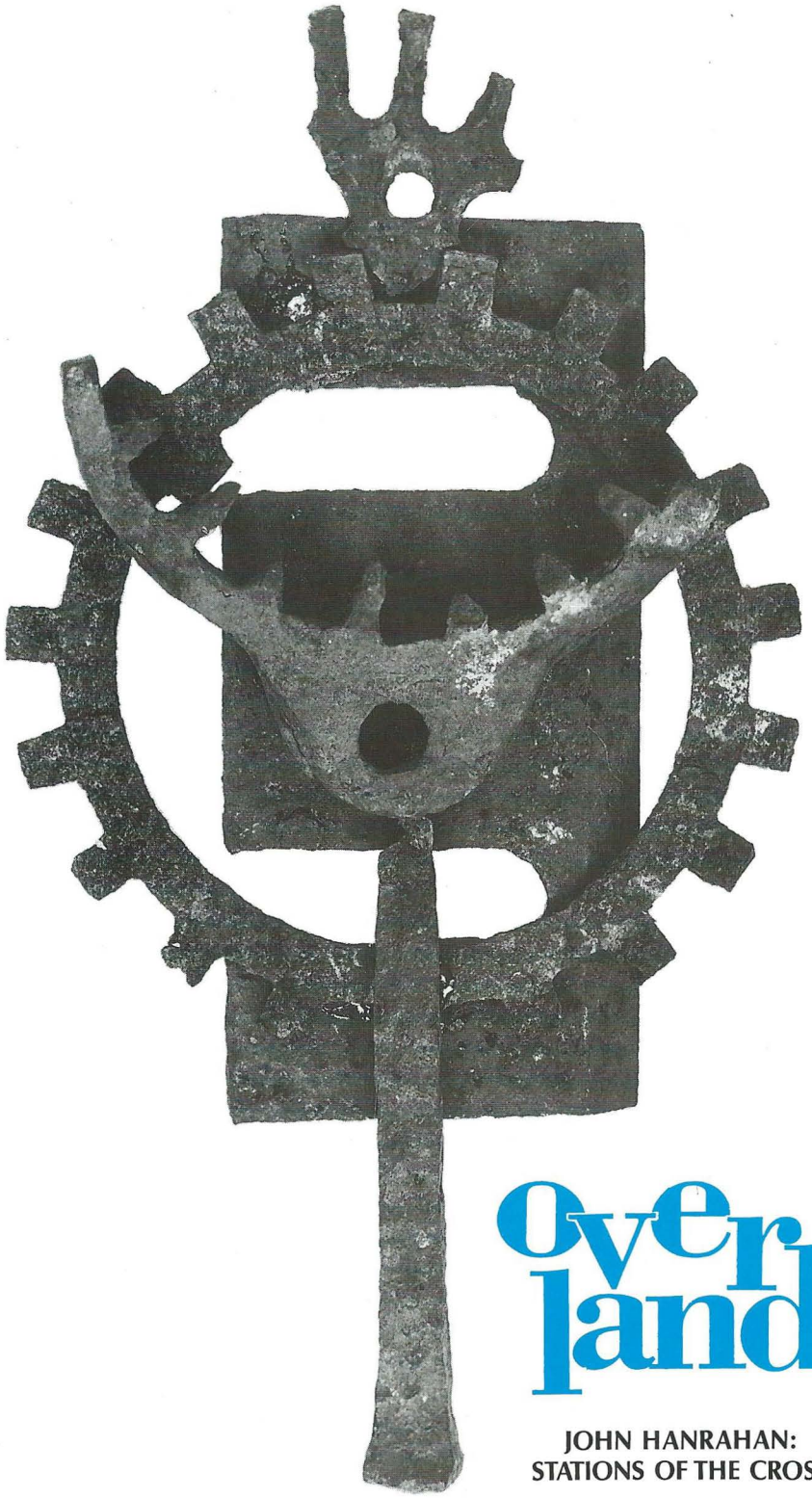

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JOHN HANRAHAN:
STATIONS OF THE CROSS

THE VIRUS OF THEORY

ALEX SKOVRON:
FOUR POEMS

AUSTRALIAN ROCK

TALKING OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Winter 1995

ISSN 0030 7416

Overland is a quarterly literary magazine founded in 1954 by Stephen Murray-Smith.

Subscriptions: $28 a year posted to addresses within Australia. Pensioners and students $20; life subscription $500. Overseas $60. Payment may be made by Mastercard, Visa or Bankcard.

All correspondence: Post Office Box 14146, MMC, Melbourne, Vic. 3000, Australia. Phone 03 9380 1152. Fax 03 9380 2586.

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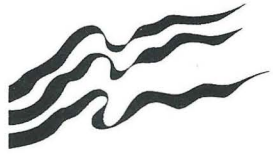
Scholarly articles will be refereed, and must be submitted on disk and in triplicate hard copy.

Overland is assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. *Overland* acknowledges the financial support of Arts Victoria, a division of the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism.

The *Overland index* is published with the magazine every two years. *Overland* is indexed in APAIS, AUSLIT *Australian Literary Studies* bibliography, Journal of Commonwealth Literature bibliography.

Overland is available in microfilm and microfiche from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, USA.

Printing: Australian Print Group, Maryborough. ISSN 0030 7416



ARTS VICTORIA

JOHN HANRAHAN

The Stations of the Star-Crossed Man

To Gwen

Station 14: The Man is laid in his tomb.

I LOVED HIM, and as he lay in his coffin, dressed in his shorts and T-shirt, his fellow priests lied about what a good priest they thought he had been.

They knew he had been a bad priest.

We, a mumble of misfits, ex-priests, ex-nuns, ex-brothers, fellow teachers and so many friends, we knew he had been a great priest. We knew that he had loved his priesthood, had loved the words, "This is my body. This is my blood." and "I absolve you from all your sins."

But they never forgave him for his loves. And they never knew that the cancer which pecked away at his lungs was not as painful as the cancer that had long banqueted on his heart and soul. His fellow-FAICs never understood that he forgave himself for all his loves only when he fought to love the bawdy of his early dying.

They pretended that they had always honoured Father Kieran Lynch, FAIC (the Latin initials for our religious Order, 'The Loving Sons of the Immaculate Heart'). They had often tried to send him into darkness, this unloved son. Always he had wanted to come home, bewildered and prodigal in his love.

But she knew all his loves, Teresa, the woman he had for years lived and laughed with, fucked and thought with, lived and died with. Teresa with her eyes tear-stained with smiles.

But his fellow priests, obese with their love of the heart of Mary, buried her when they buried Kieran, her lover-priest. They prayed her out of existence. They prayed her into the silence of that grave on the hillside that crept unweeping down to the willows by the Murray's bank. Corowa. Like me, he had been a border boy, Kieran. But while I attempted with bloody failure to storm bridges, Kieran crossed borders like a spiritual spy from Graham Greene.

Of course his fellow-FAICs had been practising his funeral. They had been trying to bury Kieran and his many loves for more than thirty years.

Station 2: The Man takes up his cross.

Kieran thought he had been seizing life when he'd joined us to put on the religious habit in 1957. Unlike the rest of us, he had not spent the first half of his teenage years being nurtured into a nobody in the baby seminary.

He had come from a normal school, the FAIC boarding college in Maroubra. He had come surprised by success. School captain, dux of the college, captain of the rugby team, in which his big and gentle bones took on an amazement of fierceness.

He thought he could be our friend. I loved him quickly, though I had learnt that 'love' was not a word we used of people. Nor was 'friend'.

I liked his accepting face that was a puzzle between a memory and a promise of being handsome. I admired his corner-of-the-mouth statements that I thought wise but which were the query of confusion.

And I loved his love of words. They never forgave him for that. And the Word was made flesh. He loved the word and the flesh and they never forgave him for that.

Kieran stood at the lecturn in the refectory reading from the life of St Aloysius, reading about one of the young Jesuit's most saintly achievements. "He never in all his life looked a woman in the face, not even his own mother." Kieran looked every woman in the face. And in the legs, and in the breasts, and in the arse. But mostly in the face; mostly in the eyes.

In his right hand Kieran held a rope two feet long. A brick was tied to the end of the rope. Kieran had to swing the rope as he read. When the brick hit the lectern, Father Master of Novices accused him of trying to distract us from enjoying our fat-floating stew. Every three minutes, Father Master would ring the bell on his table and say, "Brother Lynch, you have something to tell your brothers in the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

Kieran would then read a prepared statement. "I apologise from my heart to you my brothers in the Immaculate Heart of the beloved Mother of God for trying to have a particular friendship with Brother Hannigan. I ask your pardon and renounce all particular friendships for the rest of my life."

We had been walking down Our Lady's Avenue and Kieran had been explaining 'The Wasteland' and 'Ash Wednesday' to me. I knew, though Kieran didn't, that we were already breaking a rule, as talking about poetry was 'worldly'. Especially if it was modern poetry that didn't rhyme, and was written by a man who wasn't even a Catholic.

However, we were also breaking a more important rule, *nunquam duo*. 'Never two alone together.' It was one of the many rules that Kieran never understood. He thought that forbidding 'a particular friendship' meant that we couldn't be close friends. So did I. He never understood that either.

It took me many years to realise that this was code for insisting that we must take every precaution against fucking each other. Kieran never wanted to fuck me. He wanted to fuck only women. Many women. He wanted those women. Fucked and still vaguely virgined. From the fifties to the nineties, he was an absurdly unfashionable man, was Kieran.

But he was always in love with becoming a priest.

Station 1: The Man is condemned to death.

THEY THOUGHT he was cunning, devious.
They thought he was one of them.

But he had a naive love of trying to collar the truth for himself. He never learnt that the white celluloid around his neck was meant to choke this love into submission.

In our first year of philosophical studies, Kieran wrote an essay declaring that you couldn't prove from reason the existence of an immortal soul. His main reference was Best and Taylor's book on biology. Our lecturer Father Damien Powell went into a paroxysm of pious abuse. Best and Taylor weren't philosophers. Or theologians. Or Catholics. And they were Americans.

Father Superior was called in to further humiliate Brother Lynch in honour of Our Lady. He asked to see the notebook Kieran had on the desk. It was the book in which Kieran wrote down his thoughts for the hour's meditation we dreamed through each morning before mass. Father Superior started to read out loud from it:

"I want to get some peace with Christ that feels like post-coital bliss."

I didn't know what that meant but Father Superior obviously did. He snorted like a startled horse, slammed the book shut and furied out of the room. He took the book with him. That night Dr Kennedy came on one of his occasional visits to show the seminarians a film on his sixteen-millimetre projector. Kieran spent the evening in chapel before the prisoner of the tabernacle while the rest of us watched Doris Day and Rock Hudson have a particular friendship in *Pillow Talk*.

After night prayers, I worked out 'post-coital' by looking up 'coital' in the seminary library's Complete Oxford Dictionary. I hadn't yet learnt to masturbate.

Station 3: The Man falls for the first time.

After three days of glooming our way through to the Man's death and burial, for which we sons of sin were personally responsible, our first Easter Sunday in the seminary-for-big-boys exploded. And it didn't explode with the afterthought of the Resurrection.

At breakfast, we each received a copy of *Mater Matutina*, the seminary magazine. *Mater Matutina*, 'the morning mother'. Rachel mourning for her children.

Kieran wrote poems the way other people wrote shopping lists. Only more often. During the novitiate at Wilcannia he had been forbidden to write poems. The word was dead meat. So he wrote his poems as prose. Father Master feared the word. So he wrote pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society. *Love and the Catholic Teenager. Sex and the Catholic Teenager. Sin and the Catholic Teenager. Lust and the Catholic Teenager.* He didn't have a large range of words, Father Master. But it wasn't a poem that got Kieran into trouble this time, at least not at first.

After high mass, we stood in the cloisters or sat round the recreation room, listening to our only LP, *My Fair Lady*. And reading the Morning Mother. Kieran had written an article, *'Dolce Far Niente'*. It was based on a book called *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. Father Superior ordered us out of our Sunday-after somnolence and into the main lecture room for a conference. A conference was a lecture during which nobody conferred. We believed that Father Superior had conferred with God, who was obviously a good listener.

The result of this particular conferring was the decree that leisure was not the basis of culture. Leisure was inherently sinful. And culture had no place in the lives of future priests. Father Superior had won the clergy golf tournament three years in a row. Kieran had, in an orgy of self-love, attacked the traditions of our Order. The seminary priests had French wine with dinner because we were a Spanish Order and traditions were important.

Kieran sat next to me in bewildered blushing. He was not himself the object of his many loves. He liked himself only occasionally and then went to confession to purge himself of pride.

Station 7: The Man falls a second time.

ACTUALLY, IT WAS the same time, the issue of Mother of the Morning. Kieran had also written a poem, which lay dead in the graveyard of Father Superior's mind and then blazed into life on the third day. The Balwyn seminary never seemed such a safe haven after Kieran's prance of poetry.

Kieran usually wrote in free verse, wildly free. But this poem rhymed. That's why Father Superior read it. The poem was called 'Make it seem enough'.

O Christ, locked sweet and cold and lone
behind the tabernacle's dreaming door,
you felt with love your Magdalene of bone
and flesh. So manly enter through the door

of my now hapless heart; and sweetly show
that I do not need a woman's pulsing breast.
Not a woman's body, but you I want to know.
Be it your bread I eat, and lay the flesh to rest.

Sacramental, you live for us in breadly stuff.
But dear, sweet Christ, does it seem enough?

It was more than enough for Father Superior. All heaven broke loose. Another conference, in which Father made it clear that first-year seminarians shouldn't even know that women had breasts. If there were to be any discussion of breasts, it would be confined to the lecture theatre and then only six years later in the final year of theology, when sexual aberrations were discussed in Latin.

Kieran was summoned to Father Superior's room for his own private conference. When I asked him what inspiration had settled on Father Superior, he mumbled in his sideways fashion, "Friday morning for two weeks". Translated, this meant that every day for a fortnight he had to go through our Friday morning ritual by belting himself with a knotted leather whip.

"A poem as bad as that deserves six months", he murmured off to the left. Kieran loved the Church. Kieran was a person from whom you gleaned information rather than harvested it. When I cheated on him by reading his meditation book, he was working on loving even Father Superior.

Station 6: The Man meets Veronica.

At a discussion group on modern liturgy organised by the Young Christian Workers, Kieran met Sister Mary Vera. When I queried if there ever actually was a Saint Vera, he had grunted amiably, "No. Truth." My mind had stumbled past the name without loitering to translate its Latin meaning.

Kieran wrote to Sister Vera when she went to work on a mission in the Solomon Islands. All letters had to be left unsealed for Father Superior's inspection. I think Kieran's letters received special hermeneutic attention as Father Superior tried to crack Kieran's code. At another special conference (Kieran triggered off more special conferences than Henry Kissinger), Father Superior pointed out that Kieran had mentioned love nine times, the body four times and had also addressed a woman as "dear" and "yours faithfully".

