the outset we see how eager PRS is to come out as a rebel leader, so that he supports a cause he should have damned, and uses threats to get the result he wants in what is supposed to be a democratic show of hands.

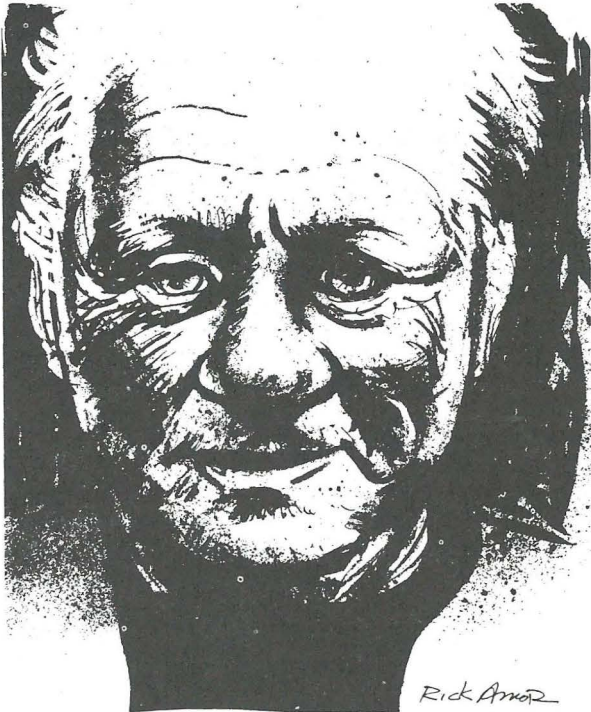
In 1921 Stephensen joined the Brisbane branch of the Communist Party and went on playing an active role. Surprisingly he was chosen as Rhodes Scholar in 1923 though, a few days before the election committee met, he published in the *Daily*

*Standard* an attack on the liberal-reformist attitude to workers' education, and declared a world-revolution to be imminent and inevitable. On his way to England he called on me in Sydney and we renewed our friendship. So, when in early 1926 I set off with John Kirtley, to transfer the Fanfrolico Press to London, I at once thought of him as a fellow-spirit in England, and we met, as Munro tells, in Paris, Oxford, London. I had expected to stay in England only a year or so; but when Kirtley decided he could not bear the place and offered me the Press, I at once thought of PRS as the one person who could help me to carry it on with any hope of success. He agreed to join me as soon as he left Oxford.

I found him an ardent Communist when I met him in England. He had been doing some important translation work, in particular Lenin's *Imperialism* and *On the Road to Insurrection*, which the Communist Party of Great Britain published. (He had also worked at Mayakovsky's poem on Lenin, and I made an effort to develop my imperfect Russian. With his help I did some Blok and Yesenin, but could not translate Mayakovsky to my satisfaction.) In 1925 he attended an eight-day school arranged by the French Communist Party and was sure that the revolution would happen any day in France. He talked so wildly that some French Communists thought he must be an *agent provocateur*. So they asked Philip Owens, also a Communist, then in Paris, to sound him out. Owens reported that he was genuine, however excitable. (Owens told me this story; and when later I quoted it in commenting on *Kookaburras and Satyrs*, PRS in a paranoiac way took me to be accusing him of having in fact been an *agent*. What I had wanted to do was bring out how ardently Communist he was in 1925-6.)

In the 1926 General Strike Stephensen was one of the few students who went to help the workers; large numbers did the opposite and helped to keep the transport system going. His ardent desire for a situation of violent turmoil was certainly deeply stirred. He felt the Strike might develop into a revolution, though he did not have the same faith in the English working-class as he had in the French. When the Strike promptly collapsed, he felt rather disillusioned, though it was to be some years before the full effects of his disappointment asserted themselves. I should like to deal at some length with this change in his deepest beliefs, for the way in which he failed to face or to grasp what had so powerfully affected him certainly brings out a peculiar element of fear, of self-justification, of inability to grasp clearly his own motivations.





Jack Lindsay

It was years after 1926 that Stephensen broke away from his Communist faith, and the process was uncertain, veiled, torn by unrealised contradictions. During his time in the Fanfrolico Press he used to go one day a week to work for the party paper, the *Sunday Worker*; he was still signing contributions in 1928-29. In his writings in the *London Aphrodite* he still expressed himself as a Communist, looking on Stalin as the consolidator of Soviet Socialism, though at the same time his emotions of unsatisfied revolt showed themselves in his keen admiration of Bakunin. Elements of Lindsay's Nietzscheanism were penetrating his so-called Marxism. My brother, Phil, and others took him to still be a fiery Communist in the early 1930s before he returned to Australia. I recall how once in 1928 I had been drinking beer with him and Charlie Ashleigh (once a very active industrial welfare worker); we took some bottles up to my rooms in Museum Street, and I was so worked up by the talk of Inky and Charlie that I said, "I really ought to join the party," Inky took me aside and said vehemently, "It's all right for me and Charlie to be Communists. But you're a poet. That's your vocation. You mustn't join any party."

When something has mattered to one so deeply and passionately as Communism had to PRS, the reasons for one's discarding it and facing in diametrically opposite directions would surely be recalled with the utmost clarity and coherence. So one would assume. Yet PRS gives the most varying set of explanations, which are obviously untrue and fail to make sense.

In 1939 he said that "following the fiasco of the British General Strike . . . which was a Communist fiasco," he left the party. Then at a meeting on 19 November 1941 he declared that he gave that party up "when Russia joined the

League of Nations in 1926 and proved itself a humbug." One of the audience interjected correctly that Russia had joined in 1934, not 1926. In 1944 he linked his leaving the party with some troubles he had had with the University authorities at Oxford in 1926. In 1954 he claimed that he gave up Marxist Communism in 1926 on finding it to be "only banditry disguised as political philosophy." In 1961, writing to me, he said of the Moscow Trials of 1936-38, "It broke my heart when Old Bolsheviks such as Bukharin and Zinoviev were executed." But these men were the bandits he said that he had abhorred in 1926.

Such contradictory statements show an almost incredible confusion as to his motives and the way in which he left the party. There is an element of truth, however distorted, in the first statement that he resigned because of the failure of the General Strike. He had certainly felt let down by the failure of the party to stir the workers up to a frenzy. It was the absence of banditry or violence that he has in fact mourned. He felt that the English workers lacked the force or understanding to break bourgeois society down and to produce the chaos in which such a person as himself could emerge as a leader.

But if we put together his explanations for having taken so crucial a step as surrendering his cherished revolutionary creed, we cannot but feel that he has no grasp whatever of his own motivations and that he blurts out whatever comes uppermost in the emotional turmoil of the moment. He reveals what we can only call an abnormal lack of self-comprehension.

We all of us to some extent trim our memories to help us along in our self-esteem, but PRS carried this kind of reconstruction to an extreme. In his accounts of the Mandrake Press, he insisted that D.H. Lawrence had a low opinion of the Fanfrolico and would not on any account have let it produce his work. There was only my bare word against this assertion of his until, by a lucky chance, DHL's first letter to me turned up in Sydney a few years ago. (I thought all his letters to me had been destroyed.) Here DHL speaks most affably of the Press and hopes that it will be able to do a book of his paintings. This letter proved that PRS's account of the Mandrake Press and of the edition of DHL paintings was as fabricated as his explanations as to why he left the Communist Party. (DHL went on later to ask me to see his Introduction to the Paintings through the Press, and to send me some "Pansies" for the *London Aphrodite*.)

But against Stephensen's strange political career with all its contradictions we must set his work as a publisher, in which the constructive side of his character appears, without aberrations. He clearly found much satisfaction in bringing books to birth or in controlling the publication system. During the whole of his time in the Fanfrolico or the Mandrake firms he kept his political passions in complete abeyance. I asked him into the Fanfrolico because I felt that I could not carry on as writer and editor without someone to run the business side. I chose all the books and did all the designing - sometimes with much care: thus I drew the placing of each poem of *Satyr* and *Sunlight* on its page. I corrected proofs and wrote many of the books or used my translations; I did all the editing. PRS ran the managing side with the aid of Sadie, who kept the books, typed letters, posted them, and so on. I thus felt quite free to

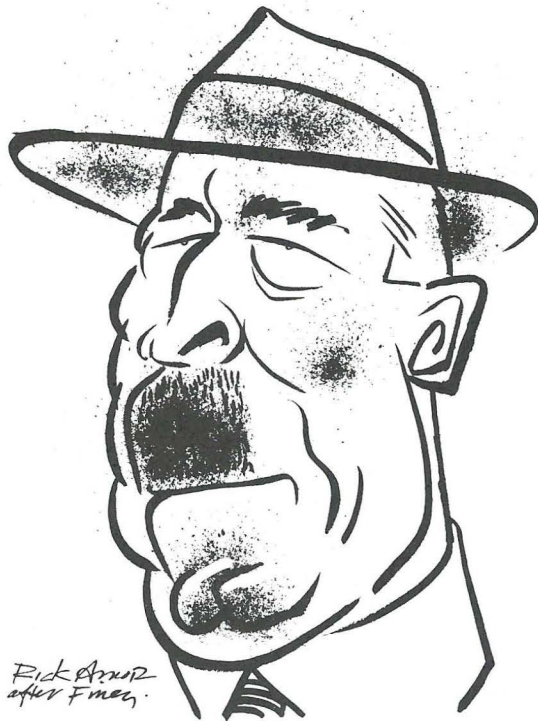


carry on with the production side. (I was also doing much research at the British Museum and copying texts. *The Parliament of Pralers* was a find; *Loving Mad Tom* involved much work in out-of-the-way seventeenth-century miscellanies, broadsheets, etc.)

Aldous Huxley's picture of PRS and myself as Arkwright and Weaver in *Point Counter Point* must have been based on the sort of gossip about us that was going round. He was clearly interested, for when he visited England after the publication of his book he walked into the office to find out what we were really like. He became very friendly and asked me to come over to France and stay with him.

PRS never showed the least sign of feeling that his side of the work was limited or boring. Indeed in all our working together there was never a single word of irritation or anger on either side. The only disagreement I can think of is when I put a page of Ela's writing into the *Aphrodite*. PRS without a word cut the page out. Without saying anything I put it back. Still, I began to feel that he should have a larger share in our activities. So I proposed that he translate Nietzsche's *Anti-christ*. This he did with gusto. I designed the book and was glad of the chance to use Norman's antichristian drawings. Then I proposed the periodical, the *London Aphrodite*, which we both edited and for which he did a fair bit of writing. Noting how happily he collaborated with Beresford Egan, a young artist who had come into our office, in some satirical pamphlets, I felt that it was only fair for him to have a wider field for his ideas than the *Fanfrolico* permitted. Also, I was already thinking that I'd like to reorganise the Press – with the business side taken over by someone like the big retailers, Simpken Marshall, with whom we were on good terms, and with myself buying a press and type so that I could handset and handprint as Kirtley and I had originally done. So when DHL's letter came, offering me his paintings, I decided the time had come for PRS to start off on his own. I didn't want to do the paintings in the *Fanfrolico*, but I also didn't want to let DHL down. So I went to the bookseller Goldston in Museum Street, who had shown clear signs of wanting to get an interest in the *Fanfrolico*, and suggested that a new press should be started under PRS with the DHL paintings, a sure good seller, as its first product.

So the *Mandrake* came into existence, with PRS as its manager and editor. He remained happy I think as long as it lasted. Then came his meeting with Norman Lindsay, who had always been keen on helping Australian novelists and poets. The result was his return to Australia, the *Endeavour Press* and so on. But his relations with Norman did not last, the firm met its difficulties and PRS attempted to set up his own company. Munro tells the story with full illuminating details. PRS in his efforts to stimulate and help Australian writers and stir the national consciousness did many valuable as well as some crude things. His support of Australian Aborigines and of Xavier Herbert's work in particular merits praise. In the end the weak side of his character showed itself when he wrote a pamphlet supporting the purchase of Junkers Aircraft by Continental Airways. "Only months after describing Hitler as a bully," writes Munro, "Stephensen was now prepared to sell his services so that the Nazi dictatorship could be clothed in euphemisms. The business justification, though, was quite simple: Stephensen had to have income . . ." Soon afterwards he met W.J. Miles and was drawn into



P.R. Stephensen

direct fascist activities. The publisher was wholly absorbed into the rebel. Again Munro tells the story fully and effectively. I only have some further comments to add.

PRS, with all his ardours, quite lacked the internal resources to keep himself on a direct course. First he thought he had as his guide Communism, which was leading to a violent revolution in which he would emerge as a leader. Then, diverted into publishing, he found a satisfying alternative, though he needed someone else to provide the fundamental ideas as dynamic. First there was the *Fanfrolico* with myself as the idea-purveyor. DHL told him to get free of me, since I exerted too strong an influence on him. He had a free hand in the *Mandrake*, but needed someone to inspire him. For a while he had Lawrence, who, however, soon died. He tried to get hold of Joyce, but that turned out to be impossible, and so he fell into the hands of the Satanist and monster, Aleister Crowley. Norman gave Stephensen a new lease of life, but the relationship broke down and PRS kept on trying to find some Australian writer or cause that would enable him to use publishing as a power-base. In the struggle, with the varying set of values that could be attached to the slogan "Australia First," he ended under the spell of Miles and moved into complete fascism.

I knew nothing of these political developments of his until well after the war when I heard of them and of his internment from my brother Phil. I was at first surprised and shocked. Then, the more I thought of him and his essential lack of any stable basis, I realised that what had happened to him was very much in character. Munro aptly cites Erich Fromm:

The authoritarian character is never a 'revolutionary'; I should like to call him a 'rebel.' There are many individuals and political movements that are puzzling to the superficial observer because of what seems to be an inexplicable change from radicalism to extreme authoritarianism.

PRS was indeed a rebel, not a revolutionary. He wanted to smash things up and to emerge as an admired leader. For a while, when there seemed to be no effectively subversive force coming up in society, he was able to turn his considerable capacities to useful ends. As a publisher he moved from violence to peaceful means of transformation. But his lack of any clear ideas about life made him dependent on others for guidance. So in the end the ventures failed and he lacked the basis for further struggle along the same lines. He was driven back to infantile levels of rebellion, dependent on someone else (Miles) for money and for the idiom on which his new drive of rebellion depended. Once, however, the new forms of dependency were stabilised, he was able to build up powerful elements of rebellion inside himself and seem very much the free agent in his actions and enunciations.

One of the things that shocked me in his later positions was his anti-semitism. Goldston had been a loyal supporter while there was any hope for the Mandrake; and for years Sadie, a Jew, was his mistress. Yet once he had surrendered to Miles' fascism, he expounded the crudest anti-semitism. His anti-feminism was a rejection of his considerable debt to Winifred. In the years I knew them well, she was an odd, wraith-like maternal figure amiably drifting along the edge of his

life. (He had a long array of mistresses as well as Sadie, among whom was Marie, wife of the poet Rupert Atkinson.) Yet it seems clear from Munro's account that he depended much on her, and this dependence became more obvious as she aged in Australia.

When my brother Ray read my *Fanfrolico and After* in manuscript, he warned me that PRS, a litigious character, might well want to take legal action against me. I then felt it was only fair to my publisher to send a copy of the book to PRS. To my surprise I got a fervent letter of congratulation. After that I terminated the correspondence as quickly as possible. I did not see how anyone with self-respect could keep in contact with such an unrepentant fascist and anti-semitic. He wrote a long review of *Fanfrolico and After* in the Book Review, in which he discussed my vagaries in a tone of an amiable superiority, but did not challenge any of my factual statements except in a general way.

I have given here my main reactions on reading Graig Munro's book on PRS. How may I sum up that book with its remarkably thorough research and balanced presentation? Munro himself cites Walter Stone as saying "Inky'll be a case for biographers for a thousand years to try and sort him out, and they never will." I should rewrite that comment: "Many persons may still keep discussing and analysing PRS, but no one else is likely to feel the need to write another biography."

*Jack Lindsay is nearly 84. He lives in Essex, is moving to Cambridge, and continues his remarkable literary career with unabated commitment and drive. He is, of course, the son of Norman Lindsay. A Festschrift in Jack Lindsay's honor is soon to be published.*



HANS HAUGE

## Michael Wilding, Post-Modernism and the Australian Literary Heritage

Internationally a new kind of writing has come into existence which critics refer to as either post-modernism, sur-fiction, or metafiction. (This new mode was hailed as revolutionary by Leslie Fiedler,<sup>1</sup> as a "marginal development of modernism" by Frank Kermode,<sup>2</sup> and as "old furniture" by George Watson<sup>3</sup>). Whether it is new or not is not the issue here; it is sufficient to say, with David Lodge, that "post-modernism has established itself as . . . a mode of writing shared by a significant number of writers in a given period."<sup>4</sup> The characteristics and the practitioners of the new mode are well-known. The question is whether it has established itself in Australia. Is this new mode of writing shared by a significant number of contemporary Australian writers?

The text of Michael Wilding's novel *The Short Story Embassy* (1975) is interesting for at least two reasons: because it shares certain features with the post-modernist novel, and because it is literally about the state of new writing in Australia. It both reflects and is part of new Australian fiction.

Michael Wilding, in an important article in *Australian Literary Studies* (October, 1977), describes what I have referred to as post-modernism or metafiction like this:

Then there is the literature of process, fiction interested in, self-conscious of, its own evolution, aware of its generative processes; the analogues here would be Kerouac and that beat generation of spontaneous writing; and the Black Mountain version of that 'from Olson – as in Fielding Dawson's prose.

The first result of the influx of new American ideas was the sense of literary liberation which it obviously helped bring about. We can say that the 'state' of new writing gained its independence around 1968. According to the new writers, in their declarations of independence in the special issue of *Australian Literary Studies*, a phenomenon as unliterary as the Vietnam war is claimed to be the chief factor that created a need for the new, not only in politics as such but also in the politics of literature.

Despite this, however, literary independence cannot really have had anything to do with that war, for much of what the new writers say, when they look back in anger, has to do with finding literary ancestors to rebel against. Yet the question is whether they in fact have any. They claim that independence has been won from "the sloppiness of Australian poetry of the fifties" (Jim Thorne), from a "realist aesthetics" that has

dominated Australia for many years, a realist tradition which in Wilding's words is even seen as "monolithic." We also find the usual denunciation of the "hegemony of English writing" (John Tranter), although it sounds highly improbable that English writing could really appear this way in the sixties.

But when the English were cast out, the Americans moved in. The watchword of the new writers became Charles Olson's "what does not change is the will to change." This rhetoric of literary liberation is familiar enough. Wilding declared that "a huge gulf opened between what had been appearing and the new writing that has appeared since."

We can view Wilding's *The Short Story Embassy* both as belonging to the new mode of writing and as a symptom of the "huge gulf" which supposedly separates it from what "had been appearing" in Australia. Wilding's novel is itself a fiction which is "interested in, self-conscious of, its own evolution, aware of its generative processes." *The Short Story Embassy* is a novel about short-story writers in the process of writing short-stories. It is the sort of novel which Christopher Lasch has denounced in his popular *The Culture of Narcissism*. There are, in Wilding's novel, many references to novels and stories, but the novel that is all the time being written seems to be the novel itself – or at least parts of it. But who writes it, or who wrote it? Whose story is it? We do not know, and we don't even know how many characters there are in the novel, as they themselves doubt the existence of each other. Apparently there are four of them: Valda, Wendel, Laszlo, and Tichborne.

Valda used to be a poet (confessional women's poetry), but is now trying to write a novel about this "girl who screwed a pusher." Laszlo is a novelist of the Flaubertian kind, obsessed with details, keeping a note-book; he used to employ metaphors with organic referents, but is now using metaphors with mineral referents. Laszlo writes about Valda, but fears that Wendel is doing the same, but he is afraid to ask him because that might prompt him to do so. Laszlo also claims that he is writing the whole novel, that is to say, he claims to be the narrator, although he is not certain as he himself may be a fabrication of Wendel's. Wendel might have written that Laszlo wrote the novel. Finally we have Tichborne (a name familiar to Australians as a 'fiction'-maker) who is a literary critic but who has also written part of the novel.

I hope this brief description gives those who haven't read



the book a fair idea of what it is like. If it is a new kind of novel and if it signals the huge gulf between itself and the traditional Australian novel, how does it then accomplish this task? How does it differ from older Australian novels? It is my contention that it can only do so through an absence of what is usually associated with the Australianness of Australian literature. In this case it means the absence of the 'monolithic' realist Lawson tradition, and it means an absence of the theme of Australianness as opposed to universality.

Murray Bail has, it seems to me, brilliantly moved beyond the Lawson tradition in his well-known short-story "The Drover's Wife," but Wilding's strategy in falsifying his predecessors is different. He has simply overlooked the tradition and turned to other models. Being a self-conscious writer, he has declared his debt to other writers. He has pointed out himself how the opening of his novel is a quotation from Henry James. The influence of Richard Brautigan's novel *Trout-Fishing in America* is evident, too. Such references to other writers are simply signs of Wilding's awareness that literature is made of literature and that it does not represent life as it is, as the realists falsely believed literature could. The presence of a preoccupation with the fictionality of fiction, with parody and irony, surely gives us reasons enough for claiming that the novel is a post-modernist one.

But I am interested in more than merely classifying it. There is a peculiar way in which this novel continuously blends poetics and politics and blurs the distinction between them. Similarly it blurs distinctions between literal and figurative language. To take an example of the latter:

'We have fattened him long enough,' Wendel said; 'Now we must move in for the kill.'

'I don't like metaphors,' Laszlo said. 'They may not be metaphors.'

Exactly: metaphors may not be metaphors, in the sense that a metaphor may also be misunderstood. The whole novel may be a metaphor or it may not be a metaphor. For what is an ambassador and what is an embassy? Someone and something which represent a state in another country, and according to the characters they represent the state of new writing, just as the novel itself is an ambassador of the new writing, and just as Wilding himself represents the new writing of Australia in Australia.

How the Embassy represents new writing can be seen from the following: Tichborne and Valda have been buying books, some of which are books of poetry which they are not allowed to bring into the Embassy. But the worst thing is that they have also bought a literary magazine:

'My God,' said Wendel, 'I thought we'd made that clear. I thought I'd said I wouldn't have that name mentioned in the Embassy.' He pointed to a quarterly from Melbourne.

'What, ---,' said Tichborne in surprise.

'Don't say it,' said Wendel. 'Don't ever mention its name inside these walls.'

'Within these environs,' Laszlo added.

'Oh, but . . . ' Tichborne began.

'An article,' Wendel and Laszlo said. 'What sort of article?'

'A literary article,' they said.

'It's about the state of new writing,' he said.

'What do you know about the State of New Writing?'

We might add here that Michael Wilding "wasted a lot of time deludedly sending material to existing media: Meanjin asked (and still does ask) for stories – and has rejected some fifteen of them and never published any." This must have been somewhat disappointing to Wilding since he in 1971 had praised Meanjin for its eclecticism in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (June, 1971). The juxtaposition of Wilding's experience and the quotation from his novel may explain why you begin to wonder as to how metaphorical the novel is. Is it not literally about how rotten the state of fiction is? For what prompted this vision of a state of writing where publishing is all the time seen in relation to spying, eavesdropping, kidnapping, executions, and what have you?

On the one hand the atmosphere of the novel may be due to Wilding's borrowings from Henry James, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe, but on the other hand one is tempted to believe that these literary allusions are meant to delude us. Is the novel not rather about Wilding's experience of local literary intrigues? It is my suggestion, then, that instead of reading the book as an example of international post-modernism we should read it as an autobiography, and as a book about literary politics in Melbourne and Sydney. Thus the novel can be seen as an allegorical version of the above-mentioned survey of new writing which Wilding wrote for the *Australian Literary Studies* two years later.

Wilding's essay tells the story (like the novel) of the difficulties and hardships of the emerging group of new writers in the cities. It tells of their battles against the 'monolithic' literary traditions and the repressive policies of the entire publishing industry. But where the novel ends on a note of profound pessimism the 'real' story which Wilding tells in the essay almost has a happy ending. Although Wilding in his novel lets Valda claim that "writing's all lies," and although he would probably subscribe to a motto Kris Hemensley has taken from Jean Ricardou as to the effect that modern texts are "productions which reveal themselves" and that previous texts are "productions which try to conceal their own functioning" (another way of expressing Wilding's idea of the huge gulf), it seems that all this self-awareness of the problematics of language has not in the least affected Wilding's way of writing *about* literature. Has his self-awareness disappeared?

Apparently so, for Wilding's essay is traditional literary criticism in a traditional literary periodical which denounces the predecessors' tradition, gives oneself a major role in the transformation of literature, and so on. This rhetoric of literary liberation is certainly not demystified, and resembles the blastings of Pound and Lewis or the anger of Amis and Braine. Thus according to Wilding, the new writing was nothing less than "a rejection of alienated specialised capitalist modes of production, a living example of a transcendence of contemporary fragmentation and alienation." What is most interesting, however, is Wilding's view of the literary tradition. In another context Wilding has *warned* against ignoring the Australian literary tradition since



he says, "to ignore the leftist nature of much Australian writing especially from the thirties to the sixties is to *ignore a major strand*."<sup>5</sup>

We could juxtapose this with a remark of Stephen Murray-Smith's to the effect that for "the would-be radical writers of today *there are no great, bourgeois forerunners* of significance to our own culturally-differentiated society."<sup>6</sup> A certain degree of agreement is found here between Murray-Smith and Michael Wilding, and if this is so, the rejection by Wilding and others of the literary tradition is contradictory. How can (would-be) radical writers of the seventies reject a literary tradition which contains no great bourgeois forerunners and the major strand of which is of a leftist nature?

Because this is so and because Wilding wanted to create something new, he and the others had to misrepresent the Australian literary tradition as monolithic, reactionary, bourgeois and realist. In *The Short Story Embassy* he celebrated himself as the ambassador of the new state of writing in fiction, and in the essay, in fact; but it is perhaps the peculiar plight of the Australian writer that he has no tradition to rebel against. But there is another reason why the Australian modernist or post-modernist is in a special situation. Again Wilding himself can help us. In the essay "Write Australian," to which I have already referred, he quotes something H.P. Heseltine once said:

The canon of our writing presents a facade of mate-ship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness. But always behind the facade looms the fundamental concern of the Australian literary imagination. That concern, marked out by our national origins and given direction by geographic necessity, is to acknowledge the terror at the basis of

being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers. It is that concern which gives Australia's literary heritage its special force and distinction, which *guarantees its continuing modernity*.<sup>7</sup>

Wilding claims that Heseltine "ends up with . . . a rigid, monistic canon," and he goes on to question whether the Lawson-Furphy manner has had any influence at all (so why rebel against *them*?). But if Heseltine is right, then the problem for Wilding is precisely how to be modern and how to "make it new" when the concerns, mentioned by Heseltine already guarantee the continuing *modernity* of the Australian literary heritage.

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#### Notes

1. Leslie Fiedler, "Cross the Border," in M. Cunliffe (ed.), *American Literature Since 1900* (1975), p. 344-66.
2. Frank Kermode, *Continuities*, (New York, 1965), p. 23.
3. George Watson, "French Critics," in *Encounter* (Feb. 1975).
4. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, (London, 1977), p. 221.
5. Michael Wilding, "Write Australian," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 24. [My italics]
6. S. Murray-Smith, "The Novel & Society," G. Dutton (ed.), *The Literature of Australia*, (Penguin Books, 1974), p. 439.
7. H.P. Heseltine, quoted by Michael Wilding, *op. cit.*, p. 28. [My emphasis]

I am the only person on this earth who remembers what she was like as a young woman. She wasn't what she became, but then few of us remain what we were. I was the first child born of a very mixed union. On the one hand was my father, twice her age, well educated, with a grown-up family, some older than she was, and forever the boss. For most of my life, and hers, he managed the Van Diemen's Land Company brickworks at Cooe, Tasmania, though when he first took the job that fabulous man, Captain Jones, was the owner, as he was of so many other projects in the Burnie district's earlier days.

I don't suppose that her husband at first realised her quality and charm. Certainly he'd have appreciated her beauty. All his life he knew exactly how to assess a woman's looks, but it's doubtful if he ever really appreciated the rare one he had captured.

She was twenty-two when she arrived in Victoria from Wales on the old *SS Ormuz*, and then travelled to Burnie with her mother, that elderly, twice-married martinet whose purpose was to marry her late sister's husband – a marriage arranged by her sister when she realised she was dying. Consanguinity wasn't an issue – grandmother was well past child bearing. Her purpose was to keep the old man company and so enable him to stay on the family farm at Village Lane, Seabrook. Because of my grandmother's third marriage we became related to that remarkable family of Burnells who had three beautiful daughters, one of whom married Joseph Aloysius Lyons, so far the only Tasmanian Prime Minister of Australia.

After the marriage of my grandmother to her dead sister's husband, my mother stayed for a time with a woman who was always affectionately known to us as 'Aunt Liz.' For many years she ran the Cooe post office and general store, and she was the mother of Enid Lyons. Her husband, whom we called 'Uncle Bill,' was a rollicking, witty man who earlier ran a local sawmill, but when I remember him it is as foreman of the VDL sawmill at Burnie. It is no wonder the three beautiful Burnell girls did well in their marriages and lives. They inherited from their mother a taste for knowledge, and from their father a leavening of wit and laughter.

I was born when mother was twenty-three, so I remember my own mother as quite a young woman. In early days, until she was defeated by age, illness, and perhaps her family, gaiety was the quality I best remember, and beauty. She was very beautiful. Her skin was the real English rose-petal kind,

her hair a dark cloud which curled a little round her face, particularly when she was busy. Although she usually wore it in a smooth large coil low on her neck, when she was busy, or hot, it had a life of its own, and formed distracting ringlets without any help from anything but itself. Her figure in those days was rather like the wood carving of Dolly Dalrymple in the new Lyons Library at Devonport, which has the same rounded early Victorian look, though why a part-native woman of that early period should look as if she were wearing corsets and gear suitable for that restricted way of life I'll never understand. But mother's figure in those days was, like Dolly Dalrymple's, full and swelling, but not too much.

I remember her best on summer mornings when the inside fire wasn't lit, and she was baking out on the back porch where there was a second stove, a Lux, where she made the most delicious pastry and scones I've ever tasted. Mother's eyes were real forget-me-not blue, the same beautiful color as those of my cousin, Enid Lyons. Usually in the house she dressed to match in blue linen, and was quite a ravishing sight. Her hands and arms were shapely, the blue linen overall was most becoming, and usually she managed to get a little flour on her flushed, happy face. No wonder our twice-married and twice-her-age father wanted her so badly that he defeated his eldest son, who was handsome, young, tentatively in love, but lacked the experience and fire of his father, who certainly managed his life well but didn't exactly improve hers.

When visitors came, as they often did, walking the long mile from Cooe or the two miles from Burnie and then climbing the thirty-seven steps which led from the brickworks to our front yard, she was almost incandescent with pleasure. I was very young when we moved from our own much nicer house just over the Cooe Creek bridge. That was, and until recently, still remained, a very handsome building which must have been lovely before the railway line was built, taking some of the land between our house and the sea. Although I was too young to remember much about that home, I do remember that father kept a boat on the edge of the small cove sheltered by Red Rock, which is still a feature of the coast at Cooe.

My sister and I liked living above the brickyards. In season the green hills offered mushrooms for the picking, blackberries, elderberries, and lots of wild flowers, mountain trout,



cucumber mullet, silver eels, roach, and an occasional rainbow trout in the creek and dam, for the brick machine ran on water power provided by an efficient turbine. There were also lots of platypuses in both creek and dam.

As replacement for her pleasant well-built house on the main road, mother hated the brickyard place which had been a jerry-built farmhouse with tiny rooms and no conveniences, though it wasn't all that long before we had an efficient bathroom, laundry and toilet. These were certainly outside, as most were in those early days, but the building was lined, and therefore warm, and not all that far from the house. But somehow mother always mourned her pretty, convenient home on the main road. Before we moved to the brickyards, father, with the help of a tradesman or two, knocked the three back rooms into one, thus creating a long narrow room with two fireplaces, where most of our days were spent. It was comfortable enough but never pretty, and mother yearned for prettiness.