No whipping this time. Kieran was sent to the Immaculate Heart College, Bendigo, to work out his standing on religious discipline.

I suppose that in Bendigo, as in all other houses of the Order, he woke to the sound of the bellringer yelling, "May the love of the Immaculate Heart of Mary overtake all places in the world". The dream-dumped brothers-in-Mary would yell in competitive piety, "Eternally" and then start shaving away at their job of loving everyone everywhere.

Father Superior never mentioned that Kieran

in his letter had mentioned "the Man" fifteen times. During our biblical studies, Kieran had fallen in love with Christ's title, 'the son of man'. But Father Superior was a scripture scholar and couldn't be expected to know.

Veronica could see the face of Jesus every time she looked at the towel in her bathroom.

Station 8: The Man talks to the women of Jerusalem.

I DON'T KNOW WHEN Kieran started falling in love with nuns.

One belief he nurtured was that women were more intelligent than men. And more truly religious.

In the mid-sixties Kieran was ordained a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech, a year after the rest of us who had suffered the novitiate together. His earthily religious letters to nuns had scared the pants of righteousness very firmly onto the bums of our superiors.

They wanted more time to sort him out. He wanted more time to sort himself out. They tried to crack his code, but as men of spiritual discernment, they didn't know where to look. The key was in a short historical novel called *The Gospel of St John*, but they couldn't be expected to know that. God so loved the world.

Kieran and I were in the first group of FAICs to study at the ANU. He got to know Manning Clark and A. D. Hope. I occasionally had coffee with a tutor in English who had a nervous breakdown and became a tree surgeon.

When Leonie Kramer came to give some guest lectures, Kieran got to know her. He fell in love with her. And with more than one nun. I was assigned the monastery car to go to a conference of the Catholic Philosophical Association. He arranged to go with me on the drive from Canberra to Sydney. He had to visit a friend in need of some spiritual support.

He directed me to Roma Avenue in Kensington, a rosary beads' throw away from the main monastery of a Sacred Heart Order which was a sort of pious twin of our own congregation. We pulled up in front of a large house that was also self-consciously part of the white man's nineteenth-century dreaming.

A woman stood on the scissored lawn. It was Sister Mary Vera watering her parents' arum lilies.

Station 9: The Man falls for the third time.

I once stole from Kieran. It was when we had both made it, sort of, as priests and were teaching at Immaculate Heart College, Bendigo. I was sitting in chapel one Sunday afternoon, thinking about the mangled meaning of my life and about how Essendon would go in the finals. I noticed Kieran's clipboard on the seat in front of me.

I knew he was digging a drain at the far end of the school tennis courts. He always swung a pick with a quiet ferocity, as if there were a need to tear something apart. Himself.

The clipboard contained dozens of pages and I stole a couple. Handwritten in Kieran's distinctive hand, flowing, urgent, yet hesitant.

Disgraceful, graceless. I took them up to my room and read them. "Gird me, O Lord, with the girdle of purity. 'She is our mother – the mother of all flesh, a new Eve. But she is also our daughter. A little girl, the queen of the angels. And she's still a little girl, remember ... our littlest sister.' If Bernanos is right, what does that make me? Mother-fucker? Sister-fucker? Queen-fucker? Lord burn our reins and our hearts with the fire of Thy Spirit. Give me the gift of chastity. Now. Later is not good enough.

Here I am in a monastery and I've only got men to talk to. I don't think I like talking to men. Not even sure if I like men. Talking's my problem. I love talking to women. But I try to say wise and priestly things. They know I'm not wise and priestly. I'm not wise and priestly. Jesus, I know I'm not wise and priestly. So I fuck them, at least in my heart. That's when I'm most real. When I'm fucking and when I'm saying 'this is My Body. This is My Blood. I absolve you from all your sins.' 'The priests are the cause of the ruin of the people.' St Gregory had me in mind. Christ, ruining people, that's the last thing I want to do. Pius XII on priests: 'We shall achieve this only when we have reached such a height of sanctity, that what we pour out on others shall be the life and virtue that we ourselves have drawn from Christ.'

"Sanctity in me! Christ! When I want to pour myself into a juicy cunt! And then I can't have what I want most. Not going to bed with a woman, but getting out of bed with a woman. Greene's whisky priest was so right about the Mass but I'm not sure about 'suddenly we see that our sins have so much beauty'. Mine don't. Mine are so little and so ugly. I try to wear myself out physically. I have belted myself with the discipline every day for ten years. But my prick isn't getting the message. Virgin mother, stop me from wanting to kiss your kidless cunt. But you know, Mother Virgin, it's not my disappointed prick but my blundering heart and my disconsolate mind."

I don't think Father Superior would be too pleased if you gave him that to read at the nineteenth hole. But then again, it might round off his day to a tee. The human heart is the most moveable of feasts.

Station 4: The Man meets his mother.

WHEN HIS MOTHER wanted a word with him, Jesus said of the fans around him, "These are my brothers and my sisters".

Pius XII: "Every woman is destined to be a mother, mother in the physical sense of the word, or in a more spiritual and elevated sense." I was standing next to Kieran just outside the cloister. Where we belonged. Our novitiate at Wilcannia was almost over and we were out of

Father Master's earshot. But we knew in our derelict hearts that Father Master's access to the cesspool that was us fell short of God's only by an angel's breath. So we stood next to the statue of Mary as she stared Nelson-like towards the Darling and we talked of priests and popes and other sacred trivia.

"Doesn't know much does he, poor old Pio dodicesimo", Kieran said of the Pope who had not yet ascended into heaven. We were killing eternity as we waited to see our parents for the first time in nearly a year. A pale blue Fairlane pulled up carrying Kieran's parents and three of his sisters. His father sat in the car as the four women got out. Slowly. God, so slowly, like a marathon slow-bike-race. Five members of the Lynch family stood as if waiting for Our Lady to introduce them. Then they all moved slowly into the demilitarised zone. Mrs Lynch put out her hand and mother and son shook hands. "Brother Kieran, so nice to see you again."

Station 5: The Man is helped by Simon.

Her back has stared at me from above our bed for more than twenty years.

She stands tall, as Helen and I walk down the aisle. Helen has a pleased translucence in her smile. I look pleased in a wobbly sort of way. The photographer fired just as we reached the pew where Monica was standing. I am sure Kieran was standing next to her, just out of range.

"Can I bring a friend?" Kieran had asked over the phone. Of course, any friend of Kieran's was

welcome and I tried to imagine which priest would be interested in the bromide of an ex-priest's wedding.

Just out of range, that was Kieran, always just out of range. As various superiors had found when they fired their bullets of piety. He was never rebellious, he was never deliberately controversial. Religious superiors found him a hard target because he sat still and prayed.

My mother-in-law, an anti-papist with all the hostility that ex-Catholics are blessed with, found Father Kieran and Sister Monica, a nun 'on leave', hard to understand. She didn't realise that Kieran had the same problem.

"But where are they staying?" I didn't know and didn't ask. I was always puzzled by the logistics of Kieran's rumoured sexual Byronising. Heloise and Abelard loved in another country. Certainly, in what was I admit my elderly age of innocence, the monasteries in which I lived with Kieran did not embrace fucking. Being fucked-up, yes. But fucking, no.

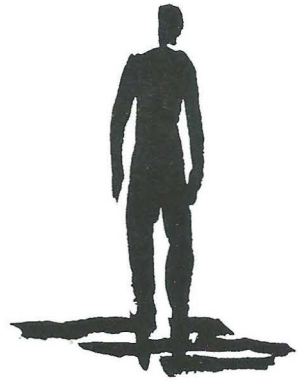
Celibates have no faith in the marriage of true minds. And they find it hard to believe in an interest in a woman that is not cuntly.

Station 10: The Man is stripped of his garments.

My mother was one of the people who helped the bishops and the superiors strip Kieran of his priestly life. Innocently.

And it was in my parents' parish that Kieran met Teresa. Innocently. Kieran was in Mildura to conduct a mission.

Father Superior had been translated, like the Holy house of Loreto, to Bendigo. We had travelled by train. Passionate son of Mary, he had to tee off once more against Kieran but also against more unforgiving fairways, on which his birdies dropped in less often than the dove of the Paraclete. In trying to get rid of one albatross so that he could hit others on God's green and pleasant fairways, he organised other superiors into a new strategy for grounding Kieran. They tried to give him a re-birthing experience by confining him to the Womb of the Mother house near the Meat Market in North Melbourne. But they found that he slipped quietly into that mysterious place that religious superiors call 'the world' and the rest of us call people.



So they sent him roving the country, St Paul in thongs, to stimulate the flock, the sheep, in the local parishes and bring them back to the fear of hell. He believed in hell all right, Kieran did. His problem was that he had no right to warn people off a destination for which he was a front runner.

So he hit turbulence again when epistles started coming in from the local priests who felt they weren't getting the money's worth of their collection plates. Kieran was wandering round the country ignoring the devil and telling people that God is love and that God so loved the world.

After the Mildura mission, Kieran spent the night at my parents' house. Teresa had been at boarding school in Moss Vale with my sister Bernadette. She had done a PhD in molecular physics and then had destroyed her professor's faith in the sacred order of things by becoming

a Dominican. Visiting mum, she thought they were having breakfast. They were. But Kieran was also using the kitchen table and the Tip Top bread and the McWilliams medium sherry to say mass.

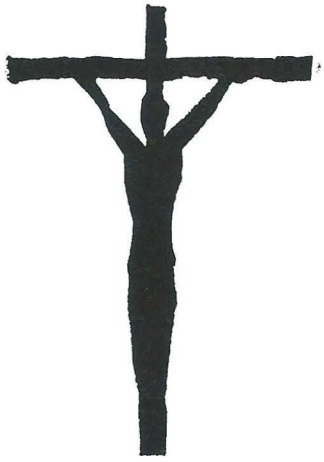
My mother, who in those days still honoured priests, was enchanted with the idea. She told her friends. Someone told the parish priest. Someone told the bishop. The bishop told our superior. So they grounded Kieran again and took away his faculties. This didn't mean a miracle of making him deaf and blind and dumb. But almost. He was forbidden to say mass. Or hear confessions. Or preach.

I don't think he minded not preaching, but being forbidden to say mass or hear confessions, that hurt.

But he had met Teresa. All the things that hurt him until the day he died concerned Teresa and that made them hurt less. And more. She was his last love and perhaps his first.

Station 11: The Man is nailed to the cross.

IN MARCH 1993, on the feast of the Annunciation, I got a letter from Kieran.



I had once asked him, when Helen and I were driving him back to Melbourne from another wedding, why he didn't leave the priesthood. "NBG", he mumbled from the back seat, "and the bread and wine." No bloody guts. The three of us were silent from Wangaratta to Euroa. Helen and I contemplating the absurdity of the cloud of unknowing, Kieran relaxing into the flagellation of false self-truth.

"Dear MH,

Two things happening. At last got the BG to apply to HH for a dispensation from my vows. Rick, more Vaticanical than me, thinks it will be OK. T is not optimistic and says it doesn't matter. But I want to get it right for her at last. Too much of the old TSE's bit from B, 'you! *hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frere!*'

The other thing is I've got the big C. All over. From the prostate to the lungs and most stations in between. The Man must be laughing.

Don't worry. Shove in a prayer. Talk to you soon.

In JC,

K."

Kieran had run his own private Vatican II with Sappho, whom he called "lover of priests"; with the Koori and the Murri, who gave him the totem of the barramundi; with de Beauvoir and Stein and Millett and Greer and Friedan and Morgan and Plath and Sexton and Kath Walker. I don't think he realised that His Holiness from Poland of the thirties was no longer handing out dispensations as if they were ribbons at a primary school sports day. That brief dreaming had lasted a visitation of about twenty years and Kieran had never noticed its coming or its going. He had long lived beyond the nineties and never really belonged to them. He just happened to die in the middle of them.

But Kieran's time had gone. He wanted to marry Teresa, a woman so gay, in the lost sense of that now appropriated word, and so vibrant with sadness that the meeting of the two made her face radiant with poignancy and courage. Kieran wrote many poems in praise of tall women. When now at last he wanted to marry a woman, she was Teresa who was short but tall in a gracious faith that surpassed the understanding of fat-faithed priests.

She did not want a husband. Her Catholicism was of a primordial kind that had foreseen, foresuffered and foregone little men called bishops, farting piety and thinking with their pricks.

Kieran's Catholicism was outdated, old-fashioned, gentlemanly.

The week before he died the bishop informed him that dispensation had been refused. They had denied him both his massing and his fucking.

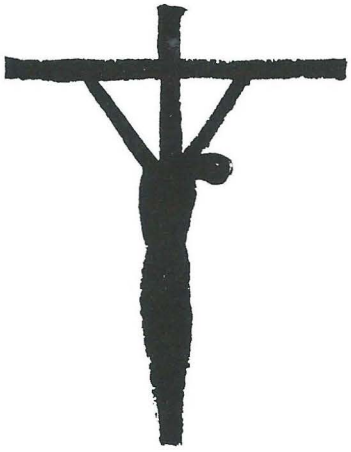
The week before he died they finally gave him enough morphine to free him of his physical pain, because he had thought it ungracious to complain of a suffering he thought he deserved.

Station 12: The Man dies on the cross.

He died, I think, in peace.

He died on February 2, 1994, on the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

For Teresa, he had fondled but rejected the temptation of the whisky priest's prayer: "Oh God, help her. Damn me, I deserve it, but let her live forever." Teresa was there to give him what no priest, no bishop, perhaps no god could ever give him, love that passes all understanding.



Words he loved, the Word – *logos* – made flesh. He loved God for his insolent incarnation. "This is my body." And hers, the woman of flesh, beloved daughter of the loins of God.

In the end, they left him unmassed, unfucked, but peace he gave easily to all but himself. I don't know if God was with him at the end. I know Teresa was.

Station 13: The Man is taken down from the cross.

THEY BURIED HIM in his shorts and T-shirt.

They pretended for him a goodly priesthood, but they were glad that Teresa and his family did not want him buried in the monastery cemetery. They buried him next to his parents in the grounds of what had been the seminary of a rival religious Order. Now it's a sports club, poking the light of its machines against the quiet of the Murray's water.

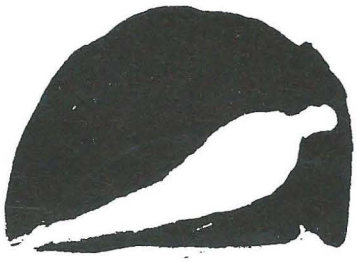
They summoned from Bendigo some priests to show the flag at his funeral. It was a white flag they showed.

The priest who preached, a goodish man but one of God's fools, said he never knew Kieran very well and then proceeded to prove it. He pretended that Kieran was an ordinary priest, lying there in his religious habit. He invited us to pretend that Teresa didn't exist.