I well remember one time when I was about twelve years old, mother, father, my sister and I clip-clopped to Burnie in our elderly phaeton to see an interstate musical show. When we got home, cold and shivering, the banked fire was persuaded to burn and we all drank a cup of hot milk. Conversation turned on the dancing, which featured some extra high kicking, which father seemed to admire extravagantly.

"I can kick as high as those girls," said mother.

"Nonsense, my dear," father remarked in a patronising tone. "Nonsense. Those girls train for years."

In less than a minute mother was in and out of the bedroom, having discarded corsets and dress and wearing one of her best petticoats, lace-trimmed and threaded with blue ribbon to match her eyes.

There was a three-inch step up from the room we were in to the small sitting room and a doorway above that. Mother approached it purposefully.

"Hold on, Flo," said father, "That's much too high."

But it wasn't. Our pretty mother demonstrated three times that high kicking was easy: she touched the top of the doorway each time.

"Satisfied I can kick?" she rather breathlessly asked father – but he said nothing.

We had wonderful parties up in the old brickyard house, which had started life as a rather squalid farmhouse. The living room was cleared for dancing, our friends, and my music teacher, Miss Zoe Evans, came from Burnie, with many of her friends, everyone we knew in Cooee was invited, and most of them came. Mother loved parties. She cooked and cooked and piled the big table, carried in after the dancing had finished, with delicious food. Until I became uninterested in food, a very recent happening, I often made some of her original recipes, and found them better than most foods I've tasted.

Mother seldom, in her earlier married life, became angry, but when she did, even father took cover. One time she wanted to go with him on a business trip to Launceston. By that time she seldom went out, because earlier she'd broken both her ankles jumping a stile and still suffered a little pain

on our very rough roads. Father said this was a business trip and he was sorry but he couldn't take her.

"But Fred, I only want to do some shopping. It's our anniversary and I'd like to visit Launceston. We haven't been there since our honeymoon."

But her husband was adamant. "Not this time, Flo, but I'll bring you a nice present."

For some reason mother got it into her head that the present would be either a short fur jacket, or a nice brooch with blue stones.

I was in the living room when father got home at about eight o'clock one evening. After greetings and a tin of toffee for us, he handed mother a brown-paper covered parcel. It certainly wasn't a brooch or a fur jacket. When she opened the parcel it consisted of six narrow white boxes, in each, a pair of above-elbow length white kid gloves, suitable for a royal garden party.

"I hope you like them, Flo. I can tell you they weren't by any means cheap."

Mother didn't say one word that I remember. There were certainly no garden parties in Cooee.

The next day our mother started to paint, using some glossy green which was originally intended for the cow-shed. Naturally she wore the garden-party gloves to protect her hands. She painted the light and dark oak panelling in the living room, the water cooler brought home from the Middle East by our stepbrother, a pickle jar of ruby and white glass given to her by her mother-in-law, who thought her son's second marriage was a mistake, as the girl was too young and not even educated. The bird cage with the two canaries looked quite nice. If she hadn't run out of that green paint she might have started on the piano. When father came home at lunch time it was all finished, including the notice which said 'Wet Paint.' Father was speechless, especially over the four-foot dado, which had featured alternate panels of light and dark oak, which we had all liked very much.

All our mother said was, "Be reasonable, Fred. I didn't want to waste your present, and those gloves were only suitable for a garden-party or a ball, and you know we don't go to things like that. I didn't want to waste them all. They're such beautiful quality."

Although she grew old, cross and fat until, when she died at ninety, she was a travesty of herself, that protest was quite enough. Father treated her very warily thereafter. I also noticed that he consulted her more often and didn't, as usual, just issue orders.

He died in 1939, her eldest son of sixteen years dying in the same sad year. She loved her difficult husband with great devotion, and nursed him through several years of cancer.

It became increasingly difficult to think of her as young, gay and happy, but she was, not always perhaps, but at least sometimes. Age defeats so many, and it seems certain that I alone remain to remember her as she was when I was young and she not so old. Pretty, gay, always busy, a wonderful, most skilful housewife and full of love, not only for her family, but for anyone she thought of as needing her help and strength. My mother died in Wynyard hospital on 14 September 1973, in the same year that my husband Milor and I travelled from Albany, Western Australia, to see her.



# Exploitation and Resistance

RICHARD ELY

*A New History of Van Diemen's Land*

Lloyd Robson: *A History of Tasmania. Volume 1. Van Diemen's Land from the Earliest Times to 1855* (Oxford University Press, \$50.00).

All things change, but only ideas have histories. Tasmania as such – the place and the people – has no history. It is not the place and people, but *ideas* of the place and people, which have histories. There have been as many histories, strictly speaking, as there have been ideas. John West, that magisterial historian, seems to have known this, or something like it. Writing his history in Van Diemen's Land in the early 1850s, he yet chose to call it *The History of Tasmania*. Perhaps Lloyd Robson is aware of it, too. Although the major title of his book is *A History of Tasmania*, manifestly his subject is not Tasmania but, as the subtitle of volume one indicates, Van Diemen's Land – not light but darkness.

In speaking of 'ideas,' I have in mind what can be called 'command-ideas.' It is illuminating, and not completely absurd, to say that human history (or rather histories) began with the myths of primal disobedience. Thus, before Adam's alleged fall, 'to be,' simply and remainderlessly, was 'to be commanded.' But then Adam fell, and that fall was two concurrent things – an act of non-compliance with the divine *logos* or command-idea, and an act of compliance with his own command-idea (I say his own, but it seems that some responsibility for it belongs to Eve and the Serpent). Strictly speaking, the Eden myth discloses four command-ideas – God's, Adam's, Eve's and the Serpent's. Each of these four command-ideas, issued in the face of the real possibility of non-compliance, potentially became the subject of a narrative action. In that sense there are four possible, and irreducibly distinct, histories of the Garden – four distinct ways in which sequences of events are re-describable as sequences of action, and re-action.

During the nineteenth century Tasmania has been the arena for sometimes sharp conflict between more or less incompatible command-ideas – conflict between the command-ideas of, respectively, the Aboriginal inhabitants, the British government through its official and unofficial agents, those who came here in servitude, those who came of their own choice, those (of European descent) born on the island, and so on. The complex gradations of tension, and the varieties of conflict within, as well as between, such groups, while evident from even a casual glance at the documents, continue to evade precise classification.

Inevitably, therefore, engaging in that conversational yet artificial activity called 'writing the history of Tasmania' comes down to inherently hard and tricky decisions about what command-ideas, and sets of command-ideas, are cur-

rently most worth inquiring into and telling about. And of course, in making those decisions and striving to carry them out, the historian is, on a certain level, responding to whatever command-ideas – liberal, humanist, ethnic, patriotic, imperialist, socialist, religious, careerist, market-oriented, high-culturist, or whatever – define his own historicity (or potential historicity).

The command-ideas which, to Robson, define his subject matter, tend to fall into two counterposed sets. On one side lie command-ideas enjoining exploitation; on the other, command-ideas enjoining resistance. The distinction is not absolute – there are, strictly speaking, no pure exploiters or pure resisters in Robson's world – but one of focus, of what one notices and draws attention to. Some persons and groups are brought to centre stage for the exploitative propensities they exhibit; others for their show of resistance. Although a few groups, chiefly, perhaps, women and convicts, are more complexly presented as exploiters in one context, and resisters or victims in another, the tendency of Robson's narrative is, in practice, to tend to reify some persons and groups as exploiters and others as resisters (usually resister-victims). Thus reified, the command-ideas of exploitation and resistance form the warp and woof of most of Robson's narrative.

Chief among the exploiters, according to Robson, were: some of the pathfinder navigators; almost all of the penal administrators; most of the capital-bringing aspirant gentry; some of the convict banditti, roving and going beyond the margins of settlement; and an increasing number of small-scale settlers (emancipist and free). At the behest of command-ideas, mostly taken as too obvious to need much analysis or comment, what they mostly had in mind to exploit was land (sometimes fisheries), and labor (rarely, Aboriginal labor; significantly often, convict labor; increasingly, free labor recruited in Britain, drawn to the colony by prospects of a better material destiny than Britain was likely to afford).

West's history builds – I assume knowingly – on something very like this distinction. First came the phase of penal despotism, in which governance was premised on the axiom of human depravity:

For many years the government of these colonies was absolute: could it be otherwise? A company of exiles, overawed by dissolute soldiery, interspersed here and



there with a few persons of superior class, could only be governed by despotism.

But that penal order – premised on the axiom of original sin – came increasingly to be penetrated and undermined by the agents of a higher civility – the “free,” earnest, hardworking, emigrant settlers, many of whom, before coming here, had been deeply nourished by the milk of true British Protestant Christianity. In Sorell’s time, West wrote,

Van Diemen’s Land was not inviting to strangers; but the current of colonisation was set in, and its ultimate superiority, compared with all others, became an article of Tasmanian faith.

The shift, here, from “Van Diemen’s Land” to “Tasmania,” is unlikely to be accidental.

It would not, in practice, be easy to separate, with scissors and paste, what one could call the Vandemonian and Tasmanian strands in West’s *History*. Nor, clearly, has Robson tried to do anything so banal. My point is rather that what one might call the *idea* of Robson’s history is distinctly present,



and distinguishable, within West’s work. Eliminate what amounts to West’s version of the large Christian hope, and Van Diemen’s Land becomes quite as terrible a place as Robson thinks it was. West’s ‘laws of increase,’ in other words, become little more than Robson’s bleak social darwinism.

What command-ideas does Robson himself respond to? On the level of what one might call the command-ideas of historical practice he seeks, and largely realises, a kind of disengaged closeness with his subject matter. The ‘closeness’ is obtained by, where possible, describing people’s actions, motives, and decisions in their own words. Quotation marks are omitted, and fragments of utterance and contemporaneous testimony woven into a densely-textured stream of reportage. The same technique has often been employed by Manning Clark, and its potential effectiveness as a device for conveying the particular in its immediacy is unquestionable,

although some (not myself) see the dropping of quotation marks as a derogation of the historian’s duty to his ‘subjects.’ ‘Disengagement’ is achieved by casting the narrative, as a whole, into that increasingly standardised refuge of the modern historiographer – the ironic mode. As in Clark’s *A History of Australia*, Robson’s judgemental imperatives (or sometimes just strong likes and dislikes) pass in this way through a kind of strenuous documentary due-process, but emerge, if anything, refreshed at the other end.

I do have a general worry about the use of this technique of dense narration, not over the alleged sacredness of direct quotations, but over the tendency of the technique to induce the historian, striving of course to sustain the pace of the narrative, to keep putting off the task of explaining the larger context of the individual elements built into the narrative. Here Robson is often negligent: no man is an island; nor, historically speaking, was Tasmania. *A History of Tasmania* is often remarkably contextless. The recurring tendency of Robson’s narration is inward, toward denser and more integrally unified description and evocation of the local, and away from the larger economic, rural, cultural, educational, religious, and political developments contemporaneously taking place in Australasia and the larger world. Arguably, what happened in Van Diemen’s Land was, mostly, just an unsurprising variant of these developments. Although Robson’s writing, as writing, is clear, fluent, and at times powerful, the deeper tendency of his narrative is often, in no good sense, gothic.

What of the command-values which lie behind, and are expressed through, these procedural command-ideas. These tend to be elusive, proving to be easier to specify by what they are not, than what they are. Robson, plainly, is repelled by cruelty, sectarian acrimony, hypocrisy, vanity, social pretension, WASP cultural smugness, the anglophile cringe, aggressive ambition, material greed, and back-biting. Not least, he is angered by collective insensitivity (worse, blindness) to the needs and values of others, and of other cultures. Robson’s expressed dislikes, in other words, are multitudinous; but it may be worth noting that, as a set, they tend to be distinctive of, and to define, what for several centuries have been the deeper searchings and self-criticisms of the middle-class Protestant conscience. It is tempting to wonder whether in Robson’s case (and for that matter Manning Clark’s) middle-classness has been turned over by its own conscience. Whether or not that is so in Robson’s case, it seems to me far from absurd to see a great deal of the Australian historiography produced during the last forty-or-so years as reactive (to a degree, reactively generational) in that way.

Resistance came chiefly from three sources: from the convicts, many of whom harbored unapproved command-ideas of the proper use of their labor and time; from the Aboriginal inhabitants, who deeply, if often unco-ordinately, were moved to resistance by traditional command-ideas of how the land should be regarded and used; and, a more shadowy theme, resistance from the land itself. Although the last theme – the resistance of the land, or at least of its friends – is not much developed in this volume, hints are offered that it will play a larger part in the next. The implicit command-idea seems to be a mix of the sacredness inherent in wilderness, and reverence for ecological balance.



None of these themes, apart from this last, is novel. All – again excepting the last – are embodied, or at one remove alluded to, in West's striking epilogue to his mournful recording of the dealings of the colonists with the Aboriginal inhabitants. That record, he believed, showed that the history of the Tasmanian Aborigines was not unique, but accorded with the experience of myriads. As an exhibition of providence, he states, it fills us with astonishment. But as an exhibition "of human passions" it fills us with "humiliation and sadness." Robson, in his preface, calls this dispossession and destruction of the Aboriginal people an impressive example of extermination and race relations so characteristic of the nineteenth century. West no doubt would simply have agreed, only perhaps asking why the nineteenth century was singled out. The "laws of increase," West had added – bringing out into the open a command-idea which seems to cause Robson terrible retrospective *Angst*, although he nowhere quite repudiates it – seems to suggest the right of migration; neither nations nor individuals are bound to tarry in one spot, and die. The assumption of sovereignty over a savage people is justified by necessity – that law, which gives to strength the control of weakness. West and Robson – each a determinist at least ninety percent of the time – come close in the end to agreeing, not only that the European and Aboriginal Tasmanians in the first half of the nineteenth century lived in the best of all *possible* worlds, but as to what, visible to all eyes, was happening in that world. The chief difference is that while this social-darwinist spectacle was interpreted by West with long-term hope, it simply deeply distresses Robson.

Robson, resorting often to a favorite epithet of Matthew Arnold's, sees colonial society as profoundly "Philistine" – as not altogether unmoved by good intentions, but as never more than shakily establishing such "appurtenances of British civilisation as religion and education." Above all, however, Vandemonian society was "obsessed with escaping all responsibilities of all kinds to everyone but themselves." But such dismal views are scarcely novel. They were commonplace from the 1830s to the 1850s, in both Britain and Australia, and not least among the anti-transportationists.

Again, one may usefully refer to West. In 1847 he produced an anti-transportation pamphlet under the pseudonym "Jacob Lackland." Robson dismisses West's choice of a pseudonym as simply "curious"; but it had a striking meaning, which West explained in *The History of Tasmania*: a colony organised as a repository for the criminals of a large nation was, and was known to be, a danger to the "moral and social welfare" of the children growing up in that colony. Van Diemen's Land was not a place which its honest citizens travelling abroad could, without danger to their reputations, acknowledge as home; but a land not fit to be acknowledged cannot be 'home' in any proper sense. Hence the choice of pseudonym. West, in the pamphlet, bade his readers look out, and forward, to the time when their sons and daughters "shall go forth, the free among the free." "Make not your name a scorn and a hissing!" Jacob Lackland concluded, "Perform your duty, AND SAVE YOUR ADOPTED COUNTRY." Robson and West largely agree, in the end, about what was wrong with the place. The most significant difference between them is that while West premissed, and structured, his history on the view that a remedy lay to hand, Robson not only denies this, but inclines to see the agitations of the "northern non-

conformists," which he sees as hypocritical, as being much part of the explanation of the overall rottenness of the place as the activities of those they criticised.

It is not altogether incorrect to say that Robson has shown what West's *The History of Tasmania* would be like with the optimistic, forward-looking bits left out. West's history, and this explains much of the narrative and explanatory power, is Augustinian. It has a unity of a kind; but it is not, and was not intended to be, a seamless tapestry. In its architecture it is premised on something very close to Augustine's view, developed in the *Civitas Dei*, that the history of mankind shows the development of two interwoven, but in concept and in principle separable, cities. One 'city' was the city of man, based on the command-idea of self-love; the other was the city of God, based on the command-idea of love of God. Augustine remarked that while his subject is the story of the two cities, he has named it only after the better one. West, of course, in choosing to call his book *The History of Tasmania*, made a similar decision for a similar reason. In Augustine's 'city of man' rational egotism leads to implicit compacts of mutual restraint for the sake of mutual safety and benefit, and in time complex patterns of watchful civility become entrenched. But the old Adams, the primal egotists – pure utilitarians all – never lose sight of the self-interest of Number One. In contrast, the deeper civilities developed among those who love not self but God, are (at least when shored up and shielded by God's prevenient grace) as genuine and disinterested and eternal as the God who commands them.