Station 14: The Man is laid in his tomb.

They never came back, the priests, they never came back to the wake on the veranda behind the Lynch family milk bar. We 'ex's' all came back. Ex-nuns, ex-priests, ex-brothers, perhaps some ex-lovers.

A tall woman unfurled a long poem Father Kieran had written twenty years ago in praise



of tall women. It was written on a long roll of cash register paper. Kieran's sisters and brothers kept the sandwiches multiplying and the wine flowing. Kieran would have had enough fodder for many masses. Teresa moved easily among us, both Martha and Mary, seeing us with "eyes that last I saw in tears", with eyes that were tear-stained with serenity.

My eyes were busy with anger. How could they deny him thus? I was betraying them both, Teresa and Kieran, woman of peace and man of peace.

Peace, now, man of peace.
The lighthouse does not see itself.
May your light shine on you,
as it will ever shine
for us,
bewildered,
yet always unfailing.

Was it still like this for you at the end, as it was for the whisky priest, when he could not like his loves but still loved his priesthood? When he "could feel no meaning any longer in prayers like this – but the Host was different"? Or at the end, was Teresa your first and final and only love?

I'm sorry, Kieran, but I hate those bastard priests. You, man of multifoliate love, never did. I'm sorry, Teresa, but I have refused to see by the light that shines from your eyes, "that last I saw in tears".

For our own wedding, Kieran had of course written a poem:

... be
in love more than heart
or mind or soul or love
itself conceive, more love
than all the turning world
can say or understand, can
twisting try and hope for.

After more than twenty years it still lies slightly crinkled as preface to our wedding album. Now, preface and epitaph.

FOUR POEMS: ALEX SKOVRON

THE WORLD CAN KNOW

(Southbank, Spring)

i

Hearty queen-upon-stilts, her crimson robe
frilled with a white neck, her gold crown gaudy
with globed crenellations; but the two pegs
clump into concrete along this yellowed stream
of a city dull with Saturday cloud
yet aflow with weekenders milling like life,
those two pegs with black rubbery tips
her one thick contact with the promenade.
The strollers gape or follow, Nikons kick,
the queen dissolves to further up the boardwalk,
her kitschy lace and scarlets barely etch
a mark in the window across this cafeteria.
Syntax rises around me to submerge us.

ii

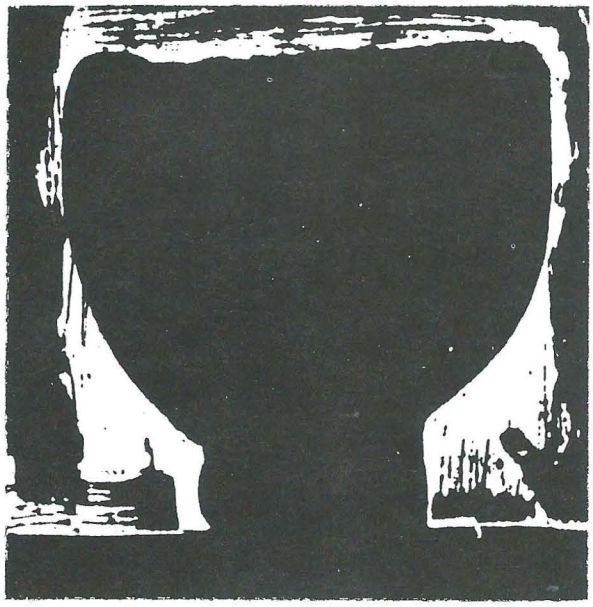
Office quartet at a neighbouring table,
champagne flutes, sunglass dishevelled, drum
of potato chips, a camera – clearly an occasion
they've struck to celebrate, their laughters
bubble clockwise in the office-empty Sabbath,
hairdos of blond trembling with a loud
want of self-consciousness, as they observe
being observed across the smalltalk seance
of a light assignation ashrill with privacies
laughing itself into the mood of half
engaged and half discordant strains.
A silence momentarily erupts – they look
to each other, confidences poised.

iii

A couple rises from a nearby clinch
debating some incalculable decision,
some drastic crossroad bristling with doubts.
They mark time in discreet dialogue, he
with a semi-smile, a half-shake of the head,
she with her copious buttock and discordant hair
facing the other way: I can merely read
the sense of resoluteness clenched to ask
or to demand his sure complicity,
or to remind him of some needless obligation
too hastily sealed, or (as she turns
aware at last of a foreign infringement)
to reassure me that the world can know.

iv

'The Wharf Food Market' hangs like a sword
above my right ear just backward of square;
the hall is full, the haggling multitude
has settled to its purchase for the hour
to sample this ephemeral geography,
    communion
with this polygon of moods.
The couple's moment has dissolved to society,
the foursome rises, their table looks hurt
as they disperse in the extinct direction
of the fossil-queen long since out of stride.
The bustle modulates into its minor,
time must develop, it cannot linger here.
Two little brothers approach with hungry smiles.



MIDDAY GAVOTTE

'a duet in which the other instrument is silent'
(Henry Miller)

His fiddle burns in the sun
as the shoppers crowd around to listen,
looking for the hat. He has come

out of nowhere, his teeth are missing
and his oversize jacket
wriggles with the music, and he glistens

with sweat. His violin is lacquered
a brilliant ochre, the bow
dances, and the eyes bestow a regular rapid

smile (not the lips though),
and the little stool that he perches upon
is almost comically too low,

and a second almost identical one
stands empty a foot away.
Just then he nods at that invisible companion,

sniffs, and ceases to play –
but continues tapping out the colourful beat
with his bow; he nods again

and smiles surprisingly, his absent teeth
gaping, as if in pride
at so adept a partner, steals a fleet

inspection of the financial side
of the performance but continues conducting.
All at once he nuzzles high

into his instrument, slyly whispers something
to the second fiddle: with a poetic
toss he resumes his own song, disrupting

the loud silence of traffic,
all the unseen migrations, the mall's frenzy;
the audience is clapping

as if in appreciation of the tacit cadenza
just concluded – then sever
slowly, diplomatically from the climaxing dancer

to go about their day. Weather
is turning: he stops, collects his disconsolate
chum
and they walk off the stage together.

RETRACING THE MAP

'And that a circle may be described from any centre, at any distance from that centre.'
– Euclid's Elements *(Book I)*

Scandinavia was always a beast springing,
though never malign – its soft Norway face,
the fluffy belly. Greenland kept growing,
and Madagascar might nestle exactly
into the coastline of the Portuguese East.
Ceylon was a tear displaced by India,
Great Britain sat there, aloof, triumphant,
a hag with a prickly chick on its knee,
ignoring Poland, buried and bloated –
except near Gdansk, its stinging defiance.
Italy reclined, obvious and easy,
at the magical heart of the Mediterranean,
with Cyprus pointing into its corner
to bypass Israel, that wedge in the middle
connecting the continents spun around it.
The vectors of North and South America
were an artist's achievement – Canada slept,
its head in cloudland, Alaska gestured,
Mexico spilt into mystical curlicues
tied off at Panama, and the old four dozen
a perfect jigsaw, with risqué Florida
risking that finishing touch of genius.
Japan was a slippery-dip into China,
a loop sent forth by Korea's cousin,
Vietnam an innocent arrogant bristle,
the Soviet Union resisted containment,
its shape impossible, and Africa's rhythm
a miracle longing to nuzzle Brazil.
Across the bottom Australia was floating,
never elusive, its bulk pretendless,
the ramshackle avian perched on its finger,
the pointer at right craning to study it:
a weird balloon suspended from fragments,
a bubble completing the world.

POPPIES

Let us gather on the grass
as the planets press their maypole round the sun.

Let us praise all metronomes
and microscopes, then dance as clinical or dirty as we can.

Let us tango in the old tuxedo
or rest upon our florals in the frowning afternoon.

Let us dazzle in our tweeds
and grey trousers, then recuperate under a thin-jeaned moon.

Let us eulogize the sea,
cock our seashells to conserve a diver's wondrous things.

Let us fail to hear whispers,
and forgetting whispers, let us form into a brilliant ring.

Let us point the torch at history,
fan the pages of our grammars in the gathering wind.

Let us learn the fire's heat,
we have all become the universal artists – our imaginings

Let us gather in the grass,
watch them grow into a field, a globe, a never-ending gallery

For everyone:
a spirit-level gallery for all.

MARGARET DUNKLE

Patricia Wrightson: Writer of Legends

▼

IN OCTOBER LAST YEAR Patricia Wrightson, doyen of Australian children's writers, paid a rare visit to Melbourne for the Writers' Festival and the launch of her latest book, *Shadows of Time* (Random House, Australia, $19.95). Eight years in the making, this is her first novel for Random (although they have paperback rights to two earlier ones) and they are delighted to have added this legendary author to their rapidly growing list. I had read this long-awaited book with delight, and accepted the invitation to an interview in her hotel suite with pleasure and some trepidation: how does one interview an icon? I was received with grace and dignity, and more: the penetrating comments, the wide-ranging allusions, the sudden wry wit that reinforced my already acute awareness that here was a writer of power, an author who fully merits her international reputation.

As could be expected (for this is how Wrightson works) *Shadows of Time* is unlike any other Australian novel for young people. It is the story of two children, one white and one black, both outcasts, wandering together through the changing countryside and through the space of almost two hundred years.

The story begins in 1798, with an eight-year-old orphaned Aboriginal boy running from his pursuers and stumbling into a smouldering cleft in the Hill of Fire, where Fire claims him, then lets him go. At the same time, not far away in Parramatta, the young orphaned servant girl Sarah Jane is running away from her employer, "to keep her good name" (she has been wrongly accused of breaking the best gravy boat).

When the two children meet in the bush they join forces, each firmly believing in his/her own culture but prepared to accept that of the other for the warmth of human companionship. The Boy (who is never named; Aboriginal names are sacred/secret) has been given the freedom of fire, since his ordeal on the burning mountain, and S'Jane (as he calls her) the freedom of water, bestowed by a magical Fish Woman as reward for being returned to the sea. With these two gifts the children drift across the land through the seasons and the years, encountering both the spirits of the land and the technological marvels of white society as candles change to electricity, railway tracks snake through the hills, cities spread and the forests vanish.

The children themselves never change, remaining eight and eleven years old – as Wrightson explains, "lost abandoned little scraps of humanity blowing endlessly through time". They have become spirit children, immortal, but the very passing of time wears them thin until they are almost invisible to the hurrying, unheeding modern people; so that when they locate the plundered form of the opalised Great Ancestor "on a shelf behind the shop's window, between lacquered sea-shells and butterflies in glass cases", all Sarah Jane need do is walk in and take it away.

As the children move back and forth across the country, revisiting earlier sites and wondering at the puzzling differences, the land itself slowly emerges as a living, breathing force, and becomes the main character in the drama.

Wrightson says she had not intended it this way; what had started as a sort of ongoing camping adventure suddenly changed focus when the children returned to the place where the boy expected to complete the burial rites for his grandfather.

The bones are gone, and axe cuts on a nearby tree carry English initials and the date 1829. Thirty-one years have passed, and the children have not grown one iota; it is the land that has changed.

As S'Jane and the boy continue their travels it is the effects of two hundred years of white settlement on "the old south land" that become the principal theme, noted by the children as they dodge bushrangers, cadge rides on trains, watch in awe the flickering images of an open-air cinema. They have few human encounters, for the white people can rarely see them, and the brown ones avoid them; the story of the two children who never grow up has travelled on ahead.

But the creatures of Aboriginal folk tales are there in plenty, ranging from the little mischievous spirits of the hills to Kuddi-Muckra, the giant snake of the inland salt lakes, and to the Hairy-men who come to watch their campfires with old, sad eyes; and it is with the Hairy-men, at last, that the children find refuge.

Patricia Wrightson was born in Lismore, New South Wales, and grew up in surrounding areas of the countryside, a solitary child in the middle of a large family. She enjoyed the various schools she attended but comments, "I was really educated by my father in literature, philosophy and wonder, and by my mother in the social sciences." And perhaps most of all by the country, for the power and magic and mystery of the land is part and parcel of all her writing.

Her earliest novels were written for her own children, and while the first two are adventure stories fairly typical of their time (the first, *The Crooked Snake*, won the Children's Book Award in 1956) the third, *The Rocks of Honey*, broke new ground in Australian children's literature.

The 1960 Children's Book Award went to Nan Chauncy for *Tangara*, itself remarkable for its depiction of Tasmanian Aborigines. *The Rocks of Honey* won no prizes, but with hindsight it was by far the most important book of the year.

It is, on one level, a tightly plotted, often amusing adventure story, with three country children exploring a nearby rocky outcrop. But the pace changes when they discover an ancient Aboriginal stone axe, hidden in a cleft in the rock. One of the boys, Eustace, is Aboriginal, and as the children discuss the problem of what to do with the axe, Eustace grows into a deeper understanding of, and finally pride in, his own cultural heritage.

Thirty-five years ago many a Koori child in a country school would have experienced the humiliations that inspired Wrightson's story, but no one before had considered it worth writing about. *The Rocks of Honey* was the first book for young people to have a contemporary Aboriginal child as a major character, his people treated with dignity and sensitivity, his folk heroes inseparable from the land.

ON THE JACKET of the first edition Wrightson is quoted as saying, "Writing *The Rocks of Honey*, I studied Aboriginal nations of S.E. Australia, became fascinated and couldn't stop."

She did stop for a time, her next three novels ranging from the delicate portrait of a young adolescent girl in *A Feather Star* (1962) to the amusing social satire of *Down to Earth* (1965) to the sensitively realised portrayal of a mentally handicapped child in *"I Own the Racecourse!"* (1968), which Walter McVitty has called "the finest single achievement in contemporary Australian children's literature" (*Innocence and Experience*, p. 100).

It was not until 1972 that Wrightson returned to Aboriginal themes with *An Older Kind of Magic*, and now for the first time the folklore and its relationship to the land had become dominant. The story is about a ruthless tycoon's attempt to turn part of Sydney's Botanical Gardens into a carpark, foiled by three children and a host of ancient spirit beings still surviving in and beneath the city (perhaps Melburnians should consider calling up the old indigenous magic in the battle to save Albert Park?).

After that came the far more powerful tale of *The Nargun and the Stars* (1973), in which young Simon and his elderly cousins join an assortment of local "old things" in returning a primeval monster to its proper home. (I first read this story by lamplight, alone one night in a bush cabin in a storm, and "the Nargun's cry, bellowing down from the mountain, full of all time and the darkness between the stars" carried a terrifying conviction that I still vividly remember.)

WRIGHTSON CONTINUED to enlarge upon the relationship between the land and its indigenous folk creatures in her most important work, the 'Wirrun' trilogy, the epic story of a young Aboriginal teenager of today, called upon to defend the land that is his birthright from the forces of unleashed evil.

With the help of a Mimi from the far north and various other spirit creatures, Wirrun

travels across – and sometimes above – the land in a series of magical adventures that eventually transform him into Hero and immortality.

In a preface to *The Ice is Coming*, the first volume of the trilogy, Wrightson defines and defends her use of Aboriginal folklore: "This is a story of today and of Australia. It is my own story, grown out of my thinking. Its human characters are my invention, but its spirit characters are not. They are the folk-spirits of the Australian Aborigines – not the ritual figures of the creative myths but the gnomes and heroes and monsters of Australia ... And I claim a writer's leave to employ them in my own stories in my own way."

IN ALMOST ALL of Wrightson's subsequent books she has continued to introduce the creatures of Aboriginal folklore and belief; a small, mischievous "old thing" who camps in Mrs Tucker's henhouse in *A Little Fear*, an unquiet ghost in *Balyet*. In all these books the strand of respect and caring for the land is intertwined with the folklore, and in *Moon-dark* takes over the theme itself, as human habitation encroaching on nature reserves causes a disharmony among the native creatures of the bush. The story is seen through the eyes of the farm dog Blue, who watches the efforts of small earnest creatures to restore the balance, directed by Brother Moon.

Elsewhere, Wrightson has been at pains to explain her fascination with these folk creatures of the Australian bush, the "chancy, wayward, illogical spirits that fit somewhere between heaven and men: the mischief-makers, the dream-thwarters, the sudden dangers, the ones who upset the fishing ... All those spirits – weird and fearsome and charming, hags and hobs and monsters, fays and fairy beasts – that belong to the middle-world of spirits."

She says that there are three reasons for her research into Aboriginal folklore: that "The white settlers left their own fairies at home where they belonged, but soon began to feel the power of those native to the new land. People always do feel the power of a land, though they don't always know it.

"... Another is that you can never get to know a people until you know something of its creative thinking: European Australians cannot know or sympathise with Aboriginal Australians without knowing what shapes they gave to the poetry and fears, the small everyday mysteries, that all people have shared.

"A third reason is that the fairies, being chancy, illogical spirits of no great importance, are the hardest to find and the first to be lost. And that would be a serious loss; for the fairies, growing out of their own country as they do, have a way of interpreting it, of catching its moods and colours. ... So man-beasts made of rock, hairy-men and whirlwind spirits catch the brooding grey forests and sunbeaten breadth of Australia. Our early settlers were right. Their own old magic was useless and powerless here." (*The Haunted Rivers*, pp. 5–11).

Wrightson says that she does not write for Aboriginal readers ("They know it all already"), but for the rest of us, we who have come late to the land and need to know and understand it. Because of her own deep instinctive affinity, her careful research and elegant command of language she is able to show us this other, older Australia, and the "earth-things and powers and spirits of the land".

She has said that she is too 'slow' a writer ever to be popular, and her books have been criticised as being too 'difficult' for the average reader. Yet her honours speak for themselves: four times winner of the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award, recipient of the Dromkeen Medal, the international Hans Christian Andersen Medal (the 'Nobel Prize for children's literature').

In 1978 she was awarded the OBE for her services to literature. Walter McVitty believes that "she has the finest intellect and talent in current Australian children's literature, and her achievements are the standard by which the efforts of others may be measured" (*Innocence and Experience*, p. 128).

Patricia Wrightson's work spans the forty years during which Australian books for young people have come of age, due in no small part to her own work in pushing back accepted boundaries. Her books have been translated into many languages; one only wishes they were more widely appreciated here at home, where fast and facile intellectual fodder seems increasingly the order of the day.

Margaret Dunkle is a Children's Literature Consultant.

ROS PESMAN

The Letters of Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford

STELLA BOWEN, who was born in Adelaide in 1893 and died in London in 1947, has until recently received little recognition in the country of her birth.[1] Yet she was a painter of considerable talent, and her name recurs in memoirs about one of the most glamorous and fabled times and places of the twentieth century, the left bank of Paris in the 1920s, the expatriate world of literary modernism.

She was there – at Rue du Fleurus with Gertrude Stein, "a very commonsensical person, of a robust and earthy disposition, ever ready with domestic advice", with Edith Sitwell whose portrait she painted, with Peggy Guggenheim from whom she borrowed money, with Isadora Duncan "who wanted a carpet to dance on so I said I'd lend her our old one", with Ezra Pound whom she taught to dance, with Ernest Hemingway who caricatured her as Mrs Braddocks in *The Sun Also Rises*, with Jean Rhys who betrayed and then portrayed her, with James Joyce, "the most courteous and unassuming of guests" who stood godfather to her daughter, and with Ford Madox Ford, the father of her daughter and her companion for ten years.

Her association with Ford and the parties that they gave made her part of the mythology of the lost generation. The disintegration of their relationship (which involved Jean Rhys) became the subject of legend – and of three novels by the other participants, Ford, Rhys, and her husband Jean Lenglet, a Dutch poet who wrote under the name Edouard de Nève.[2]

Bowen moved from representation by others to self representation when she published her own memoirs, *Drawn From Life*, in 1940.[3] Thus she was not only part of the legend but one of its makers. And her inscription was in two media. To her evocative word images of the intelligentsia of the 1920s and 1930s must be added her portraits. Among her sitters were Ford, Pound, Stein, Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Yeats.

In writing on the left bank world, Bowen appears as a bit-player, one of the endless line of wives whom Alice B. Toklas entertained while the geniuses sat with Gertrude Stein. Thus of this Australian woman painter and writer we can ask Shari Benstock's question as to what it was like to be a woman on the fringe of the expatriate Paris of modernism, constructed and self-constructed as handmaiden to male talent.[4]

But if Stella Bowen was seen by the lost generation and their chroniclers as of minor importance, her autobiography with its ironic self-deprecation, so markedly in contrast with the braying egos of the geniuses, has been much raided and quoted. This is hardly surprising since this down to earth, pragmatic woman had the painter's observant eye, the ability to recreate the visual image in words and to encapsulate place and person in evocative vignettes.

In 1923 she joined Ezra and Dorothy Pound on a tour of Central Italy.

> I had seen a hard country where everything had a lovely edge to it, and fell into marvellous formal patterns. Trees in serried rows and rocks in sequence and rivers in the exact position required to compose the picture. Old towns crowning symmetrical hills, with ramparts like a collar round the neck; bridges and towers and churches, their yellow-grey stone almost indistinguishable from the rocks upon which they stood, until a second glance revealed their keen, austere unblurred edges.[5]

Ford rightly wondered "if you weren't really meant to be a writer".

More of Stella Bowen's writing has now come into the public arena with the publication of letters that she and Ford wrote to each other from the time of their meeting in 1917 until his death in 1939.[6] The letters cluster in two periods: the beginning of their relationship in 1919, when Bowen was living in London and Ford was at his army base in Yorkshire and then at their cottage in Pulborough in Essex; and 1926–1927 when the relationship was moving towards its end and Ford was in North America and Bowen in Paris. The letters revolve around private life; literature was not part of the bonding of Ford and Bowen.

In *Drawn From Life*, Bowen published her story of her relationship with Ford, and there is a remarkable consistency between the letters stretching back to 1918 and the 1941 autobiography.

What the letters reveal, and in a way not emphasised by Ford's biographers, is the depth of the relationship between the young Australian painter and the established English writer and her role in his recovery from the trauma of the war, in the return of his confidence and in the great creative outburst that produced *No More Parades*, where she was incorporated rather than idealised as Valentine Wannup.

In 1926 Ford dedicated the American edition of *The Good Soldier* to Bowen:

> For it is certain that without the incentive to live that you offered me I should scarcely have survived the post-war period and it is more certain still that without your spurring me again to write I should never have written again ...
>
> What I am now I owe to you.

In acknowledging the Dedication, Bowen wrote that she did not deserve such a testimonial: "almost any goodish girl would have done all I've done and more". She expressed the same tough, unsentimental view of her role in Ford's life in *Drawn From Life*: "I happened to be the 'new object' at the moment when Ford needed to be given a lease of after-the-war life."

Ford's biographers have tended to endorse Bowen's self-deprecating account, pointing to its prefigurement in *The Good Soldier* (1913) both in the *vie sentimental* of Edward Ashburner and in the observations of Russel Dowell, the Ford persona in the novel. The correspondence suggests that Bowen's role in Ford's life might be taken more seriously.

In recent years, the role of 'spouses' in the creative process has come under reassessment; 'spouses' who are not necessarily wives or female and whose ranks include Robert Browning and Theo van Gogh.[8] Sentiments of acknowledgement and recognition such as those made by Ford are being taken literally when applied to companions like Bowen, who intercept the world, confer unconditional approval, serve as the 'ideal reader' and create a haven and a sanctuary. For Ford, Bowen was a place of his own "in the sun and against the rain too".

After one of Bowen's first visits to the cottage in Pulborough in Sussex that was to be their first home, Ford wrote that "I have never before in my life had a period that was all happiness – & I have never remembered or imagined such happiness". To Stella Bowen, Ford opened himself up in a way that he claimed to be unprecedented and contrary to his self image.

> I haven't got the motives that the rest of humanity have. I don't want money, power, influence, authority or any of the things that most people want. I have always wanted to find in the world just one person I trust – & that I have found in you – & a number to whom I feel kindly ... Otherwise I want nothing except to do my job well.
>
> This, dear, is the fullest confession of faith I have ever made to anyone – & I make it to you because I love you, finally and irrevocably! It is the greatest compliment I have ever paid you – & the greatest I have ever paid to any human.

It may be too that Bowen simply brought out the best in Ford in more ways than one. The image of Ford Madox Ford suggested by contemporaries and most of his biographers is on the whole negative.[9] His constant reinvention and mythologising of self (which led H.G. Wells to describe him as "a great system of assumed personae and dramatised selves") is somehow regarded as reprehensible.

The Ford of the letters to Stella Bowen is, however, a very sympathetic and attractive char-

acter, sensitive to her needs, supportive and reassuring in the face of her lack of confidence in herself and her art. He recognised early on the essential quality of her painting, its "serenity, imperturbability".

Stella Bowen was far from her own self-denigrating "any goodish girl". She is remembered as a woman of wonderful vitality, warmth and generosity, with a great capacity for making and maintaining friends. Artist Alice Halicka, who was a close friend in Paris, described her as "l'etre le moins egoiste que j'ai connu"[10]. Australian historian Keith Hancock, who knew her in London in the later years of her life, wrote of her as "the most courageous, vital and harmonious personality that I have ever known" and of her "genius for living".[11]

Her association with the talented and famous did not depend only on Ford. It was Pound who first took her up in London during the first world war and they were still corresponding in 1947 when she was dying from cancer and his life and reputation had totally disintegrated.

If the letters reveal a new Ford persona, there is a remarkable consistency between the private Stella Bowen of the letters and the public Stella Bowen of the autobiography. Hers was the classical persona, ironic, down-to-earth, practical, measured, brave, stoical, concerned that she live honestly, averse to and intolerant of emotional self indulgence, conscious of the importance of style in living.

Thus when in the early stages of her relationship with Ford, his previous companion, the writer Violet Hunt, made a public spectacle of her desertion, Bowen wrote with distaste of Hunt's vulgarisation of intimate life and of her lack of pride. Conversely when Ernest Hemingway left his wife Hadley, Bowen wrote with admiration of Hadley Hemingway's "superhuman efforts to go down with a smile & with dignity". In her turn, Bowen tried to do the same.

One of the most arresting parts of *Drawn From Life* is Bowen's account of the ending of her relationship with Ford, related from the viewpoint of a woman who wrote that falling out of love was as necessary a step in the attainment of wisdom as falling in love. No regret was expressed in the autobiography either about her relationship with Ford or its ending; she had gained enormously from her association with the man who had opened up life for her and whose mind entranced her. Other sources hint that Bowen may not have been quite as stoical as the public record suggests but the cracks do not appear in her letters to Ford at the time. The private front is totally consistent with the public.

STELLA'S ACCOUNT of her journey from Adelaide to the Left Bank and then to England can be read as a *Bildungsroman*; the journey of the inexperienced provincial to the metropolis where she acquires the appropriate guise of sophistication. It is also the story of a woman's growing up from innocence through dependence to independence and autonomy. Behind the Stella Bowen who attracted such admiration in the late 1930s and early 1940s lay an endless and fruitless search for security, material and emotional. Ford met the latter need for a moment. It is this search that is so poignantly charted in her letters.

Her father had died when she was three and she was brought up by her mother in the clerical circles of the city of spires. When she was twenty her mother died and in the following year, 1914, she sailed for England on the typical middle-class overseas trip. She had a chaperone on the ship and her London life began in the home of the secretary of the Mothers' Union in Pimlico. A chain of circumstances led the young woman who had been shown glimpses of life beyond Adelaide by her art teacher, Rose Macpherson (Margaret Preston), to the Westminster Art School and to a flat in Pembroke Gardens which she shared with Phyllis Reid, an English woman studying drama. To one of the parties in the flat came Ezra Pound and overnight Stella Bowen was pitched

> into a milieu so unbelievably different from anything I had known or imagined, that I nearly exploded in the effort not to seem nonplussed.[12]

It was Pound who led Bowen to Ford, twenty years her senior, legally married to Elsie Martindale and in a public liaison with Violet Hunt. Nevertheless she went to live with him in 1919 and bore his child at the end of the following year.

What the letters underline is that Bowen was not at ease with the morals and manners of the bohemian London into which events had taken her. Ford provided the opportunity for escape, "a platform of safety". If Bowen represented the chance of a sane normal life to the war-traumatised Ford, he represented security, a shelter, to her. Thus she wrote to him in April 1919:

> To have you really belong to me & to belong really to you is like coming home after a long exile. You don't know what it is like to be as detached a thing as I've been, not belonging anywhere. You don't know what having a home means to me – let alone everything else.

The coming together of Bowen and Ford was founded on the need and desire of each to find a haven of calm and harmonious stability. Yet Bowen's secure haven was built on shaky foundations. She and Ford were not married, her daughter was illegitimate, conditions of which she was always acutely conscious. Much of the correspondence after Ford left the army and went to live in the cottage at Pulborough was on the concealment of their relationship, not only from Violet Hunt and Stella's brother who was in Europe with the A.I.F. but from the world in general.

In France they passed as a married couple, which created a problem when they separated. Should they give out that they were divorcing? Janice Biala, the Polish-born painter who was Ford's last companion, refers to Stella Bowen writing her memoirs as a means of coming out from under "the shadow", alluded to as the illegitimacy of her relationship with Ford and of their daughter.

The legitimacy that eluded Stella Bowen in life was ironically to be conferred in death. When she died of cancer in London in 1947, the details on the death certificate were filled out by Phyllis Reid Vance, with whom she had shared the flat in Pembroke Gardens in 1917–1919. On the certificate Stella Bowen is described as formerly the wife of Ford Madox Ford, now divorced.