Just a few things Robson warmly endorses. Just a few things he might perhaps point to, Noah-iike, should God decide once again to wash it all away. Some of the homes built for the gentry, some of the churches, some of the bridges – most of which were designed and built by convicts and ex-convicts – are acknowledged to be objects of enduring beauty. Some of the do-gooders – cultural and educational missionaries – really did bring into Hell a taste of sweetness and a glimpse of light. Here and there, in consequence, philistinism reigned but did not rule. Some of the missionaries and churchmen brought with them and passed on vestiges of a once great and golden Age of Faith (when and where this great age was, is not disclosed by Robson, and I suspect correspondence will not be entered into). But that is about all, for I suspect Robson pities rather than admires the main victims of his story – the convicts and Aborigines.

The clues to Robson's positive values are few, but the overall message is tolerably clear, and it is close to that of Thomas Arnold Junior's brother, Matthew. Robson – knowingly, I suspect – operates within the frame of something like Matthew Arnold's version of the distinction between Hebraism and Hellenism, despising the former but still inclined at times – in the throwaway Melburnian way – to quietly cheer the latter.

How reliable as *history* is *A History of Tasmania*? The key to answering that question is Robson's statement that he had "practically to form [his] own Historical Records of Australia for Van Diemen's Land." The footnote citations certainly show that he has done this, but also that he has done little more. One would therefore expect his study to be strong, or stongest, on the *HRA* type of theme – the successive develop-



ments of large policy, the personalities and interactions of senior administrators, economic statistics, and suchlike – and the treatment of these themes is at least solid, and sometimes fine. Correspondingly, one would expect his study often to be suspect on the kinds of topics which were of little interest to the *HRA*-type compilers – Mickey Mouse topics such as education. And again, this expectation is confirmed by the result. For instance he is misled, possibly through misreading a despatch from Gladstone, into believing that the Irish National system had been established in NSW by the mid-1840s; but in fact, of course, it came into being only in 1848. Or again, perhaps because he has gathered much of his information about the operation of the British and Foreign School

system in Van Diemen's Land from the Anglican critics of that system, he misrepresents to the point of parody the role to be played in it by religious instruction. The sections on education are, as it happens, far from a washout; but a good account of education in Van Diemen's Land remains yet to be written.

Still, no doubt like many others, even some who are severer critics than I have been, I await with much interest Robson's next volume.

*Richard Ely teaches history at the University of Tasmania.*

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# books

## A Clouded Life

Leonie Kramer

J.S.D. Mellick: *The Passing Guest, A Life of Henry Kingsley*  
(University of Queensland Press, \$19.95).

In the end, Joseph Furphy might have done Henry Kingsley a service by his now-famous reference to Kingsley's characters in *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* as "virgin-souled schoolboys." Certainly Dr Mellick is not perturbed by it. He comments, with the solemnity that characterises his biography, "Whether they were or not, the presence of such people in the Bendigo area supports rather than discredits Kingsley's depictions of this class." Well, there's a strange sense of logic governing that statement. Were Kingsley's characters or were they not "virgin-souled schoolboys"? The question is begged. Would the presence of "such people" (which people? of Kingsley's class? or of the class of "virgin-souled schoolboys"?) support Kingsley's depiction of whatever "this class" is? These are trivial, nit-picking questions, it might be said in defence of Dr Mellick's comment. But they are not, because they point to one of the principal defects in this biography, namely that there are too many assumptions and speculations per gram of fact.

The story of Kingsley's period in Australia (from 1853-1858) was long a tantalising mixture of speculation and romance. John Barnes' work did more than anyone else's to reduce the mystery, and sort out the known from the supposed. Dr Mellick has been able to add, from various sources, to Barnes' account, though oddly enough Barnes' listing in the bibliography is not accompanied by any salute in the text. In amplifying his story of Kingsley's life in Australia (which is for me the chief interest of this book), Dr Mellick resorts to a method which can at best be described as inexact, at worst as misleading. He fills in details of Kingsley's biography from the novels.

Now it would be absurd to argue that nothing that Kingsley writes about Australia in *Geoffrey Hamlyn*, *The Hillyars and the Burtons* or elsewhere can be taken to represent his own views or experiences. But neither can it be argued that fictional passages can fill blanks in recorded facts about his life. Still less can this be so when Kingsley takes pains to attribute impressions and views to a character, and when he changes narrative viewpoint frequently. So, while it is absurd to say

that Kingsley's description of the terrifying storms round Cape Horn would have been written in the way it is if he had not himself made that voyage, the description cannot stand in for the facts of the journey. The problem arises when Dr Mellick blurs the boundaries of fiction and biography, and by so doing conveys an impression that one knows more than one can about the latter.

The second defect of this biography is that, while it encourages speculation of the kind I have criticised, it eschews interpretation which might have provided genuine new insights into Kingsley's character, temperament and beliefs. The biography is, as a result, not in itself interesting. It plods along carefully step by chronological step, but conveys very little sense that it is dealing with a human being, rather than a train pulling in and out of stations according to an aberrant timetable. So poor old Henry loses out yet again, as he so often seems to have done in real life. We don't know if he's interesting or not (unless we happen to have decided that already), and we don't know why he is, if he is. Nor do we discover whether all his travelling and writing and learning has been worth it. Has he made any impact on Australian writing? Does his work mean anything now, or does he simply lie embalmed in Furphy's caricature?

Of course Kingsley wrote two worthwhile, if imperfect, novels about Australia. He had a good prose style, and a well-developed historical sense. Above all, he had the ability to examine his own experience and to attempt some interpretation of it. He was able to speculate, therefore, upon the relevance of an English gentleman's education to life in a totally different world; he was able to become interested in the political debates in the new colony; to learn a great deal about its botanical richness and variety; to develop some ideas on the meaning of democracy. What he could not do was shake off the habits of his literary ancestors, and dispense with some of the more extravagant devices which disfigure his plots. His colonial experiences did not fit readily into the fictional forms he knew, and he was not skilful enough to know what to do about the problem. Most of all, perhaps, he had brother Charles' reputation to contend with.

Dr Mellick throws away the opportunity to comment on this interesting matter. Between them Charles Kingsley and Alexander Macmillan seem to have coerced Henry into making quite significant changes in the text of *Geoffrey Hamlyn*. Charles was concerned about the propriety of certain scenes, and Macmillan disliked "scenes of darkness," and had a



preference for "heaps of marriages" and "the merry laughter of happy families in the green forest." That reference to scenes of darkness is interesting, because there is a strain of melancholy in Kingsley's writing which provides a haunting counterpoint to his celebration of the beauties of the Australian landscape. The tainting of natural beauty by the evil of man has been a persistent theme in Australian writing from Harpur to the present day. Kingsley is not given credit for having some perception of its meaning; and Macmillan must have suffered a strange lapse not to recognise that, for all the beauty of its landscape, Kingsley was not depicting an environment entirely suited to "merry laughter . . . in a green forest."

What I most regret is that Dr Mellick has nothing substantial to say about the importance, to Kingsley, of his Australian years. Yet the evidence he produces, along his firmly plotted chronological path, is that in Australia, Kingsley was relieved of his brother's shadow, and that when he returned in memory, he saw his experiences alone in the bush and among sights and people so different from any he had encountered before, as the most pleasurable of his whole rather clouded life. This might have been a romantic after-view of a harsher reality, but that it existed at all is worth more than a passing acknowledgement.

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## Melbourne Views

Stuart Macintyre

John Arnold (ed.): *The Imagined City. Melbourne in the Mind of its Writers* (Allen & Unwin, \$17.95).

Hume Dow (ed.): *Memories of Melbourne University* (Hutchinson, \$15.95).

*The Imagined City* is a well-conceived, neatly-executed and ultimately unsatisfactory literary portrait of Melbourne. John Arnold has selected twenty-eight short extracts (each of 1500 words at most) of prose writing from the 1840s to the present. The extracts are arranged chronologically and accompanied by contemporary illustrations. Each has its own thumb-nail sketch and photograph of the writer, while endnotes supply a full list of sources and suggestions for further reading. The deftness of the editorial apparatus complements a well-designed and attractive book.

The selections encompass many of the writers we would expect: Boldrewood, Kingsley, Clarke, Richardson, Boyd, Marshall, Porter. Others are less well known. Céleste Mogador came out to Australia in 1854 as the wife of an impoverished aristocrat and lived in the bayside village of St Kilda while he, the French Consul-General, sought to repair his fortunes on the goldfields. In her novel *Les voleurs d'or* (1857), Melbourne is a primitive trading post ('No repose, no sociality'). Marjorie Clark, who wrote under the pseudonym Georgia Rivers and who is represented here with a semi-

fictional account of a young office worker in the 1920s, is another who is new to me. But one looks in vain for Dyson; either of the Palmers; Prichard; Morrison; Martin; Hardy; Oakley; or Lurie, to name but a few familiar figures who have written from their experience of Melbourne. Other readers will have their own preferences, but if we are to pick teams, then thirty-six, which is the conventional number in the southern city, offers a greater freedom of choice than this present compromise between the codes preferred in the hometown of the publisher.

This is to say nothing of other forms of artistic representation. What of O'Dowd, Dawe or Buckley? What of Humphries, Hibberd or Esson? What of the rich tradition in radical politics which has provided us with images of Melbourne for more than a century, from Charles Jardine Don gesturing across the bay from Williamstown in 1857 ("Look at yonder city") to Ralph Gibson's anticipation of the People's Republic in 1951 ("19--? This is Socialist Melbourne")?

The answer is that all are excluded by the editorial rules. John Arnold has limited his choice to the novel, short story and autobiography. He has insisted further that the writing be based on first-hand experience, thereby excluding historical novels, and accepted autobiography only if the author also published an eligible novel. As he points out, this last test admits Joan Lindsay but disqualifies Graham McInnes – and that example alone suggests its inexpediency, since McInnes' memoirs tell us more about the inter-war Melbourne of the middle class than any of the extracts that appear here.

The editor insists that he is making no claim for the merits of one writer over another, nor is he interested in "pushing or proving a particular theme or idea." In his hands neutrality is a positive virtue and strict representation an organising principle. He is concerned, first of all, to achieve chronological balance and, except for a hiatus of twenty-five years at the turn of the century, he does manage to find at least one item for every decade of Melbourne's history. He wants to span the classes and, despite the incestuous tendency of recent fiction to concentrate on the lives of the literary middle class, he does so. His principle of evenhandedness extends even to Melbourne's spatial differentiation, so that he pushes his selection out to Moonee Ponds, Footscray and Williamstown in the west, Port Melbourne and St Kilda in the south, Toorak in the east, and Fitzroy, Collingwood and Brunswick to the north. Beyond a five mile radius from the city centre, however, he finds he cannot go, and he laments the failure of our writers to tackle the further suburban reaches.

Arnold's understanding of the city is, in fact, fundamentally physical, and it is this limitation that restricts his collection. When he asks how Melbourne writers have "defined their environment," he is looking to see how they have used its "distinctive geographical features," and this in turn leads him to choose extracts with a precise sense of time and place.

Thus the passage selected from Brian Fitzpatrick's unpublished novel, *The Colonials*, is a description of the family's Moonee Ponds house ("eight brick-walled, dingy-papered rooms"); that from Joan Lindsay's *Time Without Clocks* is her picture of a cottage set in Arcadian Toorak; while the extract from William Dick's *A Bunch of Ratbags* is its opening account of the dilapidated home in Footscray. With rare exceptions, the people who inhabit these spaces are defined not so much by their social relationships, their in-

teraction with each other, as by their relationship to an immediate environment, the properties that establish them as belonging to this suburb rather than to another. The same is true of the illustrations, striking as many of them are: they are carefully chosen to convey the physical characteristics of the locality and the people in them (except for some crowd scenes in the city, the MCG and such public spaces) are posed accordingly.

The book is therefore a series of snapshots of particular places frozen in particular moments of time. However vivid the verbal and visual images, they do little to clarify the historical processes that have worked on Melbourne and to which the writers were responding. Part of the difficulty lies in the brevity of the extracts, which makes it all too easy to lose the movement and scope of the complete work. The treatment of Leonard Mann's fine novel, *The Go-Getter*, provides an instructive example. We are given a passage where a man, of whom we know little more than that his name is Chris, has invited a woman who served him in a city pub, to come out with him. As we follow their tram journey to St Kilda, the familiar landmarks provide a backdrop to a growing intimacy, and Chris's observation of a new block of flats in St Kilda Road prompts him to imagine new business opportunities. But the reason for these musings remains as opaque as the context in which the journey takes place. It is in fact a fragment of a city quickening into new life in the tail end of the Depression, and the trip to St Kilda is one step in the gathering momentum of Chris's fortunes after he had been marooned in a northern working class suburb.

Now it is a hazard of the enterprise that such contexts should be occluded, and this presents the editor with special responsibilities. If we are to establish a sense of Melbourne as something more than a series of places and moments, it is all the more important that he choose extracts to suggest the processes that bind its parts together. And if we are to see writers responding to Melbourne and not simply to the City, to its particularities and not simply to an artefact of modern civilization, then we need to be shown what shaped its distinctive identity. In some cases Arnold has managed to do these things. For the late nineteenth century he has given us some of the images that are common to any metropolis – the splendors of the 'Block' and the exotica of the demi-monde immediately to its north could be reproduced for Sydney or Manchester or any other equivalent city. He has given us some of the comparisons whereby writers seeking to characterise Melbourne merely emphasized its derivative character – the North American grid pattern of its topography, the Glaswegian civic architecture, the Alexandrian sky and Mediterranean brightness. But he has gone beyond this stock-in-trade to identify some of Melbourne's particular characteristics by dwelling on the class that stamped its distinctive image on "Marvellous Melbourne." Jessie Couvreur ("Tasma")'s *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* and Martin Boyd's *The Cardboard Crown* conjure up that thrusting, confident era of the wool kings and merchant princes who raised their Italianate mansions around Government House.

But their downfall in the financial smash and the Depression of the 1890s is barely suggested. Ada Cambridge tells us that "A better example of the vulgarising effects of wealth, and of the refining effects of being without it, was never packed in a neater compass," but that scarcely hints at the

moral collapse engendered by the bankruptcy settlements of the Land Boomers, nor of the extent to which Melbourne's ruling class lost its earlier confidence. Throughout much of this century, Melbourne's ruling class have fought a prolonged battle to overcome this sense of deficiency. Yet the ebbs and flows of this struggle and its principal landmarks – Melbourne as a national capital, the renewed reverses in the Depression of the 1930s, the post-war industrial growth and the loss of direction in the 1970s – find but scant expression here. What we have instead are vignettes of particular corners of Melbourne.

*Memories of Melbourne University* really ought to be reviewed by someone who doesn't have them. My own are too intrusive and too much entwined with some that appear here to allow a proper evaluation. I find it impossible to tell what the outsider will make of ten former undergraduates describing such a self-enclosed world. Revelatory or indulgent? Aimless or purposeful? Who knows? I can only proceed on the assumption that the present pre-occupation with personal fulfilment and the intense curiosity about the lives of others have not yet been sated.

Hume Dow says in the Introduction that autobiography is "a notoriously slippery genre." I do not think it is unfair to suggest that only some of the contributors have grasped it, and that the majority have produced instead a collage of reminiscence and anecdote. Nor is it an accident that the minority – A.A. Phillips, Jack Hibberd and Stephen Murray-Smith – are singled out by their appreciation of the complexity of the literary form. They reminisce also, but they do so with an awareness of the reminiscer's responsibility that, as A.A. Phillips puts it, the river of memory should be traced along its serpentine course but it must in the end wind its way out to sea.