IF STELLA BOWEN'S search for security was threatened by the illegitimate nature of her relationship with Ford, it was also undermined by the financial precariousness and poverty which plagued her time with him and beyond. Their life together was financed by her small private income from her parents' estate and by what he could make by writing. It was never enough and their capital – most of it hers – was absorbed by the *Transatlantic Review*, the short-lived little magazine that Ford launched at the beginning of 1924. After Bowen and Ford separated, she had little to fall back on beyond what she could make from portrait painting and the meagre royalties from Ford's British publications.

At the beginning of their life together, Bowen had written to Ford, "You don't know what having a home means to me". Twenty years later she recalled her life in France where she and Ford moved in 1922 as "a long, unequal struggle to get together another permanent home". From Red Ford, the cottage in Essex, they had progressed to Coopers Cottage in Bedham then to the south of France and then through a series of dilapidated and uncomfortable studios and apartments in Paris which Stella doggedly tried to turn into homes.

For Bowen a roof over her head was "the best insurance in the world against the lean years". The shelter that she sought was thus also physical, a place of harmony, normality, aesthetic satisfaction. And the creation of that haven dominated the correspondence of Ford and Bowen in the first and last years of their lives together. The letters of 1919 revolve above all around the renovation of the cottage and garden in Pulborough. In the letters in meticulous and loving detail they plan and work for their home.

It was at the time when her relationship with Ford was disintegrating that Stella Bowen at last found accommodation which satisfied her need to live to some extent as a *bonne bourgeoise*. The refurbishment and redecoration which she described in such attentive detail in her letters to Ford might be read as the efforts of a woman desperately trying to shore up her collapsing world, home again being the symbol.

> Do you think that if I get everything attended to before you come back that we shall be able to avoid messes for a long time? I mean trottings & scramblings. I should like to have all the material side of life fixed up in a thor-

> oughly bourgeois fashion, – & then I'll just *despise* it.

It is usually assumed that Ford's relationship with Jean Rhys played a crucial role in his separation from Bowen. Yet what comes through in the correspondence is Bowen's determination that the Rhys episode should not be allowed to break up the family, destroy the haven which she saw as essential to all their survivals, Ford's as well as her own and their child's. Ford appears to have concurred, and the language of love and need in his letters did not diminish until after his return from America at the beginning of 1927.

More important than Jean Rhys in the disintegration of the relationship was its failure to provide material or emotional security. Bowen wrote to Ford in December 1927 that she felt "a perfect *panic* at the thought of facing a precarious existence any more" and that she could not tell him how much their daughter "benefits by a tranquil, bourgeois existence". In 1933 Stella Bowen, unable to survive any longer financially in Paris, moved with her daughter to England, much to the chagrin of Ford. She did not relish life in England "among these half-baked English minds", but there were people in England who could help her:

> I dare not to go away from what little human warmth & support there is for me in the world, & I don't dare deprive Julie of it.

Six months later, in rebuking Ford for his criticism of Julie's education in England, Bowen wrote that after a period of harrowing insecurity and anxiety she was now building up a new life for Julie who was becoming acquainted with other families and people who had honourable standards of conduct. One bitter disagreement between Julie's parents was religion and Ford's concern that his daughter be brought up in the Catholic faith that he had adopted. It could not have been without irony that Stella expressed her fear for a future for Julie "enslaved by the catholic view of marriage". It had been Ford's Catholic marriage that lay behind Julie's illegitimacy.

Paradoxically, if the disintegration of Bowen's relationship with Ford lay in part in her failure to find material and emotional security, it also stemmed from her growing independence of Ford and her desire for autonomy in a life of her own. Stella Bowen's expatriate life began as that of a young woman who was conscious of her colonial background, whose manners and mores were not those of the sophisticated circles into which she moved in the metropolis, who lacked self confidence and who was very diffident about her art.

It ended as that of a woman who had learnt that there would be no such thing as 'belonging' to another person and that in the last resort "you must be responsible for yourself, just as you must prepare to die alone"; a woman who in both the private and public record neither whined nor whinged but displayed a stoic toughness and a refusal to take self or the world too seriously. Her life with Ford and then as a single supporting parent had also turned her into a feminist, conscious that women's upbringing and education in no way fitted them for self realisation and self sufficiency.

STELLA BOWEN'S STORY deserves a telling beyond her role as spouse in expatriate Paris and as an articulate witness of time and place. She was a painter who first received some recognition in the war years when she was appointed by the Australian government as an official war artist and whose work is now receiving more attention as part of the movement to recover the work of women artists.

Writer as well as painter, Stella Bowen's *Drawn From Life* deserves a place in any canon of Australian autobiographical literature. She also belongs to that not inconsiderable group of Australians who have lived their lives abroad and who have on the whole been ignored or marginalised in the placing of the focus in Australian history on Australia rather than on Australians.[13] In the lives of Australians like Stella Bowen or Louise Hansen Dyer, the subject of a recent biography, connections were forged into the outside world, into internationalism and cosmopolitanism, connections which still need to be explored.[14]

Ros Pesman, who teaches history at the University of Sydney, is writing a life of Stella Bowen as part of a study of Australian expatriate women in the inter-war years.

ENDNOTES: see page 60.

DARREN TOFTS

A Theoretical Virus

Nicholas Zurbrugg: *The Parameters of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1993).
Gregory L. Ulmer: *Heuretics. The Logic of Invention* (John Hopkins University Press, 1994).

WHEN THE NEW new historicists of the future begin quarrying late twentieth century culture, they will discover, to their astonishment, that the job of identifying and naming the dominant discourse of the period has been done for them. It generally goes by the name postmodernism, and its most distinctive metaphor is that of the virus (the 'postmodern condition'). One of the tasks facing the cultural anthropologists of the next century will be, no doubt, to determine the cause of this condition, and its pestilential mood of *fin de* everything. To their dismay (in the face of a mounting sense of redundancy), they will find that the virus which causes postmodern condition has already been classified. It is called 'the B-effect'.

The 'B-effect' is a theoretical virus. It is to be found in the arena of social and cultural critique, and it amounts to an infiltration throughout critical and creative work of a sense of apocalypse, failure, and exhausted possibility. The 'B-effect' stems from an oversimplified and reductive application of the more provocative ideas of writers such as Walter Benjamin, Samuel Beckett, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard. Nicholas Zurbrugg, who has named the 'B-effect' virus, is not the first to identify its cultivation. However he is one of the few critics writing about it who has attempted to redress it in a manner significantly different from the prevailing tendency of outright denunciation.

Zurbrugg is undoubtedly the most influential commentator in this country on the contemporary avant-garde, and it is here that he finds the antidote to the current infectious state of 'B-effect' theory. His interviews with, and essays on important figures such as William Burroughs, John Cage, Laurie Anderson and Barbara Kruger are well known both here and overseas. They are a constant and refreshing reminder that there is much more to postmodernism than poststructuralist critical theory.

Rather than focusing narrowly on the fashionable, catastrophic traits of postmodernism, Zurbrugg is interested in drawing attention to its broader parameters. Parallelling the spread of 'B-effect' anti–art and theory has been the proliferation of experimental, ante–works of art, which counter the myth of crisis and exhaustion through the invention of "new modes of positive creativity". This 'C-effect', as Zurbrugg calls it, is antithetical, immune to "panic sensibility", and is generated on the principle of "unavoidable renewal" through technological innovation.

The 'C-effect' is named after, and based principally upon the work of one man, John Cage — "first and foremost of postmodern artists". Cage may seem an unlikely choice in this respect. For many the composer who turned our attention away from music to noise is more readily associated as a 'carrier' of the 'B-effect' virus. However Zurbrugg is persuasive in portraying Cage as "one of the most positively informed critics of contemporary culture". What emerges from Zurbrugg's engagement with his work is an approach to creativity that is endlessly resourceful and passionately inventive. The concept of the impasse holds no truck here.

Zurbrugg cleverly uses Cage as an index of the postmodern avant-garde (in the process making some fascinating parallels with its modernist predecessor), specifically with respect to the utilisation of new technologies. *The Parameters of Postmodernism* is particularly interested in American avant-garde art, and its emergence "from the heart of the age of hypermechanical reproduction and production".

Cage is well known as the inventor of electronic music, but unfortunately that's about as far as most biographical notes go. Zurbrugg portrays the development of his work through the technologies of magnetic tape, to television to multi-media as the seminal moment in the "electrification of the avant-garde". Cage's absolute centrality to the whole notion of an avant-garde sensibility is much more impressively made by Zurbrugg than David Revill in his 1993 biography of Cage, *The Roaring Silence.*

This sensibility is to be found in artists as various as Kenneth Gaburo and Steve Reich, Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson, whose work contributes to the fruitful continuity of an enlivened techno avant-garde, which not only explores the potential uses of electronics, but also the experimental possibilities of merging different media forms, particularly as new ones develop. Such activity has had the effect of taking the notion of creativity in unexpected and fertile directions, of establishing new aesthetic conventions and necessitating a vigorous and ongoing process of critical assessment and theoretical reflection.

The work of the English telematics artist Roy Ascott is especially important in this respect, for it represents the heightened dimensions of creativity made possible by advances in hypermedia. As artists find increasingly ingenious ways to use computer technology, critics are engaged in the process of formulating their work in aesthetic terms. The challenge, of course, is that much of the new telematic art is founded upon communicative and responsive principles quite different from traditional forms. The shift from analogue to digital representation has resulted in the generation of a purist aesthetic which continually stretches the boundaries of our habitual assumptions regarding creativity.

As Zurbrugg astutely points out, though, the interactivity and hybridity promised by cybernetic space is nothing new, and he cites precedents in John Cage's late work *Europera* (1987-1991), which exploits the principles of chance and improvisation through the intermingling of different media. In the "notionally anarchic" character of *Europera* Zurbrugg identifies the drive behind the contemporary American avant-garde: a "confident commitment to the positive, organic synthesis of antilinear or multilinear modes of traditional creativity and multimedia creativity".

Zurbrugg is convincing in his assertion of the positive, energising nature of ante-art, but the most remarkable feature that emerges from his attention to it is its pervasiveness. Much theorising has been done concerning postmodern paradigm shifts, the emergence of new epistemologies, and cultural change in the age of electronic media.

However Zurbrugg effectively demonstrates how artistic creativity partakes of, as well as contributes to such change, and in the process precipitates the actual conditions of change subsequently co-opted by the "battalions of B-effect theorists".

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF postmodernism's "hybrid aesthetic" is such that artist and critic, spectator and spectacle are, to use a phrase of Beckett's, continually "skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression". How do we describe practitioners of ante-art, let alone their work?

The difficulty the cultural critic faces is of naming something that is often entirely unfamiliar, and dependent upon the invention of what will be, in hindsight, appropriate conceptual and aesthetic frames of reference. What, for example, is Gregory L. Ulmer? Is he a critic, lecturer, theorist, auteur? On the basis of *Heuretics*, his most recent exploration into the domain of creativity in the age of electronic media, it would be reasonable to assert none of the above. Well, that is, he is all of the above, but no single term will do to identify what it is that he does in *Heuretics*. And what is it that he does? "I am developing an analogy for chorography, saying that electronic writing is like performing a tableau vivant from Beau Geste as part of a follies show at a frontier saloon commemorating the Columbus quincentenary".

On the basis of such eclectic integration it is easy to see why the term 'interface' has become such a common part of speech these days. Ulmer is interested in the consequences of electronic media, particularly for speech and print, and in the circulation of knowledge across different contexts. It is not surprising to find that surrealism is a guiding principle in his work, for heuretics, as the term suggests, gives priority to discovery and invention through the synthesis of disparate material.

Heuretics is part of an ongoing work in progress, commenced in *Applied Grammatology* (1985), consolidated in *Teletheory* (1989), and sustained internationally through a listserver on InterNet. Ulmer's 'Invent' list on the Net is aptly suggestive of his interest in the powerfully generative nature of writing, conceived as a cultural technology which crosses disciplinary, generic and institutional boundaries. In *Heuretics* Ulmer doesn't propose an argument about the development of electronic writing and its impact on logic, rhetoric and the creative process itself; he *makes* it according to the very logic he seeks to explain.

The name he gives to this generative principle is 'chorography', derived from Plato's term 'chora' (place of growth) to mean "a rhetoric of invention concerned with the history of 'place' in relation to memory". The place or space of such invention is subjective, in this case the totality of information gathered and integrated within the inventive matrix of Gregory L. Ulmer. In this it is more appropriate to think of *Heuretics* as multi-media performance art than scholarship (though it is elegantly informed by the latter).

Drawing on Breton's surrealist manifesto, the history of method, poststructuralist theory and multi-media experimentation, Ulmer confronts the conceptual task of how to commemorate the Columbus quincentenary in the light of post-colonialism, the ascendency of cyberspace and cultural studies.

The result (which constitutes the bulk of the book) is an audacious, startling, sometimes exasperating act of inventive flare. The conclusions he reaches seem unimportant, for what is memorable is the process of tuning in to the logic of invention. He refers at one point to the ability to *write* an intuition.

Heuretics is certainly that, and it eloquently demonstrates the assertion made by many commentators that electronic writing systems, such as hypertext, have much in common with intuition and the associational logic of memory. Few critics writing on the inventive capabilities of hypermedia have been able to match Ulmer in demonstrating (as opposed to simply stating) what it means to write and *think* electronically.

In his ingenious incorporation of poststructuralist theory as part of the hybrid mix of multimedia invention, Ulmer contributes to the 'C-effect' of postmodernism. Ulmer appropriates 'B-effect' theory with remarkable aplomb, in ways which are reminiscent of John Cage's verbal play, especially in his 'mesostics' ("The Other writes *le mur*, and I read *ulmer*").

Theory, when put to work by Ulmer, is not the flat, lugubrious rhetoric of apocalypse, but a flexible and potentially inexhaustible initiator of invention. His 'choral writing' is further testimony to Zurbrugg's timely portrait of the postmodern as (after John Barth) a culture of replenishment.

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SAYING GOODBYE

Separation has always been inevitable. There's death,
for one. Either yours or his. No getting out of that.
A phonecall. A policeman at the door. A short trip in
an ambulance. Or you might wake up to find him cold,
marble cold, beside you. That's supposed to be the best
way. In his own bed. In his sleep.

He might, on the other hand, walk out alive. The world
is full of women, many of them prettier and smarter than
you. Less tired. Less busy. Altogether, less trouble.
You know he has options. A queue of other women,
pressing behind you, whispering. Why are you taking so
long? Why don't you just get what you want and go? Make
room for the next one.

Then there's illness, mental or physical. You think
you're safe. You think you've checked out his family
history. And then he turns a certain age and something
like a time bomb goes off in his head. You are left
sitting in the debris with blood on your face. If he
survives, you will not know him. You will have no past
in common. Your stories won't match. Neither of you
will know how you got there.