So long as this sequence is followed, the evocations of lost undergraduate worlds possess a unifying coherence. There is the freedom, the excitement and doubt of the first undergraduate days; the intellectual and emotional discovery that follows; and finally the completion of this transitional adulthood. All the changes that separate Vera Jennings' University in the days when Royal Parade was unsealed from Louise Carbines' University with its pedestrian walkway over Swanston Street, all the particularities of curriculum, dress and mores that are recalled by the contributors, find a place in such a context.

Where the unifying theme is lost, however, the nostalgia becomes fulsome. The most common weakness is the surfeit of eccentricity and genius. Too many of the writers remember their contemporaries as characters larger than life, extraordinary in their talent and wisdom or even in their awfulness. Granted that these were our salad days and that never again would we be able to play out our favored roles with the same freedom, there is a striking absence of the run-of-the-mill vulnerable post-adolescents that I recall. Memory plays lesser tricks also. The watery fate of Guido Barrachi in 1917 is oversimplified, the Keon-Cohens are given a wholly imaginary descent from the Cohens, and so on. Few of these slips are of consequence, but let me correct one before it is too late. Lapsing into his Dr Johnson mode in the course of a splendid memoir, Stephen Murray-Smith makes sport with a naive academic who asked him recently to account why he became



a communist. It ill behoves the Boswellian fall-guy, who was himself a member of the Communist Party, to spoil a good story, but I must explain that my question was meant as a gentle reminder to Stephen that he was once a radical. With that protest I had better conclude.

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## New Light on Will Dyson

Doug Hall

Ross McMullin: *Will Dyson: Cartoonist, Etcher and Australia's Finest War Artist* (Angus & Robertson, \$29.95).

With the publication of Ross McMullin's book on Will Dyson we have something of a redress after decades of neglect of a major satirist, draughtsman and inspired thinker. Why such a rare and conspicuous talent as Dyson has not before now been recognised with a major publication is almost inexplicable. Yet, perhaps, therein lies a paradox. Sporadically admired, and at times acclaimed in his native country, his achievements are more fully appreciated in England than Australia, even though, in recent years, his work has received renewed interest here. It was certainly England which gave him the scope to develop unhindered by parochial and insular editorialism. He found these attitudes barely tolerable on his return here in 1925, even though he had been prepared to stay permanently. Dyson was interested in universal issues and problems which affected people generally, regardless of their cultural or regional character. His fascination with the Douglas Social Credit system, vehement opposition to militarism and hatred of self-righteous conservatism were pre-occupations over a long period.

The experiences which helped shape Dyson's attitudes have hitherto been recorded only generally, and the subtle aspects of his character virtually ignored. This biography goes some of the way to reveal the complex nature of the man through the description of experiences, associates and the times. Why Australia failed to keep Dyson when he returned in 1925 is suggested in the book through an elaborate and fascinating account of our attitudes and social climate at that time.

McMullin correctly contends that Dyson's uncompromising insistence on independence, and his objection to the unreasonable editorial constraints placed upon him, would only enable his career to continue as a mildly amusing cartoonist whose work would be tempered with appeasement. As the book amply reveals, so many of Dyson's attitudes were based on direct experience. The struggle to shape a future in Australia in the 1890s, although having come from a working class family, the breaking of the ice as a cartoonist and caricaturist, but seeing a dead end with every new venture, finally caused him to leave Australia in 1910 for England to establish a reputation, only there to have the Empire involved in the Great War. All this was a recipe to fill such a sensitive

yet resilient personality with cynicism and despair. The death of his wife Ruby (Lindsay) in 1919 only compounded the sense of his own mortality.

There is a large chapter devoted to Dyson, the war artist. It is the work done in France, and the superb folio of lithographs which followed, which made his contribution as a war artist unique. It was not merely Dyson's desire to be in the front line which made his work special, but also his views on militarism and contemporary politics, which provided him with an informed and philosophical base from which to work. The title of the book tells us that Dyson was "Australia's finest war artist" and there are few who would dispute this, even though the chapter on the war years fails to deal adequately with the work in artistic terms.

In fact, this is the book's greatest disappointment. In so many ways Ross McMullin's book is a splendid biography – yet when his narrative details a particular interest of Dyson's, and a cartoon or etching which arises from these interests, the author simply describes what is depicted and the issues associated with what is shown. The book fails to discuss or



speculate on any aesthetic views of Dyson, and when comments on artistic matters are made, and this is done infrequently, the author quotes from other sources. This shortcoming repeats itself when dealing with Dyson's etchings. Why was he attracted to that medium? Why in particular did he use

drypoint, and how should this work be viewed in the context of the art of satire?

Dyson's etchings are well represented in Australian public galleries because this work is a significant contribution to twentieth century caricature and satire. For a large part of Dyson's career he was able to produce work related to his interest, instead of spending a lifetime responding to the whims of editors and the fleeting nature of minor issues. The strength of his work lies in his ability to produce a series of works exploring themes such as those ranging from militarism (the Kultur Cartoons) to Freud (the series of drypoints on "Our Psychoanalysts").

Unlike so many cartoonists with long periods working for newspapers on a regular basis, Dyson never developed a style or technique in his draughtsmanship which would reduce its graphic strength for the purpose of meeting deadlines. There was no room for compromise in the methods and content of his work; independence and integrity were central to Dyson's character and work.

Dyson would turn in his grave if he could see the quality of the reproductions in this book. With the exception of those reproduced from the collections of the Australian War Memorial and the Australian National Gallery, the prints are an embarrassment. I don't know if the publishers required the author to supply the photographs. If they did, the book is an example of why this attitude should change; if this wasn't the case, the quality control of the publishers leaves a lot to be desired. The clarity and quality of the lines and halftones are lost in these reproductions and we are left with blurred, scratchy images which can only hint at the talent of the man the book is about. There is no shortage of Dyson's original material, yet most reproductions in the book appear to have been taken from the newspapers or magazines in which they were first published, and the quality is superior in the original publications. The fact that the National Gallery of Victoria owns no less than 130 works makes the shortcomings in this area unforgivable.

I anxiously awaited my copy of the book and, despite these criticisms, it shows itself to be a thorough piece of research, written in a manner which ensures its accessibility to the wider public. It not only throws new light on Dyson, but also provides a vast amount of information on Melbourne's and Sydney's art, literary and publishing figures. The area dealing with the Great War serves as an invaluable piece of new writing on the subject. I'll read the book again, and enjoy it and learn from it, but for a serious, scholarly and critical evaluation of Dyson's art, I'll have to look elsewhere.

*Doug Hall is Director of the Bendigo Art Gallery. He mounted a national touring exhibition of Dyson's work in 1980.*

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For some years now the Adelaide Friendly Street Poetry Group, which holds regular readings, has been bringing out anthology collections of work by their members. More recently they have begun to publish very handsome paperback collections, some of them illustrated, by particular poets. It is an admirably vigorous publishing program.

*Messages of Things* by K.F. Pearson is an impressive collection. It contains adaptations and translations from Catullus, Heine, Borges, Lorca, two sixteenth century Spanish, and two Spanish American poets. He invests them all with the color and texture of his own thought.

Some of the best poems are about objects and suggest that things are like mirrors, in the sense that the way we look at them and what we see are a reflection of what we are – thus the cycle "Self Portrait from Objects in a Room," of which I liked the last, "A Cigarette Paper," the best:

Small and frail as a cowrie shell,  
and twisted in discard,  
a cigarette paper just holds  
to the edge of the wicker waste basket  
waiting a breath for its fall.

It's like waiting a breath for your fall but at times,  
at times the sheer diagonal flight of a bird  
across the upper rectilinear blue of your windowpane!

The love poems, of which "Catullan Variations" and "Gaius Petronius at Night" are the most interesting, are passionate and sensuous with many memorable lines:

If you dissemble "otherwise engaged," send apples  
kissed by your round lips, and I will freely eat.

The dramatic poems, "Triptych Monologues" and "The Assassin His own Counsel" show a jazzy zest for contemporary language. In "Odysseus" we are given a sense of the interpenetration of the past and present, of Odysseus still alive, as he is, in the twentieth century.

However in spite of its vividness and vitality, the collection seems to me to be marred by frequent clumsiness:

Once I used to say, Call no man happy who is not born  
dead  
but now I stand before you, myself the felicitous man

The last four words sound stilted and pretentious and jolt to a wobbly halt.

... I'd have you remember our pro-  
-ess of my cock and your clitoral tip

The grammar is clumsy; cock and clitoral tip are words of conflicting sorts, one popular the other medical, which shout angrily at one another; the splitting of the word prowess is idiotic; the poem, which calls itself "A Formal Sonnet," is nothing of the kind.

However in spite of these and other blemishes far too numerous for comfort, and perhaps that's their intention, *Messages of Things* is interesting throughout, nearly always alive and vivid, with many real insights.



*the white rose & the bath* by Jenny Boulton is an altogether smoother performance. It is very direct, immediate poetry about people and situations written in well-controlled free verse, well-modulated but without much rhythmical variety. Sometimes it is confessional, overflowing with joy and/or pain; always it is celebratory, the language spare and often witty, drawing together disparate associations which attend particular moments of illumination:

at 31 i feel like a juvenile delinquent  
& dance high kicks in the chorus line  
of addiction life is a craving  
i keep on wanting more.

This comes from one of the best poems in the book, "ambush," which begins:

in the long grass  
i am inconspicuous  
as a stained glass window,  
a cat hidden by  
a single blade.

Among the poems which I like best are "the vase of blue iris," with its subtle evocations of scent and color and of being in love, and the poems about childhood and family. Of the intense love poems, "it's funny" is very good indeed.

The book is full of memorable passages of great eloquence. It is often witty and at times wryly funny, above all it is always natural. My only quibble, apart from the boredom of unrelieved free verse, is that occasionally the deliberately low key results in banality, a clichéd conversational note.

Rob Johnson's *Caught on the Hop* is another interesting collection. There is a wide variety of work here: landscapes which are usually suggestive metaphors for personal experience, poems about the first and second world wars, poems about people he has met, and about day to day experience, like eating in a Chinese restaurant, a pub scene, a literary seminar and so on, poems based on the history of painting and literature, poems about lust and tantalising women, poems about dreams and hobgoblins, poems about religion and, best of all, poems about his family.

The last poem in the book, "Returning from the Beach," about his life with his wife, is Johnson at his best. It is painfully honest and the landscape which is both real and a metaphor is strong and vivid. It's too long to quote in full, and an extract wouldn't do justice to its quality. Its structure depends on the repetition of phrases and images, as well as on the juxtaposition of such things as "the cliff-top softened by winter rains" and the smoothing of the lines of his wife's face. But the war poems and some of the historical ones are distanced, so that their lack of immediacy gives the sense of poems manufactured as some kind of duty, rather than the result of inner compulsion.

In subject matter some of the poems, such as "A Drawing by Leonardo" and "Diana of the Pharmacy," remind me of A.D. Hope, but although they are good, they haven't got the older master's tautness, strength and ability to work a metaphor through with astonishing invention to completion. This failure leaves this reader at least with a feeling of dissatisfaction, of something missing.

*Leaving Maps* by Jeff Guss has been likened to the work of Thomas Hardy. It is true there is a similar elegaic note and a comparable strength of narrative drive, but there the similarity ends. Hardy, even when occasionally clumsy, has rhythmical richness and variety and at times he achieves great intensity of grandeur or magic. To read a collection of Hardy poems is to dance to a variety of country rhythms and from time to time to be delighted, uplifted, astonished. By comparison *Leaving Maps* is dull. The rhythms, eschewing metre for the most part, are boringly similar to one another and the tone of voice is uniformly grey. Some poems toy with rhyme and assonance, which helps to give structure.

In spite of this general impression there are a number of excellent poems in the collection, even one or two of considerable rhythmical delicacy. There are poems about childhood, about teaching and being taught, about biblical situations, poems based on pictures, about country characters and situations. Most of them have a narrative core. All are melancholy, tender and compassionate.

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## A Proud Woman Revealed

### Marian Aveling

Alan Martin (ed.): *Letters from Menie: Sir Henry Parkes and his Daughter* (Melbourne University Press, \$19.95).

One of the richest sources drawn on by A.W. Martin in his mighty life of Sir Henry Parkes were the letters written to Parkes over some forty years by his eldest daughter Menie Thom. Martin necessarily used the letters to tell of Parkes rather than his daughter. This book repays his debt.

In his preface to *Letters from Menie*, Martin cites approvingly the observation of Gordon Allport that a series of intimate letters "often better than fiction or biography, even than autobiography . . . tell us what a particular concrete life is like." So true is this of *Letters from Menie* that one has the illusion at times of eavesdropping, of invading the privacy of a proud woman who would have been appalled to see her hopes and fears and embarrassments thus revealed. One doubts that even Martin's celebration of her victories would have reconciled her to such revelation.

But we can be grateful. Menie is well worth meeting, both for her own sake and as a more than usually articulate representative of her class and sex. She reveals herself as intelligent, witty, passionate, compassionate and at the same time rigidly restrained and censorious of any lack of moral restraint in others. The ironic self-awareness that plays upon her perception never lightens her sense of sin, in herself and others, though age brings a sort of apathy. That irony and apathy make her story something other than heroic, but tragic is not too strong a word for her gradual defeat.

Menie writes about human relationships – about her mother and sisters and brothers, and then about her husband and children – of loving and distrusting and struggling to

understand. She writes painfully about the subterfuges and humiliations of genteel poverty.

But Menie writes most vividly of non-domestic topics, of religion and of politics. The one obsessed her, the other her father. The passion and precision with which she addressed these subjects may owe something to the vocabulary at her command; both partake of what Mary O'Brien has called "male-stream" traditions of complex language and thought, at a level of abstraction not yet developed for the female concerns of family and reproduction. And her language is specially charged here with the need which fuels all these letters – to draw and hold her father's affection. She writes of politics to show him how effortlessly she can enter his world, of religion to draw him into hers.

A.W. Martin's treatment of the material is almost flawless. After a short biographical sketch he lets the letters stand more or less alone, with a few explanatory passages in the text and fuller notes at the back. One may quibble a bit at the political bias of the distribution of information between text and notes; some readers may think it odd, for example, to find explanations of obscure elections in the text, while having to turn to the back to find out that Menie's last baby died shortly after birth, and that exasperating (and mysterious) Henry is her nephew.

But all is redeemed by Martin's long after-piece on "Themes in Menie's Published Writings." In the guise of analysing Menie Thom's quite extensive output of poems and newspaper romances he uses their autobiographical content to enlighten both her letters and her life. Some of Thom's heroines are beautiful inwardly and outwardly, and achieve perfect love on earth and in heaven; some write great novels and achieve intellectual acclaim and financial independence. But Martin makes no cheap points about wish fulfilment; rather he follows her through a complex search for identity and belonging. He highlights the "special pain" with which Thom's fiction treats of "the suppressed ambiguities of womanhood." He concludes by quoting a fine vitriolic piece, an aside set at the moment when one of Thom's most noble heroes discovers his all-consuming passion for the heroine most like Menie herself:

Oh woman, self-enslaved – well, would we change it if we could? Is it not her business, the sole purpose for which she exists? What sort of woman is she who has no domestic tyrant, before whom she can cringe, submit, get her individuality trampled out of her? She is the most unhappy creature in creation.

It is one of the strengths of women's history that it has led us to treat women's sexuality as problematic, to pay close attention to our historical characters' sense of themselves as women. But it has been thus far a rather one-sided pre-occupation. Historians have hardly considered the other side of the equation, male sexuality. We now have a fine picture of Menie Thom's sense of herself as a daughter, wife, mother and sexual object. It remains to be explained how Henry Parkes understood himself as father, husband and lover.

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## How do you like your history done?

Gerard Windsor

Thomas Keneally: *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (Allen Lane, \$14.95).

Thomas Shapcott: *White Stag of Exile* (Allen Lane, \$12.95).

Peter Mathers: *A Change for the Better* (WAV Publications, PO Box 545, Norwood, S.A., \$9.95).

Colin Johnson: *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (Hyland House, \$12.95).

History may allow a multiplicity of approaches, but historical fiction seems to encompass an infinity of them. Here, for example, are three spectacularly different versions.

Thomas Keneally writes a form of historical fiction, nearly all the time now, and on this occasion he's even getting his history to perform a neat trick of repeating itself. *The Cut-Rate Kingdom*, a tale of the Curtin Government, was published in 1980 by Australian Consolidated Press as an example, Keneally himself said, of a novel of the future; that is, it appeared looking like the *Woman's Weekly*. But it now seems that the success of *Schindler's Ark* has let the counter-revolution in, and *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* has turned up in a handsome, stiff-jacketed Allen Lane uniform. It's mainstream historical fiction; large amounts of fairly accurately-recorded public events, battles, personages, etc, and a few fictitious individuals introduced to provide the human interest in the foreground. In this case it's a mistress for the incumbent of the Lodge, and a legless member of the Press Gallery. It's a fair story, and Keneally's fruity, suggestive discourse on Australia is easy to listen to.

Colin Johnson's view of his nation is prouder. He has a noble theme, the last agonies of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. But he is not equipped to handle it. He has the requisite passion, and he has done the anthropological and historical research. But something more is required to raise *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* from being an account of a tragedy that all right-minded people will grieve over, to a piece of fiction of independent worth. That something more is literary craft, and Johnson unfortunately does not have it. This is a harsh judgement on a writer whose third novel arrives plastered with earlier tributes from such diverse admirers as Blanche d'Alpuget, Ian Tumer and Tom Shapcott. But this novel seems crude stuff indeed. Above all Johnson is linguistically clumsy and tonally quite out of control. As a result the prose is slack and clichéd, even making occasional forays into pulp fiction and melodrama. In the first pages the youthful Wooreddy has a vision: "another boy would have . . . collapsed in a quivering heap of shock." He later "thinks that his last moments were upon him" and later still he is desolate because "all that he had known and loved was no more."

Perhaps the most pervasive problem is the narrator's voice. Much of the action is seen through the eyes of Wooreddy (whose honorific "Doctor" is never convincingly explained). In his youth he observes four white men ("nums") raping a black woman. He watches the scene with the detachment of a scientist. Yet, at one moment, Johnson cannot resist an outrageous pun. "Another *num* came and went – to be



replaced by another." Later, for the first time, Wooreddy boards a white man's boat. "He was adrift without an anchor, another sea-simile based on new things, but with allies." To think of the clichéd metaphor is unlikely enough. But then to refer to the figure of speech, and to cast the whole thing in a syntactical nightmare, is simply embarrassing. Johnson cannot decide on, much less control, the way his characters are to think or speak. An Aboriginal woman finds a white man "sitting in front of his tent writing up his thoughts." But a few pages later her understanding has regressed and his is merely "endless lines of marks on the soft white bark." The Aborigines, gradually being crushed by modernity, lapse into the most unlikely modernisms. On a trek one says to another, "You married a local girl, didn't you? Are you going to drop in on her people?"

When it comes to Europeans, authorial control is stronger, but that is possible because Johnson simplifies his attitudes down to one: undiluted disgust. The whites all seem to come from one small part of London, and might even be neighbors of Arthur Daley. Their speech is overloaded with aitches. George Augustus Robinson says, "Sir, when I give han horder, I hexpect hit to be hobeyed hat once, an' wit no back chat." But the ascription of this trait must have slipped Johnson's mind because we are told of a much older Robinson that he "now never ever dropped his aitches"!

Johnson just does not have his craft under control. The vituperativeness of his physical portraits becomes a joke. One old settler is a "weedy honky-nosed ghost"; a convict shepherd is portrayed: "the hog nodded his head and fluttered his straw-coloured eyelashes down over his little piggy eyes. He could no more keep his mouth shut than pigs could fly." The narrator's irony is leadenly heavy-handed: "Mr Clark rushed up from burying another Aborigine, but only a child, to ask if he was ready."

Such linguistic chaos is not a matter of superficial flaw. Epic tragedy doesn't grow miraculously from an accumulation of botched sentences.

Tom Shapcott makes the most adventurous and lyrical use of history. His second novel, *White Stage of Exile*, is a collage centering on the suicide in Brisbane in 1899 of Karoly Pulszky, a former director of the Budapest Fine Arts Museum. The novel's technique seems to have left critics lukewarm; they have missed a narrative tension and normal psychological unfolding. Further, I suspect, although the work "is the result of Shapcott's interest in a dilapidated grave near his home in Brisbane," he is only very marginally interested in setting up a Europe/Australia contrast, and doesn't even bother explaining why Pulszky chose Australia for his exile. I'm not sure that we're still very welcoming of our novelists who choose settings and characters other than Australian. But, of these three "historical novels," Shapcott's is the most sophisticated and the one that will repay rereading.

The materials for the collage are verse as well as prose, and possibly as much material by another hand as by Shapcott himself. 'Hungarian' newspaper reports, and parliamentary proceedings are included, although they may well have first seen the light of day in Brisbane. We are not told. Certainly the whole book has a classical uniformity of tone; it is measured and economical. And in place of more conven-

tional qualities its strength is in a richness of parallel and analogy and symbol. The white stag, for example, has one of its originals in the legend of the vision of St Eustace. Out hunting, Eustace came across a stag bearing in its antlers a crucifix, and he was converted to Christianity. To his daughter, Pulszky is Eustace, hallowed and visionary. But he is also the stag, brandishing and yet burdened by the object of his dedication. In his case this is Art, and it finally becomes the cross on which he is in fact crucified. But if a painting by Pisanello is the explicit source of Shapcott's stag, there are overtones of that great calendar favorite of a generation and more ago, Landseer's "The Stag at Bay." Pulszky is hunted and brought to trial (possibly justly) by family and political enemies moved by a medley of impure motives. His fate even has Yeatsian shades to it; "*hysterica passio* dragged this quarry down."

The nuances of the stag are typical of the book. It is always a tentative appraisal of human action and motivation. There is no dogmatism, no simple-minded partitioning of good and evil. Shapcott uses people not to judge but to echo and reflect and highlight one another. Pulszky's daughter Romola marries Nijinsky; her memories of father and husband are juxtaposed and spark one another. But Pulszky's wife, Emilia Markus, is queen of the Hungarian stage, so that it is not only art connoisseur father, and dancer husband, but actress mother, that are perpetually highlighting and counterbalancing one another. The artists' flair is everywhere in Shapcott's variation on this bizarre scrap of history.

Peter Mathers is too much a creator of his own world to be interested in playing variations on any episodes from the historical one. Not that he has no contact at all with the actual. In fact his love of myriad concrete details makes him the literary equivalent of the great Australian weekend handyman and car-tinkerer. He manages an encyclopaedic range of reference to motorbikes, farm machinery, plumbing, cars (usually used), chemicals, lists of all sorts, and more motorbikes.

The teeming specificity of Mathers' prose is of a piece with his fictional world. The pace in his novels is a sprint, and he sees no good reason to slow it down over the shorter distance. He is in fact hyperactive, and keeping up with him is exhausting. The breakneck development of action, the verbal decathlon followed by the linguistic pentathlon, the mass migrations of characters on and off stage, the sheer impatience with leisurely scene setting, description, characterisation, the surrealistic slides flashing on in rapid succession, the snap of the one-liners closing off the stories – these are what make for the exhilaration of Mathers' stories, but they can also make for indigestibility. The stories can become over-dense and clogged.

The stories that open up best are those where Mathers gives most rein to his talent for dialogue. The unadorned stichomythia that he writes is the nearest thing we have in Australia to the products of the Irish masters, Flann O'Brien and Beckett. Mathers does not lose out in the comparison. There is a more serious import behind Mathers' dry fare than O'Brien has, and for Beckett's bleak metaphysical background Mathers substitutes a thankfully hilarious social and political consciousness. "Like a Maori Prince," where an

Aboriginal tries to get a haircut in a country town, is a triumph almost entirely of uproarious dialogue. It is the irrepressible wit of the victim that makes the story a perfect union between high comedy and social exposure. *Mutatis mutandis* the same effect is achieved in half a page of dialogue in "Arthur and Alwyn," between Alwyn and a train conductor on the subject of "a bomb blessing." A more or less horrible world peopled by more or less objectionable people is Mathers' view, but by a trick of lightning he allows other spectators to find it all invigorating.

*Gerard Windsor lives in Sydney. His first collection of stories, The Harlots Enter Here, was published in 1982. A second collection will be published in 1985.*

## Myself and Everything

Graham Rowlands

Bruce Beaver: *As It Was* (University of Queensland Press, \$7.95).

Alan Gould: *The Pausing of the Hours* (Angus & Robertson, \$9.95).

Bruce Beaver's 1979 autobiography of his early years has been reprinted after the poet-novelist's receipt of the 1982 Patrick White Literary Award. Writers' autobiographies often appeal to other writers. *As It Was* appeals to non-conformist writers in particular – and to other Australian non-conformists. Moreover, it appeals to those who experience or encounter mental illness. I like it.

Which isn't to say it's a satisfactory literary work. There are two major problems. Firstly, it *doesn't* tell us enough of what we need to know to put into perspective what it *does* tell us. Secondly, Beaver's reader *needs* to know that manic depression is a genetically inherited *biological* illness. Although the condition obviously has to manifest itself in psycho-social contexts, its ups and downs can function independently. Manic depressives are often very happy or very unhappy solely because of body chemistry.

*As It Was* contains both poetry and prose. From the viewpoints of content and technique (as distinct from structure) Beaver's poetry and prose are equally sound. To say that his two genres differ little isn't criticism of the poetry; it's praise for the prose. *Up to a point*. The poetry is *distinct* from the prose in one important respect – over and above the 'unjustified' right hand margins, of course. Most episodes in the poetry – not just the many farm scenes – are satisfying, fully realised and virtually self-contained. Not so with the prose. The reader feels that a chapter, a page, a paragraph, even a sentence could be made into a large slab of autobiography. Or a novel.

Beaver has written one novel. I suspect that more novels lurk in these thirty-four pages. They could, of course, be written in poetry. But he's already written six poetry collections.

I'd like to hear more about everything he tells us in prose – except perhaps his detailed use of popular and high culture as

escape from the rest of Australian society. A familiar story. I'd like to hear more about his relatives, his formal education, his suicide attempts and his relationship with the woman next door. Why were his suicide attempts incompetent? Why were his mood swings so marked? He doesn't explain. He doesn't even agonise over attempted explanations.

Which brings me to my second reservation. I'm glad Beaver hasn't written a case book. I'm grateful for his detail, scenes and acerbic commentary. For someone so frank about adolescent humiliations, however, he's reticent about clinical insights into human behavior. His single worst passage accepts insights from "the sociologists etcetera" while rubbishising the terminology itself. In fact, the terms come exclusively from psychology and psychiatry. Beaver's inaccuracy is revealing. I suspect that the reason for such unfair defensive writing is his own experience of shock treatment. This experience and its contexts were apparently so horrible that they prevent him from even retrospective fairness. The reader is left wondering whether or not muscle relaxants were administered before "the headphones." And the reader needs to know.

Beaver tells us that Gandhi's assassination sparked off his first suicide attempt. Gandhi's assassination and what else? He tells us that at the time of his grandmother's death he was "ready/to try and kill myself again." Why? He describes *how* he didn't; not why. Moreover, the attempt was followed by seven months of hard work. Why? And it was *while* enjoying his first real sexual relationship that he lapsed into inexplicable misery. I see no reason why his prose should be exempt from the self-knowledge sought in "The Poems":

poems grounded  
in the being  
of myself and  
everything.

If Beaver didn't receive much sympathy in the past he's in danger of not receiving much now. Even if "manic depression" were the last two words of his book, their use would make us more understanding. Without them, the reader may find him self-pitying and pitiable.

And what a chance missed – so far. Beaver has the literary skill and the material to explore the infinitely complex interconnections among biology, psychology, environment and society. After all, when the theories have been advanced and refuted, we can't *explain* Hamlet's or Richard Mahony's behavior.

The blurb on Alan Gould's fourth poetry collection refers to a "transition from his earlier dense, knotted textures . . . to . . . music of almost visionary calm." The blurb is right. It will probably sell books. It will certainly encourage readers who begin at the beginning and can't continue.

If Gould's transition were itself a poetic achievement, the readers lost in the process mightn't matter. Nothing is gained, however, but relief. The obscure first half fails; the clear second half succeeds. It's not, of course, as simple as that. Nor is it just my taste.

Half the collection is written in heightened language; the other half is more relaxed, if never colloquial. There's also much rhyme. Paradoxically (and no doubt intentionally) al-



most all the rhyme occurs in the relaxed second half rather than in the, or *as the*, heightened language.

Clearly, then, my objection to the first half isn't a bias against traditional poetic forms. It is, however, an objection to the strained, obscure and outmoded language produced by gratuitous use of other languages, banal general categories, long words rather than short, tortured syntax for, or to sound like, blank verse, self-conscious displays of knowledge as well as the characteristic literary and historical allusions explained in the Notes. So we read of "pellucid" skies, "embrangled" lovers, sailors "trouser'd in a white stramash of seas" and (in a serious poem) the following sailors' chant:

Bugger off, fool-bird,  
before your lousy aeronautics turn  
you into supper.

Although it would be possible to commend certain lines, stanzas and certain data on pearls, dolphins and albatrosses as effective and informative poetry, no classicist would want this sort of praise. The only poems that work completely in the first half are the metaphysical "Galaxies" and the shark poem, "A Limb of God: 1938":

In what lies their good character? In this,  
that blue be blue and all that's not be eaten  
because the belly is the only sea.

The second half starts with a sequence "The Artificial Life." In fact most of this half is about "artificiality," whether it be systems of values or objects like needles and scissors. Gould apparently contrasts this artificiality with nature and physical labor in the first half. It's possible, however, that he implies a similarity between this artificiality and nature and physical labor. I'm unsure about the extent to which he wants to reveal the artificiality and vicariousness of his experiences of nature and physical labor. After all, he wasn't born when sailing ships ended their world runs. His knowledge of "albatrosses" in the first half openly comes from the library. Perhaps most of the first half's subject matter comes from the same source.

If Gould does imply similarity rather than contrast, it's paradoxical that he's at his poetic ease in the "artificial" life while only able to write about the natural in forced, artificial language. Could it be that he's not prepared to admit his distance from the physical prowess and endurance of his heroes? Could it be that he knows that the closest he'll come to his ideal is self-imposed struggle with deliberately difficult language? Whatever it is, I hope he's done with it. He has much more to offer.

"Fifteen Statements in a Card Game" is a short, complex poem about ironic destiny in simple words and rhyme. "A Masque for the Wedding" and the longish "The Fear of Dying" set a cracking narrative pace in couplets. In "A Masque," the poet directs the actors in the masque of the bride's murder to play their parts at a real wedding, hinting that life imitates art. A beautifully controlled poem. In "The Fear," the terminally ill woman dreams of avoiding her specific death by dying in other ways. Prior to her actual death she dreams of a lesbian relationship that turns out to be

with herself. She is death. A marvellous poem.

Gould's collection ends with vivid, intelligent poems about simple things. While he evokes parrots, rivers and waterfalls competently, he's better with the artificial. He's poignant with ship hulls, clever with needles and ambitious with sails. He's superb with scissors:

they are the slish and slish  
that parts one stillness from another.  
They also are that stillness.

And magical with spinnakers:

Soon they will flow up like genie,  
these sudden white and blue and orange wishes  
rampant for the world to give them form.

Soon they will exist like thoughts  
and all the world, which is now just a thought,  
will be the world again.

The reader will note that needles, scissors and even Gould's beloved hulls, sails and spinnakers are inventions; not discoveries.

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## The Naming of Names

Barry Jones

Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle (eds.): *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 9 (Melbourne University Press, \$35.00).

The luck of the alphabetical draw in volume 9 of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* has provided a far more interesting range of major and minor characters who flourished between 1891 and 1939 than volume 8 (Overland 88, 1982). Grainger, Griffin, Griffith, Hawker, Higgins, Holden, Holman, Hughes, Isaacs, Kingston and J.T. Lang are in the first category, and Mary Gilmore, Monty Grover, Deborah Hackett, C.D. Hardy, Lawrence Hargrave, R.F. Irvine, F.A. James, F.S. Kelly and the Kenniff Brothers in the second. There are 678 entries by 460 authors.