Or you could be left with his body. A warm sack of
bones, empty of meaning. You could look in his eyes and
see nothing, not even recognition, as though they were
made of glass.

He could also simply vanish. Go missing with nothing but
the clothes on his back and a cut lunch. For the rest of
your life you will not know if he's alive or dead. If he
was a bigamist, a criminal, a spy, or if it was just
something you said.

And so for years, you have been saying goodbye. And
goodbye. And goodbye. Because you know only one thing
for sure. Some day, you will mean it.

LISSA MITCHELL

ANOTHER PAGE WITH MORE WRITING ON IT

(after Jacques Prévert)

2 and 2 make FOUR
4 and 4 make EIGHT
8 and 8 make SIXTEEN
once more says the teacher
but then the lyrebird
parts the sky
the boy spots the lyrebird
hears him singing
cries RESCUE ME
PLAY WITH ME
BIRD! so the bird
swoops down to play with
the boy 2 and 2 make
FOUR again
says the teacher
the boy starts skipping
across the classroom
the bird starts skipping
right behind him
4 and 4 make EIGHT
8 and 8 make SIXTEEN
and 16 and 16
what do they make
nothing
certainly not thirty-two
so they just walk off

in different directions
the boy has hidden
the bird in his desk
but the other children
all hear the bird
all hear the music
and 8 and 8
wander out of the classroom
and 4 and 4
and 2 and 2
stroll off holding hands
and 1 and 1
make neither one
nor two they just walk away as equals
and the boy starts singing
the teacher screams
WHEN YOU HAVE QUITE FINISHED ...
and the classroom walls
slowly disintegrate
the windows dissolve into sand the ink
becomes water the desks grow back into trees
the chalks coalesce into a cliff
and the teacher's ballpoint shaped like a quill
leaps free of her fist turns into a bird

RICHARD DEUTCH

JACOB G. ROSENBERG

Mordechai the Intellectual

EVERYONE TALKED about Mordechai's intelligence. Foremost among his admirers was his wife Schifra. Schifra would say that what her Mordechai possessed in one finger wasn't to be found in the whole of Einstein's head. "It's obvious," she would explain, "because I seldom understand what he is saying." If Mordechai was aroused by a discussion, he would become so sharp as to be positively dangerous. He'd then shoot down any adversary with a barrage of fancy words, raising his finger skyward and announcing, "Remember, it's all a question of abstract proletarian consciousness. The dialectical aspects of the matter are ..." And so on.

Mordechai was a ladies' finishing tailor by trade, and a good one, who had arrived in Lodz in the early 1930s. He had come from a small town somewhere, and, as was common with small-town folk, he was a know-it-all. He understood things more quickly, more fully, and with greater insight than anyone else anywhere. At workers' meetings, he asked convoluted questions, his interjections were weighty, while his own speeches were fiery. His enthusiasm inspired them all, and with such an armoury of wisdom, understanding and rapier wit, he quickly rose to prominence in the local needleworkers' union. In fact, he became a star. There was not a placard posted, not a banner waved, not a strike called without Mordechai being on hand. He was involved in everything. Without him, there would have been neither union nor Party, and the world itself would have stopped turning. It was no wonder that the young girls were drawn to him like bees to honey. Schifra suffered agonies of jealousy, but for the privilege of living with such a great man, she bore her grievance in silence.

Then war broke out. In the needleworkers' union there was confusion. A meeting was called. There were expressions of alarm: the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was a betrayal! What was happening? What was going on? The only person who did not lose his head was Mordechai, who, with the agility of a circus acrobat, leapt on to a table and addressed the gathering, crying, "Comrades! Remember! It is all still a question of abstract proletarian consciousness!" He threw this like a grenade into the midst of the disturbed assembly. For the moment, the reference to dialectical aspects had disappeared.

In the three weeks that it took the Germans to enter Lodz, Mordechai moved to the Soviet-occupied zone with his wife, who was then in the late stages of pregnancy. There, for the first time and with great rejoicing, he met with Soviet soldiers, Voroshilov's comrades of whom he had read so much in the numerous foreign-language books and pamphlets he had devoured.

With rekindled enthusiasm, he prepared himself to educate the backward Jewish masses in Soviet truths, but his best intentions foundered. His services were not particularly sought by the propaganda office, and, early one December morning, two uniformed men appeared at his door and set into motion a chain reaction that had Mordechai, his wife and their newly born daughter, Lenina, dispatched on an excursion to the more distant, somewhat cooler provinces of Stalin's paradise on earth.

On the train, Schifra cried. Mordechai pranced about her as though one leg had become shorter than the other.

"Schifra," he kept saying, "you don't understand. You're no better than all those other bourgeois geese who don't know the meaning of revolution, or of sacrifice for the cause, or of

building a brave new world. You don't have the faintest notion of what the dialectical process is all about. So stop crying Schifra, I beg you. It's embarrassing in front of all these fellow passengers."

Shortly after their arrival at the Siberian camp, Schifra became aware of the oriental Kalmyk overseer's gaze, which fell repeatedly on her amply developed bosom. It was now Mordechai's turn, she reasoned, to put up in silence. But Mordechai was not one to be silent. One day he approached the overseer and said, "Comrade governor, I come to you with a plea. It is not about my wife; nor has it to do with my own honour. Revolutions have no place for such bourgeois notions. The issue is more truly one

It was now Mordechai's turn, she reasoned, to put up in silence. But Mordechai was not one to be silent.

of proletarian consciousness and socialist integrity allied to morality as taught by our beloved Ilyich Lenin, by Joseph Stalin and by that noble knight Budienny, whom I feel I have come to know so well through the reading of his works."

On hearing Budienny's name, the Kalmyk's eyes ignited with a wolfish sharpness. The next morning, Mordechai was on his way to the mines of Sakhalin, there further to salt his dreams of revolution.

IN THE SPRING of 1945 the war ended. The world was free! Free! At the very sound of the word, Mordechai felt reborn.

In Lodz, to which she had by now returned, Schifra waited impatiently for Mordechai. Beside her on their reunion was their daughter Lenina, who was holding the hand of a little boy. This child had Schifra's appearance except for a pair of dark and slanting eyes. Schifra smiled as she presented the child to Mordechai, saying, "He's called Herschel, after my grandfather."

Mordechai promptly accepted Herschel. As a member of the Party and an internationalist, he was also the builder of a new world in which there was no room for bourgeois prejudice. He had no time for trivialities. What was more important was that Poland needed him, and, as if nothing had happened in the six years of the war, he made straight for the union offices, where he set about establishing a co-operative, became an official and subsequently its delegate. However, his efforts to please his superiors and be useful – above all, to be useful to the cause – ended one night with another knock on the door. Across the threshold stepped an old comrade called Stefan who, with good reason, had also come to be known as Basher. With Mordechai he was hearty.

"My dear Abrasha!" he said expansively.

"My name is not Abrasha", replied Mordechai curtly.

"Oh, what droll people you Jews are. You do so insist on continually changing your names. Listen, Abrasha, I'm here as the representative of the Polish people. Tomorrow, at ten precisely, I want you to be at my office. You have information that we need. Names, for instance. Names; we want names; lots of names. In the meantime, you need have no fears for yourself. I am posting a guard at your front door for protection. You're safe. You need have no worries. You're in good hands."

Mordechai did not appear at Stefan's office. Instead, at first light, he, together with Schifra, Lenina and little Herschel, left by a secret rear door, thereby also leaving Poland behind forever.

In time, they reached the shores of a fortunate new country. It was not long before Mordechai acquired a workshop. He then made rapid progress and very quickly became a manufacturer, in the process amassing a sizeable fortune.

On his retirement, Wednesday became his favourite day. It was then that Schifra would leave early in the morning to go about her activities; Lenina was married to a doctor who hailed from a fine Chinese family, Herschel lived on a kibbutz in Israel. Mordechai was free, entirely free, able without distraction to sit in his customary armchair and watch his favourite show, *Bonanza*, on television, and indulge himself in sweet tea and nuts which were on a table by his side.

On one such Wednesday, however, at a most crucial moment when Hoss was getting involved in a brawl, the doorbell rang tersely.

"Confound it", Mordechai cursed to himself. "Just as I'm relaxing, some beggar or other has to come visiting."

Peering through the spy-hole in the door, he saw, beaded with sweat, a man he had come to consider a *nudnik*. The man carried a pile of books in his arms. Adopting as well as he could

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"You have information that we need. Names, for instance. Names; we want names; lots of names."

---

his Schifra's voice, Mordechai rasped from his side of the door, "My husband isn't home at the moment and I have no money."

"Schifra, dear," he heard from the other side, "I haven't come about money. I've brought him the last volume in the series he wanted."

"He's read it already. A year ago."

"How could he? It's just been published."

"Well, as far as I know he's read it", insisted Mordechai, tiptoeing back to his place and to his favourite program.

But, as he sank into his armchair, Mordechai's head slumped forward. He suddenly found himself in another world. He was in a grand red marble palace. On a gilded throne sat Karl Marx chewing on a large marrowbone. To his right, dressed in women's clothes, stood Stalin himself, drinking bile, and to his left, naked except for a diaper, stood Lenin – addressing him, Mordechai, in the warped, distorted mechanical tone of a robot.

"Mordechai. You have sinned greatly. A terrible punishment awaits you. You have associated with Bundists, and Zionists, and Trotskyists. You have given money to Israel ..."

"No! No! I have had no such associations", stammered Mordechai in defence."I've merely wanted to persuade them, convert them, influence them, convince them of the truth. As for my contributions, they were just small change and, even then, solely on your behalf, sir ..."

"And what is this?" boomed Stalin, and at that instant there appeared before Mordechai a huge television screen, on which he could see his son with the slanting Asiatic eyes standing to attention as Yitzhak Shamir pinned a medal of valour on his chest.

"So!" Stalin snorted, this time seeming to speak with the voice of the one-time Kalmyk overseer of the camp to which Mordechai had been sent. "Kidnapping Soviet children is socialism too!"

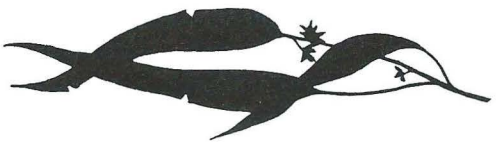
Mordechai felt faint, confused. When he came to, he saw Schifra hovering over him, her whole expression stark and tormented, like that of a frightened bird.

"Mordechai dearest! Mordechai!' she appealed to him. "What happened? What's the matter, dear? Tell me, Mordechai, what is it, what is it."

Mordechai looked into her face, her eyes.

"Nothing has altered," he murmured, "nothing has changed. Nothing. It's all still a question of abstract proletarian consciousness, of abstract proletarian consciousness, while the dialectical aspects of the matter ..."

And, even as he spoke, he turned to one side, pressed his head into the white cushion on his chair and, with the smile of all-knowingness at play on his lips, fell soundly asleep like a tired child.



MICHAEL GEORGE SMITH

Ozrock: The State of Play

Coda

THIS ARTICLE continues my discussion (in *Overland* 135) of recent problems affecting the Australian rock music industry, in response to the release last February of *Stayin' Alive: Identifying the Problem*, the first part of a major new study carried out in 1993 by the industry body, AUSMUSIC.

The report identified a decline of the '80s-style Aussie pub band, diminishing live music venues, and industry structures that prevent both younger players from perfecting their craft and older hands from consolidating their creative maturity. Additionally, in my view, the emergence of 'tribute bands' (coupled with the re-emergence of a widespread cultural cringe, which is disguised in the rock media as a dismissive, hip cynicism) have cast big shadows over the local scene, while shifting the spotlight back onto 'name' overseas acts. To these problems, you can add the perennial one artists face in trying to gain access to recording facilities, air-play and effective distribution networks.

This last task is made increasingly difficult by both the sheer diversity of local 'independent' recording labels and the prevailing fragmentation of musical genres and tastes – into everything from ska to metal, grunge to groove, thrash to hip-hop, acid jazz to rap – with each style claiming the allegiance of its own distinct 'tribe' of fans and followers.

On the world stage, the style heroes include Iggy Pop and Neil Young, Public Enemy and Ice-T, Soundgarden and Pearl Jam, while Australians include Nick Cave, who left Australia a dozen years ago to claim fame in Berlin.

The record companies and distributors servicing the appetites of these fragmented subcultures invariably introduce every act as 'independent' and 'alternative', despite the fact that the big international acts are often signed to major multinational labels and can boast sales of around a million copies worldwide. It's all part of the desperate need to assign 'street credibility' to the act, essential in today's record-buying market.

Judging from the hyped-up press releases, having 'street credibility' often means being arrogant, misogynistic, violent and insane – or, at least, to affect being mad, bad and dangerous to know as part of a public image.

In Australia, bands like Powderfinger from Brisbane and Defryme from Melbourne are utilising similar descriptions, with stage personae to match, to market their particular musical hybrids.

Because the audiences for contemporary popular music are so specific, record companies must target them very accurately when signing up new talent. About two years ago, in order to do just this, local arms of the world's multinationals began to absorb those independent labels that had survived the 1980s, seeing them as research and development offshoots for the major labels.

Entering into joint ventures, PolyGram picked up Red Eye Records, and Warner Music incorporated rooArt, a label originally with PolyGram that was established by INXS manager, Chris Murphy. Festival Records picked up Waterfront Records, and so on. Some of the major labels have created their own subsidiary labels to create that essential 'street vibe' for their artists. For example, Ra Records became a subsidiary of rooArt, Id a subsidiary of Polydor, and Raw Records a subsidiary of Sony Music. Each of these labels offers smaller budgets in the

form of developmental contracts, which are ideal for acts that are still defining their style and developing an audience.

While *real* independence only belongs to acts that control every aspect of the recording, manufacture and distribution of their products, the absorption of most of our surviving 'indie' labels – and distribution deals with the remainder – has provided smaller labels with sorely needed capital, and artists with greater opportunities.

While recorded music is in good shape, the live scene seems to be shrinking. Or is it? In Sydney, barely five or six venues play a truly significant role in promoting those bands 'cool' enough for the music press to notice. But other rooms draw far bigger crowds with acts playing jazz or fusion, dance music or blues.

The Harbourside Brasserie presents everything from Vince Jones and Kate Ceberano to the experiments of performance artists like Peril, Phlegm and Mu-Mesons. Inevitably the packed house for Kate and Vince allow the insecure houses expected for Peril, but at least these venues are committed to new music in all its forms. Similarly, the Rose Shamrock & Thistle in Rozelle caters to the more melodic and acoustic acts while across the road in Balmain, the Bridge Hotel features new blues and more technically adroit musical stylists.