Eminent writers in this volume include Zelman Cowen on Sir Isaac Isaacs; Macfarlane Burnet on his predecessor at the Hall Institute, Dr C.H. Kellaway; and Gough Whitlam on Sir George Knowles.

On a cursory reading, I have picked up very few slips: Clemenceau is described as "president" rather than "premier" in Billy Hughes' entry; the Victorian premier E.J. Hogan was Edmond not Edmund; and while Charles Kingsford-Smith's divorce in 1929 is mentioned, there is no reference to a first marriage. At times, listing characters under a formal or birth certificate name may cause some confusion – who is George Percy Grainger, especially as the

subject always called himself Percy Aldridge Grainger? (The index of authors compounds this, by crediting Kay Dreyfus with an entry on 'G. Grainger.') Hans Heysen is listed as "Heysen, Sir Wilhelm Ernest Hans Franz" and Frank Hurley as "James Francis." It is rather late to change the style now, but it would have been better to use the British *Who's Who* form – "Whitlam, (Edward) Gough" or the *DNB's* "Kendal, Dame Margaret Shafto, better known as Madge Kendal."

It is not made clear why Hackett, Deborah Vernon (1887-1965) is listed under her first married name, rather than her second (Moulden), third (Buller-Murphy), or her maiden name (Drake-Brockman), since her first marriage was the shortest (eleven years). She was most widely known, certainly to people of my vintage or younger, as the indefatigable "titanium queen," Dr Deborah Buller-Murphy, a name she bore for thirty years. The Hackett name is best known now through her son, General Sir John Hackett, a best-selling author on military affairs.

Sir Samuel Walker Griffith (1845-1920) has the longest entry, fourteen and a half columns by R.B. Joyce, beating William Arthur Holman (Bede Naim) and William Morris Hughes (L.F. Fitzhardinge) by a column. Isaac Isaacs and J.T. Lang follow with eleven columns each.

Despite his impressive record as Premier of Queensland, major author of the Commonwealth Constitution, and first Chief Justice of the High Court, Griffith still awaits a full length biography. His brief bibliography mentions only two publications – *Queensland Political Portraits 1859-1952* edited by D.J. Murphy, and R.B. Joyce in *Historical Studies*, no. 63, October 1974. Griffith was an adviser to Governors-General behind the curtain, and believed they had the duty to dismiss ministers whose actions they believed to be "detrimental to the welfare of the Empire or State." His grim professionalism is slightly counterbalanced by the unexpected romanticism, extravagance and heavy drinking of his youth.

Holman and Hughes were binary stars, both born to genteel poverty in London within the same decade, resourceful and opportunistic as young men, working their way through the union movement and up the political ladder, leading Labor governments through World War I, splitting over conscription, deserting to the enemy but mistrusted by their new allies and personally always regretting the break with their origins. Both have been the subjects of major biographies. Hughes astounds by his energy and his ability to grasp larger international issues as no Australian politician did until Evatt, but he also debased the quality of political debate for decades. We are only just getting over him.

Charles Cameron Kingston (1850-1908) has a seven and a half column entry by John Playford which emphasises Kingston's propensity to violence. I had not known that he challenged [Sir] Richard Baker to a duel, was arrested carrying a loaded revolver and put on a twelve month bond which was still in force when he became premier of South Australia for the first time in 1893. He shed his blood for the state in a savage horsewhip fight after being attacked by an Adelaide businessman. He had a reputation of being the father of his state, but Dr Playford only identifies one possible child, the politician A.E. Edwards. He vindictively kept a former friend confined to an asylum, despite medical advice to the contrary.

Among interesting short entries are Charles Downey

Hardy (1898-1941), "the Cromwell of the Riverina," a Country Party Senator and self-styled fascist with great gifts for organisation; Muriel Heagney (1885-1974), a pioneer of equal pay for women and an organiser of women's unions, with a strong grasp of labor history and international affairs; Robert Francis Irvine (1861-1941), a radical economist, sacked from his chair at Sydney University in 1922, and later economic adviser to E.G. Theodore; Frederick Alexander James (1884-1957), dried fruit grower and persistent litigant, whose High Court and Privy Council appeals over s.92 of the Constitution changed national politics; and F.S. Kelly (1881-1916), athlete and musician, associate of Casals, friend of Rupert Brooke, victim of World War I and composer of a spritely and elegant 'Gigue' (opus 7), originally for flute and transcribed for oboe, which ABC radio often plays.

*Barry Jones is Commonwealth Minister for Science and Technology and author of Sleepers, Wake!*

## Masterpiece of Trivia

Sean Regan

Peter Howson: *The Life of Politics* (Penguin, \$39.95).

Among the few forms of self-employment not recognised by the Australian taxation authorities for purposes of personal gain, that of diarist puts the greatest pressure on our fragile sense of false modesty.

Everyone can travel, but travelling, as they say, doth not a traveller make. Everyone can keep a diary. And diary keeping doth not in most cases even an appointment make. Yet every year the chronicles are begun and personal identity sustained with the help of page, pen and what remains of the English language. These are democratic times.

They are also testing times for the few remaining genuine travellers and diarists. Both are threatened by progress, if in a benign sort of way. Cheap transport is responsible for the tourist who in turn has forced the hapless traveller into assuming increasingly joyless poses and undertaking increasingly pointless journeys, of which Mr/Ms Morris's pursuit of alternative genitalia is perhaps the most disturbing example so far.

Yet the trade remains a moderately agreeable one, notably for those of Indian descent. Arriving, remember, is well over half the fun.

The diarist, however, faces the infinitely more difficult task of standing his ground against cheap information. Facts, never as essential as opinions, have taken the literate world by storm. Anecdote is now the patron saint of knowledge and memory that of intellect. The quiz show and the academy interchange: the universal graduate is on his way.

The specific difficulty this poses for the diarist is whether he can resist the fancy that accumulation of particulars will serve his purpose better than the arch-simplicity of superior observation. The trick has always been to draw from the quotidian implicit comment on the age. This means being on constant guard against the facts, the seductive detail which of



itself says nothing worth saying. The finished diary – which will have been rigorously pruned – is a record not of events, but of moral combat: the daily failures of a species locked against itself.

The pre-eminent diarist of our day is Richard Crossman. His papers began as notes for a book on the British Constitution and therefore had, from the start, a clear didactic purpose. He was also fortunate in being both an academic and a journalist. Though this can be a dicey combination – which profession provides the prose and which the logic? – in Crossman's case it proved devastating. An incisive mind was served by a trenchant pen to create a literary, as much as political, *tour de force* – not the second Bagehot he originally had in mind but something infinitely more enjoyable. It was, in a word, a Diary.

In his Foreword, editor Don Aitkin contends that the Howson scribbles “compel comparison” with Crossman. Whether, after three years of editing the things, Aitkin had had enough, and thought deliberate sabotage in the public interest, or whether from sheer naivete, he thus invites the most damning and obvious criticism of *The Life of Politics*: Crossman was a diarist; Howson kept a diary.

As Aitkin explains: “Where Crossman is introspective, argumentative, conversational – the reader always in mind – Howson is terse, descriptive, factual. The giant who strides through Crossman's pages is Crossman himself; the minor figures are painted by his brush. Howson is altogether more modest . . .”

Aitkin clearly has had much practice in marking workmanlike theses. These, however, only reach the bookshops by way of such charities as the ANU Press. *The Life of Politics* has been printed by Penguin/Viking and, its author stresses, at the publisher's insistence.

The reason Aitkin gives for this extraordinary departure from rugged free enterprise is that the Howson diaries are unique, at least for the time being. “There is nothing like them in anything written about Australian politics.” This, he says, gives them “a special fascination.”

What – on this principle – Aitkin would make of the collected love letters of Norm Gallagher defies imagination. Perhaps we are in for a few surprises. But on this occasion he is wildly off the mark. The Howson papers may command a certain academic interest for what they reveal about the state of mind of a minor, somewhat prissy Liberal politician during the 1960s. But they do not, of themselves, serve a useful academic purpose, nor any other. Not to put too fine a point on it, they are an unmitigated hodge-podge of trivial detail, irritating petulance and hopelessly special whining.

Some idea of the general level of discourse is given by the quotations on the dust jacket. These, presumably, were chosen for their commercial appeal, as representative of the “juicy” bits – Howson's term – that make this an honest, uncompromising insight into Canberra high politics. But how much do they juice? A note that on 29 November 1972 the Melbourne Club was “the most depressing place in Australia” is followed by the revelation that on 18 December 1967 Malcolm Fraser chartered an aircraft at Government expense. (Presumably this is something he should not have done, though Howson provides no grounds for supposing that the taxpayers' money would not otherwise have been put to an

even more futile purpose.) Such are the high spots. Even Professor Aitkin could not drum up fascination for the low.

The publication of *The Life of Politics* proves two things. One is that the traditional attitude of the Australian masses towards their elected representatives is totally justified. The brightest and the best do not, generally speaking, enter the country's parliaments, and the few that do soon discover their own talent for mediocrity. Peter Howson is no better or worse than the average. He did a job, thought ridiculously highly of himself, and came out with an attractive pension. Most of us would probably have done the same, given the appropriate circumstances; and most of us would probably have kept a record of sorts which inflation and common greed would now encourage us to sell in some form. There is nothing specially despicable about this. Nor is there anything remotely admirable.

The second point the appearance of the Howson papers establishes is that our thinking classes have still to learn that simply being an Australian premiere is no substitute for quality. Had a work like this been submitted for publication by a comparable English politician, it would have been politely returned. (An American would have published it himself.) But because Howson's effort is the first of its Antipodean kind – “very unique” as one of our more articulate legislators has put it – it gets the sort of exposure and praise that, elsewhere, are reserved for good books.

The fact is that Howson is not a diarist and the promotion of this unreadable volume as the “Australian Crossman” will do nothing but make him and us look silly. The colonial cringe has given way to a harmful nationalist servility, left and right, with barely a trace of the one quality essential to all mature civilizations: wit. The facts, again, have got the better of us.

The saving grace of posthumous diaries is that they bring no financial reward to their author. One profoundly hopes Peter Howson is not starting a trend.

*Sean Regan is a political scientist currently on leave and advising the Leader of the Opposition in Victoria.*

## Th Definite Article

Eric Beach

W.H. Oliver: *James K. Baxter: A portrait* (Allen & Unwin, \$19.95).

A fine biography, with accurate literary judgements & splendid use of illustrations . . . if th rest of this review seems to be an argument, that's as much a measure of Baxter's contradictions; “more by temperament than by ideology, he was a man of the left” . . . it bothers me that Oliver uses piecemeal quotations to hammer home this thesis tho' . . . Baxter's grasp of dialectical processes had atheists like me turning on th radio for his Lenten lectures . . . he wished for th synthesis of catholic party & communist church, & mayakovsky's influence, “the slanting rainstorm,” is missed . . . th book makes too much of Baxter's own myth of an early Bohemia; this structural imbalance might have been redressed by more

inclusion of younger poet friends he had in the latter years, Sam Hunt & Peter Olds . . . so we have a toned down Baxter, & if we consider that the poet gave gossip its full due in his work, this biography is too cautious, over-refined, & careful of people's privacy in a way that Baxter never was . . . little is made of his trip to India, obviously a watershed if we consider Gandhi's vow of swadeshi; "that spirit within us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote" . . . & this man, who wrote thousands of poems, had also read miles of poetry, both Neruda & Brecht wrote meditations on this theme . . . James K. to Jim to Hemi . . . I remember being approached by a bare-footed, bearded dwarf in oil-skins in Willis Street, Wellington, he hugged me, embarrassed, in my suit, hugged the girl I was with (& she later told me, embarrassed her), we went down to Suzie's for coffee, where they were loath to admit him, & spent an hour talking about the books I was carrying, Keats & Mayakovsky.

My first job, I was given "ballad of the stonecut sugar works" apropos of the boss timing a man when he went for a shit, yeah, Baxter belonged to us, for all that he wrote; "it was my dearly held illusion once / that labouring men were better than their betters." Where the biographer finds this proof of his rejection of his early socialism, I find it a passing comment on his ongoing synthesis of politics & social issues, a self-mockery, above all.

That this irritating man was received into the comforts of the church, then set about him like Lenin in *What is to be Done*, doesn't strain the imagination quite so much if you remember the man alone ethos of n.z. literature, in the dominion of the iconoclast the one-eyed man is king . . . so we have a saint who couldn't see past the end of his dong . . . as in the myth where Maui goes looking for eternal life & emerges from between the giantess's thighs only to get caught because all the birds crack up laughing.

Colin McCahon's painting, "JIM PASSES THE NORTHERN BEACHES," is, perhaps, an indication of how Maori myths are beginning to become part of imported myths, Baxter yoked a great many strange beasts to the service of his poetry, & the biography is honest in describing the bumpy ride . . . perhaps the New Zealand politesse so much in evidence is what enables the biographer to touch upon so many facets of such a diverse personality, & not grow maudlin . . . one gets an impression of the landscape so central to the poet's work, the back-tracking from the settled flood-plains of the literary life to the bare bones of the hinterland . . . the life is allowed to intrude upon Oliver's conclusions about the man, he has the grace to be defeated by the contradictions . . . I wish that Jim had belonged more & lived longer, & lay some blame at the door of the narrow country he lived in, a country where pride & humility slope steeply away from each other . . .

But then, what availeth it a man if he should have many friends & refuse to look after himself?

He left some barbs that'll sting a while yet, as attested by the defensiveness of this, & other biographers . . . saying that he was never "sentimental about communists" then quoting an instance where he was . . . he has the mark of the great poet, pursuing the life of the imagination whilst being faithful to the externals . . . it's a hard thing to be an exile, harder still to be an exile in one's own country . . . so that, whilst he rebelled against any political conviction that'd put him in harness, the

church found him a secular bastard.

In the end, W.H. Oliver points the reader towards the poems, & is attentive throughout, to the fact that the man was a poet;

. . . the poem is  
a plank laid over the lion's den

& I'll probably get more flak than Jim Jones for tampering with the definite article.

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## Diminishing Returns

Paul Carter

R. Gibson: *The Diminishing Paradise* (Sirius Books, \$12.95).

As no aim is stated before page 196, any attempt to summarise the argument of *The Diminishing Paradise* could only mislead: it would imply a coherence the book totally lacks. In fact, beyond his subtitle, "Literary Perceptions of Australia," Gibson never establishes a theme. The reason has to do, I think, with Gibson's lack of a clear idea of the nature of literary tradition and influence.

Gibson's book is divided into three sections. The first two of these deal cursorily with literary perceptions of Australia before 1770 and between 1770 and 1850. The third section is a "reading" of two recent novels, *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*.

The links which Gibson tries to establish between these three sections are wholly superficial. Before 1770, he claims, Australia was conceived of as a Paradise. After 1770, and especially after 1800, it came to be regarded, at least by explorer-writers like Sturt and Eyre, as Purgatory. And where does Patrick White come in? Well, his historical novels are set in the pre-1850 period and reveal White's interest in its literature of exploration.

The problem with Gibson's scheme is that it establishes no continuity between White and the pre-Botany Bay literature. Gibson appears to have confused mere chronological succession with a literary tradition. A literary tradition is not a metaphysical lineage revealed only to the literary historian: if it is anything, it is the writer's conscious inheritance, his reading.

A tradition is the imaginative re-invention of themes. And the way a writer re-invents his reading is inexplicable without some reference to his immediate literary context. But Gibson never supplies this: he seems to think of tradition as nothing more than the temporal ordering of subject entries in a library catalogue. This explains, perhaps, why he insists on a Paradise-Purgatory paradigm which systematically decontextualises the texts he cites.

A good example of the consequences of this occurs in Gibson's description of the "Botany Bay Eclogues" of



Robert Southey. Only the constraints of his scheme could lead Gibson to find in Southey's poems both an image of Australia "which had been latent in the 'pre-discovery' representation of the diminishing paradise" and "the beginning of the next dominant aspect of the English representation of Australia" (i.e. Purgatory).

As their literary and philosophical context makes clear, Southey's early poems are not a prophetic link in some hitherto unnoticed hermetic tradition. They embody Southey's youthful admiration for Godwin. The "Botany Bay Eclogues" express Godwin's view that man is the product of his environment, not his inheritance. The pastoral convicts of Southey's fancy are accordingly susceptible to their new surroundings. Exposed for the first time to the healing influence of Nature, their moral reformation proceeds apace. The point is that, for the convicts of Southey's poems, Botany Bay is both Purgatory and Paradise. It reflects their altering state of mind.