Yet while these rooms might draw large audiences, these fringe acts still find themselves outside the mainstream industry, and must record and release independently, or record for boutique labels like Spiral Scratch at the jazz/pop end or Dr Jim at the noise/experimental end. As has always been the case, acts that don't fit the prevailing formula must invest their own money if they want to record. In the 1980s, however, the live work would generate not only the 'following' to which the recording could be sold, but also the money needed to manufacture recordings that came to be perceived as a vital legacy of the period.

In her book, *Your Name's On The Door* (ABC Books, 1992) rock journalist Tracee Hutchison lists the 'essential' recordings of this or that band, which might have lasted a mere dozen live performances and released barely a hundred copies of a single. In the 1990s, industry cynicism combined with the caution of a cash-strapped record-buying public, has severely inhibited independent recording. Costs have risen exponentially, while the opportunities for *payment* for performances have shrunk. Even for an artist with a string of albums and enormous popular respect at the performance level, costs may be prohibitive. For example, it might cost around $26,000 a week to tour an artist backed by a four-piece band and using minimal lighting and sound production equipment. What chance, then, for a band with no reputation, no recording deal, and no airplay for a privately financed recording, that has to survive tenuously on door deals when it *does* get a gig?

THE PROBLEM OF AIRPLAY for new music has always been a contentious one. Legislation eventually imposed a local content quota on radio, in order to ensure at least *some* support, although changes have been made by the new Australian Broadcasting Authority.

The argument has been particularly virulent in Sydney since the expansion of what was 2JJ into the ABC's national youth network, JJJ-FM. Previously, local bands had far greater access to station air-play for their independent recordings and demonstration tapes, which significantly supported the live scene. All that changed when the station went national, helping to further marginalise those Sydney bands trying to survive outside the inner-city indie label/distribution networks. Mainstream commercial radio is, of course, closed to these bands as well.

The alternative is the public or community radio station networks, and here Melbourne has an advantage with 3RRR-FM, long-established as an alternative network supporting the independent scene. In Sydney, stations such as 2SER-FM and 2RSR-FM are just as supportive, yet listeners who have been so vociferous in condemning the 'blanding out' of JJJ-FM have not turned to the community radio stations in any significant numbers.

In an essay titled 'Heritage Rock', collected in *From Punk To Postmodernism* (Allen & Unwin, 1992), John Potts writes that commercial radio "has produced complacent audiences, who know exactly what they will hear and are comfortable with that". But the problem goes far deeper than Potts suggests. English commentator Philip Norman, in his essay, 'The Age Of

Parody', originally published in the *Guardian* and collected in the book of the same name (Hamish Hamilton, 1990), hits the nail on the head with the following observation:

> Pop music is the universal placebo, wooshing and tishing in the earpieces of a million Walkmen, soothing the awful exertion of having to walk or catch a bus or train. Eighties pop has been chiefly parody, a witless synthesised stream of Fifties and Sixties revivals cashing in on what seems inexhaustible nostalgia for those far distant, thrice blessed times. Greater still is the parody of youth's rebel music having been hijacked by TV ads to sell detergent, cat food, even Sanatogen tonic for the elderly.

"Pop music is the universal placebo, wooshing and tishing in ... a million Walkmen, soothing the awful exertion of having to walk or catch a bus or train."

Is it any wonder that today's youth are seeking the extremes in their choice of music, if they care at all. As for commercial, or as John Potts dubs it, 'heritage' radio, the truth is that the medium is *reflecting* the complacency of its listeners rather than reinforcing it. An English band, which has taken elements of the past and given them a new twist, is aptly named Pop Will Eat Itself!

Yet it has always been the nature of pop/rock to pillage its past to create its present. So the acid jazz of DIG owes much to the cool school jazz of Miles Davis and John Coltrane, the rock of The Badloves to the R&B/blues of the 1970s British blues boom.

If anything in the pop tradition is 'legitimate', why then should would-be aesthetes turn up their noses at the likes of Southern Sons, John Farnham, Jenny Morris, Shane Howard and Noiseworks? Only because these performers work within parameters deemed mainstream, and are therefore 'uncool'. But this attitude only diminishes the possibilities for Australia's next generation of musicians and songwriters, and the malaise deepens.

In her book on the music industry, *The Power & The Passion* (Warner/Chappell, 1993), Lesley Sly quotes the music director of one of Sydney's major commercial FM stations, Geoff Holland, who tells us exactly why today's radio is *not* committed to pioneering new directions in popular music: "This audience is the silent majority of people, who live in the suburbs and who don't care much about music. It may take up one billionth of their lives – they might buy two or three records a year, and go to one or two concerts."

Invariably, those concerts will be by overseas artists. Even local heroes such as Midnight Oil and INXS, each with new albums to promote and substantial airplay on both commercial and non-commercial radio, failed to sell out their stadium concerts in most capital cities last summer.

Another telling quote in Sly's book is from record company promotions manager, Paul Barker, who comments: "You have to accept that radio is not part of the music industry; the fact that they play music is coincidental to the fact that it sells more advertising. If twenty-four-hour news sold more advertising, they'd drop music now."

Indeed, the top-rated radio station in Sydney is now a talk-back station.

IF RADIO IS NOT as accessible to new music, in all its variety, for exposure, the street press certainly is, and the proliferation of free weekly music newspapers has helped not only sustain but sometimes 'break' bands long before record companies have taken notice. Yet, even here talent may be dismissed or championed according to perceptions of momentary fashionability. Critical analyses of either the artists, the music or the culture from which they spring is minimal if it appears at all, and there is an inevitable pressure from advertisers to promote events and acts that might otherwise have received rather different (or indifferent) coverage. Overall, however, the street music press has been unstinting in its support of new and original music.

That leaves television.

Current record company wisdom dictates that

an appearance by an artist or band on the popular variety show, *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, on the Nine Network, will help to sell a couple of thousand extra units of that act's latest single or album, as well as boost concert ticket sales for that act. This is in spite of the fact that, since the beginning of the 1980s, television has presented more popular music as part of its regular programming than during any previous decade, predominantly in the form of video clips, such as in the ABC's program *Rage*. This has been especially important for those independent bands who have been able to make their own promotional clip. New outlets for new music are popping up all the time, often in the afternoon period designated for children's viewing.

Yet it is the often clumsy 'live' appearances on *Hey Hey It's Saturday* – which actively copies the format of the most important music television program ever to screen in Australia (*Countdown*) – which seem to have the most impact.

Some rock journalists are hopeful this might lead to some sort of revitalisation, a rediscovery of live music on TV.

Though I don't want to seem pessimistic, this is fairly familiar 'industry wisdom', similar to expecting the next band a label signs to be the next Beatles or Nirvana or U2. The reality is, of course, that once a Beatles has happened, no amount of grooming a new act will produce that phenomenon again. The very experience of a Beatlemania educates the audience to a level of musical/cultural sophistication that inevitably precludes so innocent a response being repeated. Similarly, it is unlikely that there will ever be another *Countdown*.

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The impact of *Countdown* as a cultural phenomenon cannot be underestimated, as Peter Wilmoth points out in his book, *Glad All Over: The Countdown Years 1974-1987* (McPhee Gribble, 1993). It not only made stars out of the many artists that appeared on the program but helped create, with them, a distinctly Australian pop fraternity, of musicians capable of competing on the same level as any visiting overseas bands, in terms both of popularity and record sales. Without *Countdown*, Skyhooks, for instance, singing songs about suburban Melbourne, might very well never have attained the record sales that made them, for many years, the biggest-selling act in Australian pop history, and, incidentally, established their label, Mushroom Records, which is now the single most powerful independent Australian label. *Countdown* helped maintain John Farnham as a teen idol, launched the solo career of Daryl Braithwaite and helped his band, Sherbet, top the charts. It was *Countdown* that first made *Something In The Air* a hit for John Paul Young, revived a decade or so later by Baz Luhrman in his film, *Strictly Ballroom*.

HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED. Today, there is no single identifiable Australian popular music culture. Therefore no single program – and especially one formatted to the mainstream Top Forty – can ever satisfy a significant (in terms of ratings) viewing minority in the 1990s. Again, *Countdown* reflected a more innocent age, when acts were uncritically lionised for simply making music. Eventually, *Countdown* failed when, in the 1980s, it tried to expand its brief to take in the increasingly fragmented music scene.

Wilmoth quotes one of our more cogent music journalists, David Brearley, who writes for *The Australian*, in *Glad All Over*: "Pop is well and truly dead. As a style of music, as a way of thinking and as a system of identification."

This, I think, is just a bit *too* pessimistic a view. There will always be some form of pop music, and some form of identification. For example, thousands of pre-pubescent and adolescent girls around Australia see the band Girlfriend as role models, and are buying their records in significant numbers. For the rest, there are The Hard-Ons, Tumbleweed, You Am I, The Welcome Mat, Clouds, Ratcat, The Screaming Jets, The Fauves, Underground Lovers, Hard Candy, Peg, Chocolate Starfish and dozens of other bands pounding the boards around this country.

Perhaps, looking to the future, the music

industry should seriously consider embracing the new technologies coming into play through the computer industry. Some Australian artists have already done so. Icehouse included a CD-ROM disc with their latest release, *Big Wheel* (Massive), while independent singer and songwriter, Guy Delandro, included a CD-I (compact disk–interactive) track on his CD, *Pools Of Reflection*. Whether or not the music-buying public embraces this or other new technologies, it is unlikely that emerging artists will have the money to translate what they're doing musically into futuristic soft/hardware packages.

Overall, I think we're seeing the end of the pub rock era, the rebirth of the unlicensed venue, and a music industry that is still very supportive of local talent, yet just as unsure as to which direction it should take. And that of course is the point. There is no magic formula, and certainly no guaranteed way to know the hits from the misses.

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Bev Aisbett

DAMIEN BRODERICK

Writing Science, Writing Art

SUPPOSE IT'S TRUE – as Robert Frost told us – that poetry is what gets lost in translation: the precise ordering of *these* words, in *this* exact verbal and cultural context. And not just poetry, but all creative literature. Then the special value of the written word would be whatever it is in a passage of writing that cannot be paraphrased. "In music, the graphic arts, and literature," notes the science historian Thomas Kuhn, "the practitioner gains his education by exposure to the works of other artists, principally earlier artists. Textbooks, except compendia of or handbooks to original creations, have only a secondary role."

Science, by striking contrast, is what can be done anywhere, in any natural tongue, according to a mathematical or practical laboratory recipe – what's called an algorithm. Science curricula, Kuhn goes on to remark, "do not ask even graduate students to read in works not written specially for students ... Until the very last stages in the education of a scientist, textbooks are systematically substituted for the creative scientific literature that made them possible ... Why, after all, should the student of physics, for example, read the works of Newton, Faraday, Einstein, or Schrödinger, when everything he needs to know about these works is recapitulated in a far briefer, more precise, and more systematic form in a number of up-to-date textbooks?" So science, if we accept the point Kuhn is making, is what can be condensed into a textbook, or at least into an apprenticeship steeped in trial and error.

Perhaps, then, to revive another old and equally dubious distinction, art is first of all 'form', science 'content'. A poem, in Archibald Macleish's aphorism, should not *mean*, but *be*: more precisely, its meaning resides in its performance, like a kiss. An equation or a theorem *means* above all else; it *is* only to mean, like a finger pointing.

Notice the names used for the distinctive ways scientists and their peers in the humanities employ keyboard and paper to get in touch with each other and share their terrific new insights. The characteristic *scientific* document is termed a 'communication'. It's rather like a terse telegram, sent to interested fellow practitioners (often, these days, directly through electronic networks). It's a message relaying results, a recipe for repeating them.

By contrast, the characteristic *literary* document is dubbed, broadly and simply, 'writing'. It is named as a text. That decision all too easily overwhelms any significance a piece of literary writing might possess as notation or transmission of information about a non-textual or pretextual world. To put it another way: when we read a piece of fiction, we certainly get a lot of pleasure from the artful way it's told – but none of that would be possible if the story didn't tell us in *some* ways (perhaps through metaphors) about the world and the people who move through it.

So the paradox is this: while the scientist has become the very embodiment of powerful creativity in our society (if we leave aside the financier, shonky or otherwise), his or her written output is the last thing in the world to be dubbed 'creative writing'. That term has become a dismissive shorthand for a kind of leisure-time spillage of emotion, produced by those who cannot really cut the mustard, who aren't equipped to join the genuine producers, the folks in industry, sales and technology. At best, in our market economy, we're allowed to turn briefly to the inconsequential solace of creative

writing to recover from the stresses of real life.

In response, perhaps, specialists in the humane studies over-value the 'text' as never before. Its pretensions have been inflated in an ambit claim so grandiose that it could only be sustained in an area of life protected, like the church in previous epochs, from any shock of contest. In the Derridean formulation, *There is no outside-the-text*: a text carries no message about any non-textual outside world, because it is entirely a linguistic device for generating meanings about and within language itself. (Later, claiming to have been misunderstood, Jacques Derrida altered this to "there is nothing outside context", with which nobody could disagree – although philosopher Richard Rorty noted that even Derrida could not "hope to grasp the *conditions of all possible contexts*".) Pushed to the extreme, Derrida's original formulation seemed to suggest that no text carries any reliable message drawn from the outside world. Writing, for the rigorous deconstructor, was entirely a linguistic device for generating meanings about and within language itself.

If any message were to be imputed to text, it's that *everything we know and say* is text – in a rather surprisingly extended sense of the word. For the world of human experience is a construct, an inscription, a discourse open to endless reinterpretation by writers (and in this sense we are all writers) who are themselves 'written' by other texts. This is a parody of current literary theory, true, but it's closer to reality than many critics would care to admit. What's often seen in humane studies is a fetishism of the text. (A fetish, after all, is just an ordinary object believed by its worshippers to contain magical power.) Fetishism embraces the finger instead of looking at the object it's pointing at. Not that this is an error found only in literature. A biologist might dissect the finger; an artist might paint it; both would miss the boat, if the finger pointed to a timetable.

So what about science? Despite superb attempts by specialists such as Paul Davies and John Gribbin to turn chaos and quantum theory, cosmology, genetics and ecology into popular readable form, the strict working discourses of the sciences are quite simply incommunicable to the non-initiate. Today's poetry might be hard to understand (though not, surely, as hard as the most formidable literary criticism), but harder still is real cutting-edge science. The reason is sketched by Kuhn:

> The most esoteric of poets ... is far more concerned than the scientist with lay approbation of his creative work, though he may be even less concerned with approbation in general. That difference proves consequential. Just because he is working only for an audience of colleagues, an audience that shares his own values and beliefs, the scientist can take a single set of standards for granted.

Even in many earnest attempts to reach the non-expert, the language of science rapidly evades the untrained. Consider this *Scientific American* tribute to the late Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman:

> [Feynman's] lecture is a tour de force of exposition, seeking to derive a couple of the most important results of quantum field theory not "in the spirit of Dirac with lots of symbols and operators" but by explicit arguments that flow from those summary zigzag sketches known everywhere as Feynman diagrams.