Bound up with Gibson's lack of reflection on the meaning of tradition is his insensitivity to the nature of literary influence. At least, this is only how I can interpret his complete indifference to the significance of literary genre. Take his initial thesis of Australia as a pre-1770 Paradise. It is based on a monumental confusion between the traditional Antipodes of western literature and the "Australia" of Quiros. Had Cook shared Gibson's view that Terra Incognita (the great southern continent) and Terra Australis were one and the same, he might have saved himself a good deal of time tacking the south Pacific.

Gibson's confusion of geographical and literary hypotheses about the south is, among other things, a failure to distinguish literary genres. It leads him to treat the writings of Swift and Dampier as if their ideas about the antipodes had the same "truth value." It also means that Gibson completely ignores the literary genre which *would* establish a theme for his book. I mean the distinguished tradition of geo-evolutionist thought running from Burnet and Newton to Hobbs, Erasmus Darwin and Lyell: *this* is the literary tradition in which to locate the speculations of Sturt, Eyre and Mitchell.

Gibson's recognition that the explorer journals are of quite as much literary as geographical interest might have been the chief value of his book. The works of Sturt, Eyre and Mitchell (not to mention Flinders, King, Stokes, Grey and Giles, whom Gibson inexplicably excludes), represent a distinctively Australian genre. Giles subtitled his travel journals "The Romance of Exploration," and the explorers generally strove to lend the barren facts a rhetorical aura.

But Gibson quite fails to understand the hybrid nature of these texts. He treats them as naive self-dramatisation – quite indistinguishable from contemporary fiction. It is particularly unfortunate that Gibson follows Mitchell's biographer, Cumpston, in dismissing the *Fourth Expedition* (1848) as inferior to Mitchell's earlier *Three Expeditions*. Cumpston were prejudiced by the slightness of Mitchell's discoveries, rather than Mitchell's prose.

In fact, the *Fourth Expedition* demonstrates that Mitchell's style never represented a naive empirical response falsified by literary ambition: it embodied a literary strategy, the indispensable rhetoric of novelty.

This insensitivity to the *literary* character of the pre-1850

travel literature explains why Gibson's attempt to analyse White's novels in terms of them also fails. Mind you, Gibson needlessly compounds his own difficulties when he excludes the one explorer-writer White himself acknowledges. In an extraordinary admission of literary jingoism, Gibson informs us that Leichhardt's "nationality places him outside the terms of reference of this book." Beyond the obvious interest in purgatorial experience, Gibson does not establish that the explorer-writers influenced White in any significant thematic or stylistic way.

Perhaps this failure reflects Gibson's own formal and stylistic poverty. His tin-soldier view of literature, where texts exist without context or value, merely as pawns in the literary historian's academic strategy, is well-matched by his make-believe style. Only the fairy-tale assurance of his conjunctions holds together the succession of non-sequiturs. But where the weaknesses risk becoming clearest, he positions his toy cannons, a battery of pseudo-academic jargon.

The blurb for *The Diminishing Paradise* informs us that, as a recipient of the University of Queensland's 'Sir Henry Abel Smith Travelling Scholarship,' Gibson was able to carry out three years of daily research for this book in the British Museum. Gibson might have got more out of his sojourn had he followed the example of another Queenslander in Bloomsbury, Inky Stephensen, and spent his time sinking black-and-tans at The Plough.

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## An Australian Robber Baron

Laurie Clancy

Dal Stivens: *Jimmy Brockett* (Penguin, \$6.95).

*Jimmy Brockett*, first published in 1951, has lasted the course well, and the new Penguin edition merits a reappraisal. The sub-title of this novel, "Portrait of a notable Australian," more or less accurately reflects the author's unjudging view of his remarkable central figure. The novel opens with an italicised passage in which two stonemasons are walking along a gravel road in the North Sydney cemetery in December 1938. A symphony of voices follows until we receive the following revelation:

There it it was on the corner of the will: 'I have asked the undertaker to bury me on my face so that anyone who doesn't like this will can kiss my arse.'

The anecdote vividly captures much of the contradictory, rebellious larrikin nature of the man, though the comment of one of the stonemasons – "Labour man, my arse" – is equally significant. Stivens has chosen to tell the life of Jimmy Brockett in his own words and the novel is, among other things, a 'tour de force' of the Australian vernacular. The first person technique necessarily precludes a great deal of moral judgment, but Stivens has also studded his narrative with italicised passages, becoming more frequent the further

the narrative proceeds, which provide an additional, qualifying perspective on the man. Personal stories, contemporary newspaper reports (presumably fabricated, though with a very authentic feel to them), scholarly historical accounts, an essay "The Life and Times of Jimmy Brockett," extracts from Brockett's own newspaper – all these provide fascinatingly different views of a man who seems something like a cross between the central figure of Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* and Willie Stark from *All the King's Men*, with perhaps just a touch of Citizen Kane thrown in as well.

Brockett's imagination, ambition and appetites are gargantuan, especially by normal Australian standards. Indeed, the Australian vernacular aside, Brockett seems more akin to the great American robber barons of the last third of the nineteenth century, an analogy the novel at one point makes explicit. Brockett is the personification of a period in which the values of laissez-faire capitalism went unquestioned. Men went out and made their fortunes, and let the rules go hang; Brockett is genuinely devoid of moral values, but for a few sentimental concessions such as boys' homes. Those who fail lack either initiative or industriousness. Despite having seen the recession of 1893, Brockett has no sympathy for such failures. And it is *men* who make these fortunes: this is a patriarchal world in which women are very obviously second-class citizens at best, and the aim of making one's fortune is finally to pass it on to one's son. This novel is specifically and (for 1951) surprisingly vehement in its feminism. Of all Brockett's actions, the one that strikes us as most offensive, far more than his innumerable infidelities, is his sabotage of his wife's embryonic career as a painter.

Most of Brockett's attitudes are predictable and representative of a type. He is fiercely nationalistic, constantly repeating his assertion that Australia is the best country in the world. Associated with this is his racism, especially his anti-Chinese feeling, again another widespread phenomenon of the time:

... the old man would take us to Paddy's Markets and we would gape at the Chinks with their vegetable stalls and smell the carbide from the flares, and of the day when we all went to hear a German band playing in George Street. I told her, too, of the brawls we used to have with the Pommy kids in our street, and how they reckoned a colonial would never do anything right, and how we all grew up, swearing we would show them a dinkum Aussie was worth ten of anyone else.

And again: "We've got the best country in the world and the best people, and we don't want any Chinks or other foreigners butting in on us. We can develop it in our own way, but we did need more people."

Brockett is anti-English but only in a mild form, merely believing that "The bloody place had about as much as a dead lizard. It was an old man's country." But, when the issue of conscription comes up, he is predictably in favor of it to a fanatical extent, and wrecks his brief political career by his zealous support for the issue. The italicised sections of the novel enable Stevens to give a huge range of views of Brockett. At one extreme there is the laudatory special article in the Sydney Star:

... History may give Jimmy Brockett a place as the last of the rugged individualists. This pushful, raffish, humorous Australian became a legend during his lifetime. It's not just an accident when this happens to a man. The simple truth is Jimmy Brockett symbolised much of what Australians with their pioneering background admire.

At the other extreme there is the verdict of an unnamed Sydney left-wing paper:

*More than any other man in recent years, Brockett corrupted everything his hand touched. He was a kind of Midas in reverse ...*

*Let us not shed any tears over the passing of Brockett nor be deceived by his raffish buffoonery into thinking him "not such a bad fellow after all." ... Don't let us accept his own evaluation of himself, as just another jolly fat man, a twentieth-century Falstaff, but see him for what he was, a cold-blooded thug.*

Although it is harshly phrased, and ignores the man's very considerable capabilities, it is probably the latter opinion which is closer to the truth. Brockett's lack of any moral sense left him genuinely unable to comprehend the idealism and sense of principle of a man like Pat Regan. He destroys Regan and his wife in a manner reminiscent of Willie Stark – by digging something up on them even if he has to plant it first – and he is bewildered when Regan returns an incriminating document to him as soon as he abandons the Labor Party for the Nationalists. At the end of the novel (which ranges from September 1905 to July 1936) he is a broken, obese, paranoid figure who has either lost or driven away the few people who cared for him.

But undermining our temptation to judge are the energy and vitality of the man himself, as embodied in his extraordinary language.

Political novels are surprisingly rare in Australia, though they do go back as far as William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* (a phrase that recurs in this novel) and include more recent novelists such as Jean Devanny. *Jimmy Brockett*, however, is one of the liveliest and most noteworthy examples of the genre.

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## Roustabout

Stephen Murray-Smith

Merv Lilley: *Git Away Back! A Knockabout Life* (Currency Press, \$22.50).

Drover, cane-cutter, seaman, cook, bush poet and, in his younger days and perhaps still today, a good man to have beside you in a stoush, Merv Lilley has compiled one of the



most idiosyncratic books ever put together this side of Poepel's Peg, and the gallant and enterprising Currency Press of Sydney have put it out as a finely-designed book, with effective illustrations by Rick Amor.

At first sight *Git Away Back!* is a ragbag of assorted bushiana: autobiographical fragments, bush recipes, how to clean straw hats and starch collars (from a girl's exercise book of 1909), songs and recitations collected in pubs up and down the Queensland coast, Merv's own occasional verse, written on board ship and elsewhere, stories of unionists and scabs, reflections on family life.

Well, yes, these are the bones of the book, but on reading, it becomes more than this. Much of it is an epitaph for a vanished Australia, but it is in no sense a mournfully-romantic or a self-justifying kind of book. Perhaps as successfully as anything I've read, it carries the old Australia of forty years ago forward into today, because above all it's about the personality of a man who has lived through those years and those experiences and has carried what he thinks is useful luggage forward with him to the present day. So when we read of Merv going to gaol in Sydney because he thinks that parking fines are socially unjust, it's part of a weave, a mesh which gathers up and makes meaning out of his selections from life, whether they happen forty years ago or forty months.

Thus from a decent integrity and a cross-grained honesty we get a man's philosophy. Not a 'bush philosophy,' however, if we take that phrase to imply a rude and dogmatic certitude. Merv Lilley's quiet humor, often at his own expense, and his self-knowledge, defeat his excesses and pretensions before they have crawled far out of their holes.

The best things here are the elegaic vignettes of bush life, finely remembered and finely controlled ("Going for the Mail"), and in fact far more 'poetic' than much of the poetry; and the hilarious and slightly sinister "My Journey Among Woman," Merv's sub-acid account of riding shotgun to his young daughter when she was shanghaied by a bunch of militant feminists and visionary, underfunded film-makers to take part in the making of a film on the sufferings-in-the-bush, and the emergent heroism, of convict women. The nexus between the feminists and the film-makers began to break down under the stress of living in the mud:

"I think we've got to crawl through the bush naked on our hands and knees, while they film us from behind."

"And why are they doing that?" I ask.

"Oh, so that they can see how far they can see up our arses, of course."

"Do you really think that?"

"Oh, yes, of course. You've got to expect it. That's all they're interested in, really."

The book seems to have been subjected to some kind of selection by committee, which may be why I miss two of my favorite pieces of Lilley's writing, "Letter to Ted Robertson" and "Bush Meeting, Pre-war," both published many years ago in *Overland*. But there are plenty of good things here, where Merv Lilley's robust individualism breaks like a pinnacle through his mythologies of collectivism.

## Everything you wanted to know about Oz Hist. but were afraid to ask

Ruth Shnookal

C. Below: *The Vedgymight History of Australia* (Heinemann, \$9.95).

Those of us who remember the palmy days of History know it was relentlessly British. Occasionally other minor happenings impinged, such as Indians mutinying, or the French or Irish refusing to acknowledge that British History was the one true History of the World, but examination questions rarely mentioned such trivialities. Sadly we must admit that it was a pretty dull slog.

It was the brilliant historiographers Sellars and Yeatman who advanced the thesis that History was only important if it were *memorable*. Students rejoiced, sold their Trevellyans, and *1066 and All That* became the standard definitive text. The revolution, we thought, had been won.

Historians, however, are a devious lot, and took revenge by discovering non-British history, totally unmemorable because good plain Georges I to VI were replaced by people called Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and Ali Sastroamidjojo, and we were told of places which nobody had heard of and which in any case changed their names the minute we had found them on the map. History was doomed to years of deadly struggle. Historians have been instantly recognisable by their unsmiling, anxious faces and high suicide rate.

But relief was at hand. "Australians all let us rejoice," indeed. *The Vedgymight History of Australia* concentrates in eighty-eight action-packed pages (great pictures, too) what the publisher modestly states to be "all the goodness of three large volumes." At last History has rejoined the S.&Y. mainstream. The *VHA* not only passes the supreme test of being completely memorable, but adds a Tolstoyan vision of our great land which can only have originated from C.M.H. ("Carlton") Clark.

To present the essence of a work already concentrated is obviously impossible, and all this reviewer can suggest is that you rush out and buy the book immediately. You will then be in possession of an in depth, wide-ranging and comprehensive history of your sea-girt land, with a guarantee to win all historical arguments at dinner parties. You will understand (at last) that Australia was not discovered at all, and you will have thorough knowledge of the Constitution from:

1. There shall be a monarch, who shall not be a citizen of Australia.

1 (a) The monarch shall do absolutely nothing.

to

7. The Laws of Australia shall apply everywhere.

7 (a) Except in the States.

Learn it. Anybody can memorise only seven points.

Local history is not forgotten; Alice Springs for example:

Alice Springs was invented to fill the Hole in the Middle. It is noted for:

- (a) being in the middle;
- (b) being the nearest place to Ayers Rock;
- (c) beer cans.

If Australia had a Central Government, it would have to be in Alice Springs. This is the main argument against having a Central Government.

Almost nothing is omitted, from the New South Wales Corpse which "was believed to have died of drinking polluted rum" to the Manics, one of whom was "known as the Little Digger. Another was a Cardinal. The main difference was that one was called Manics and the other wasn't. He was called Billy Hughes."

*Almost* nothing is omitted, but what about all those battling little Ozzie sheilas who made Australia great? Apart from some sexist illustrations (that on page 8 could even be racist), there is mention only of Dame Nellie Swanson and Vegemite Pavlova, and we have grave doubts as to whether

V. Pavlova was ever naturalised. What about Chisholm, Greer, Daisy Bates and Olivia Newton-John? To your word processors, sister historians.

There is one glaring inaccuracy. The blurb asserts that the erudite Prof. C. Below who wrote this elegant historical dissertation, is "known to his friends as the Dud Czech." This is flatly unbelievable. He is definitely one hundred cents in the dollar, and certainly wrote with the glorious strains of our National Anthem ringing in his ears:

In history's page, let every stage  
Advance Australia Fair.

*Ruth Shnookal lives in Melbourne and is an active member of the feminist movement.*

## SINGAPORE

apartments  
wide and  
tall –

cocoons –  
A sauntering  
citizen

may call  
Yojan globes  
a spider's

web. Selections  
claim to place  
each bouy

seas apart,  
in close  
constituencies.

JOYCE PARKES



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## Wild Man of Letters

The Story of P.R. Stephensen

by Craig Munro

'Inky' Stephensen, as he was almost universally known, was one of Australia's most brilliant and extraordinary literary figures. His perverse and arresting personality reached far beyond his native land, for he was admired by D.H. Lawrence, parodied by Aldous Huxley and trailed by MI5. His life's story is twined with names as famous as James Joyce, Liam O'Flaherty, Aleister Crowley, Norman and Jack Lindsay, Xavier Herbert and Frank Clune.

He was critic, author, journalist, translator, editor, prolific literary 'ghost' and publisher of superb editions which today have collectors clamouring in the auction rooms.

His erratic views and talent for extremes led him all the way from Communism to the extreme Right. He was a super-patriot and strident Australian nationalist, yet World War II saw him interned as a potential traitor.

This story — for it is more than a biography — will grip anyone interested in Australian history or literature. It is sound scholarship at its most absorbingly readable.



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