Hey, hang on there! Is it true that the "summary zigzag sketches" are *known everywhere*? Hardly. The terms 'DNA', 'entropy' and 'chaos', and a little of their sense, might have become educated commonplaces in the last two decades. Plenty of non-scientists can do complicated things with computers, and readily master the jargon of programming (which often involves complex logic or mathematics). I think it's fair to say, though, that knowledge of Feynman diagrams among non-scientists is perhaps largely restricted to those with a taste for quantum mysticism. The really *interesting* step, however, was what came next in this 'popularisation':

> The diagrams are a form of shorthand analysis, but they are far from a geometrization of the events. Their fidelity relies on careful and original mathematical rules that accompany each straight or wiggly line, usually generating at every vertex an exercise in matrix algebra; between intersections they imply a

> clever nesting of integrals that serve to sum over the spacetime excursions that intervene.

Oh, right. Feynman's sorrowing colleague was not sneering here, of all places, at his non-specialist readers. Nevertheless, this precise (though highly general) account of Feynman's achievement begins to resemble, for the ordinary reader, the lofty and mysterious language of religious liturgy: of grand rhetoric, poetic to the extent that we trust – on faith – the literal power it grants to the initiate. Otherwise, it's sheer mumbo-jumbo.

I once made this point during a Melbourne Literary Festival discussion. Fellow panellist Dr Jane Figgis, who used to run ABC radio's *Science Bookshop*, was mightily offended. Feynman's theories on quantum electrodynamics (or QED) were by no means impossible for the general reader to understand, she replied – for the unusual reason that Feynman himself had written one of the greatest popularisations of that very topic.

His book, based on a series of lectures, is called *QED*, a neat little joke in itself for those who remember that in geometry 'Q.E.D.' stands for *quod erat demonstrandum*, the phrase used to sum up a demonstration. It's lively, avoids pomposity and tricks of higher mathematics – and, in my view, is really a snow job. I don't think it explains those wiggly lines at all. It tries very hard, but in the end its readers will carry off nothing but a blurry sense of a wonderful truth forever out of focus.

I feel confident about this, because Feynman himself was honest enough to admit it in the book. "The ... reason that you might think you do not understand what I am telling you is, while I am describing *how* Nature works, you won't understand *why* Nature works that way," he cautions. "But you see, nobody understands that." True, this is a subtle point. Perhaps the *how* can be conveyed, even if the *why* is forever out of bounds. Not so. In another typical friendly joke, the great physicist opened his third lecture this way:

"Some of you haven't heard the other two lectures and will find this lecture almost incomprehensible. Those of you who *have* heard the other two lectures will also find this lecture incomprehensible, but you know that that's all right: as I explained in the first lecture, the way we have to describe Nature is generally incomprehensible to us."

Well, perhaps this is still just a humble acknowledgement that our poor human minds can never hope to plumb the cosmos to its bottommost depths. When we get into Feynman's own special mastery, though, he's forced to shrug his shoulders in despair:

"The second action fundamental to quantum electrodynamics is: An electron goes from point A to point B in space-time ... The formula for the amplitude of this action is a rather complicated formula, and I'm sorry that I don't know how to explain it in simple terms."

We needn't enter the amplitude of quantum least-action paths to get thoroughly lost. What is the curious onlooker from the humanities to make of a General Motors advertisement in the front of the same issue of *Scientific American* that carried Feynman's obituary? (Remember, what follows is from a paid *advertisement* in a popular magazine!) Expensive, handsomely mounted over three pages of colour for its impact on sales and perhaps staff recruitment, the ad describes research into robotic arm control. It is worth citing about a tenth of the text for the accumulating impact it achieves on the dazed, utterly excluded humanities reader:

> If the problem could be discretized, making it in some sense finite, it could be put on a computer and solved numerically. So Dr. Marin replaced the unknown function with a piecewise cubic approximation.
>
> This allows the search for the unknown function to be confined to a class of functions that are completely characterized by a finite number of coefficients in a B-spline series.
>
> He similarly discretized the constraints, replacing the infinite set of constraints with a finite dimensional subset that could be dealt with numerically.

The shape of the language is cheerful journalese. Nor is it difficult to decode some of the *general* sense. It's hardly more technically bizarre, on the face of it, than any carpenters' guide to fixing the rafters (which is itself a complex discourse laden with specialised terms which also exclude the outsider but make for precision and speed

among practitioners).

The problem, however, is one of kind, and not of degree. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, if you're lucky enough to have one to hand, may explain without enlightenment that

> In problems in which the approximate has to match $f(x)$ but not $Df(x)$, $D^2f(x)$, etc., it is undesirable to introduce derivatives of $f(x)$ as additional parameters (arbitrary constants). Consequently, a desirable property in piecewise functions might be continuity of the derivatives at the nodes without specifying the values of the derivatives there. Piecewise approximates of this type are known as splines, the most popular form of which is the cubic spline.

'Elucidation' of this kind points to an horrendous exlusion principle. The Two Cultures of science and the arts remain sundered. By contrast, we might consider a fragment from Wallace Stevens, the favourite poet of American deconstructive critics: "Tell X that speech is not dirty silence/Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier."

This portion of his poem 'The Creations of Sound' looks like a philosophical assertion rendered rhetorically for greater bite. It might even be supposed to act itself out – it is at the least emulated *speech* made dirtier, in the sense of more opaque, quarrelsome, difficult. One sees at once that to take its full measure one would need to be acquainted with the rest of Stevens' poetry, with that of his contemporary poets and perhaps philosophers, and with the specific historical and cultural matrix from which his reading and writing grew.

Charles Bazerman made this point in an interdisciplinary examination of "what written knowledge does", though his comparison was not with literature as such but with its technical criticism.

> The literary vocabulary on one level appears to be purely technical, not unlike the technical vocabularies of molecular biology or sociology. Terms such as *topos, apostrophe, sonnet, turn, enjambment* and *sublime* are the critic's basic conceptual equipment, learned as part of professional training. On another level, however, the literary terms are more than technical, for each reverberates with former uses and examples. One can know and understand *deoxyribose* on the basis of modern chemistry alone, but to understand the *sublime* one must not only have read Longinus and be familiar with the ensuing critical debate to modern times, one must have experienced a wide range of poems that embody the development and variation of that concept.

Still, surely lay readers of literature (and even of much criticism) have a grasp of its meaning which vanishes when they're rudely faced with B-splines.

The paradoxical outcome of this truth is drawn in a rueful remark by the great physicist Paul Dirac: "In physics, we try to say things that no one knew before in a way that everyone can understand, whereas in poetry ..."[1]

Dirac's sarcastic implication – that in poetry the everyday is rendered as obscurely as possible – might not be fair. After all, is it really mere common sense that speech is cleaned-up noise? Still, a cultivation of multiple meanings, textual gaps and level-shifts of meaning is patently signalled by Stevens in a way absolutely unlike the attempt on precise clarity – dauntingly formidable though it is – in the GM advertisement and the Feynman obituary.

If the poet dirties the windowpanes of silence and speech alike, it is, as Wallace Stevens noted, "to make the visible a little hard/To see": to interrupt utility in the interests of insight. The insistence in the scientific tradition of the *empirical* – the things in the world which are irresistibly *there*, no matter how much we might wish it otherwise – is what anchors this lofty perspective. It balances the drastic dispersion of subjectivity (*Oi! It's me!*) into a vapour of discourse (*Good afternoon. This is your Language speaking*) which is the specific risk and hazard of postmodern approaches to world and text alike.

The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin once offered a celebrated account of mediaeval life, showing how it married oppressive toil and madcap carnival. We readers in this turn-of-the-millennium scientific culture also live two lives. One is *official* and *work-bound*, monolithically serious and sombre, beholden to bureaucratic

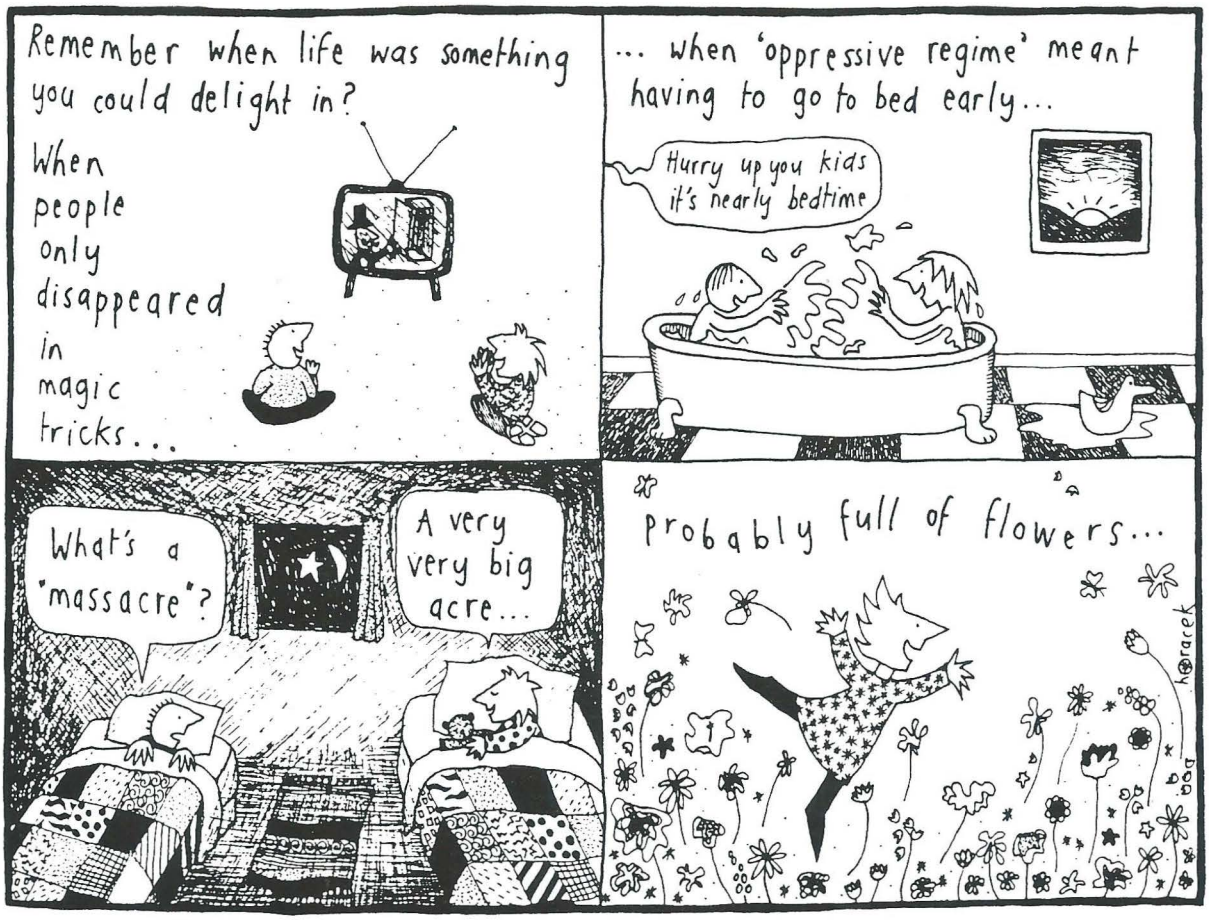
order, governed by the dogmatism and pieties of authority. The other rejoices in *carnival*, free invention, ambivalent laughter, sacrilege, profanations of all things scientific and lawful, disparagement and unseemly behaviour, familiar contact with persons high and low.

The worst mistake would be to identify one of these contrasted conditions with science, and its alternative with the arts. Whichever way you made the match, you'd miss the crucial point. Each is twined through the other, and is twinned by it. In these new Dark Ages of multinational financial crime, greenhouse threat, fundamentalist lunacy, runaway over-population and technology, we need fluency, however impossibly, in both tongues. Only with a drunken sobriety can we rightly sing their clashing songs, see their dirty clarities, heed the music of their shattering crystalline spheres.

NOTE

1. I borrow this charming reference, and the previous citation to Stevens, from William R. Paulson's illuminating *The Noise of Culture. Literary Texts in a World of Information*, Cornell University Press, 1988.

Damien Broderick tries to link the Two Cultures in his science fiction, literary theory, and regular reviews (in The Australian*) of science books. This article is adapted from his forthcoming* The Architecture of Babel: Discourses of Literature and Science *(Melbourne University Press, 1994).*



from "Life on the Edge"

PATRICIA HEALY

First Job

IT'S THE END OF 1945. The war has ended. I'm sixteen, with a Leaving Certificate from the school I disliked so much, Firbank. At home we don't discuss the question of whether or not I'll be going to work (as opposed, say, to getting some more qualifications). I have to pay my own way and that's that. I'm as unquestioning as my parents on this score. I'm well aware that I've had a couple of years more schooling than many girls from families in our income bracket – that in fact I'm among the privileged with a Leaving Certificate.

What to do with that Leaving Certificate? The options in 1946 are clear if hardly expansive: office work, shop assistant or nursing. So it's office work. (I don't want to be a nurse and the Leaving Certificate lifts me out of the ruck of shop assistants – just as well for me and the customers, I think.) My only thoughts on office work are negative – I don't want to work in a bank – and my parents' thoughts are more negative: what on earth can Pat do – she can't type or do shorthand – not to mention her untidiness and laziness and the fact she's only interested in books and films.

Our dilemma about a job is solved when I get one – by default, typically. In the closing days of school we're told about jobs offering at a place called the British Phosphate Commissioners – interviews this Friday – hands up those who want to go. I'm the only one to respond. I see this as my chance to go to the Argosy on Friday night and catch up on 'The Citadel', a film I've missed somehow. So the appointment is made and I persuade the mistress on 'exeats' that it's necessary to go home on Friday night (Saturday morning is the usual time) to discuss this 'career opportunity' with my parents. Permission granted.

Phosphate House (515 Collins Street) is then a modern building, all six floors of it, and the interviews take place on the sixth floor. No problem with nerves, the interviews are but a prelude to the joys of Robert Donat and Ralph Richardson in the evening. Mr Gaze, the General Manager, is absent. When he returns he looks austere and mildly benevolent and asks and says little. His deputy, Mr Christian, is there and short and round and inquisitive. He asks me to give a demo of writing with the left hand and seems surprised it's legible. I've been fielding his other question for three years at Firbank ("Aren't you a Catholic with a name like Healy?") and confirm easily enough, legs crossed, that I'm not. End of interview. Miss Frost (what is her official title? does she need one?) induces mild terror but I've realised by now that the name Firbank is more important than me and the lack of commercial subjects. I walk out of British Phosphate with a job in the New Year, a junior at 25/6d a week. There's not much to discuss with my parents – they know me well enough to know the reason I'm home early – but I remember some surprise and indeed relief that I've got a job.

I start at British Phosphate with the most lowly job of all (perhaps they *did* notice I lacked any commercial training), the dogsbody junior. It's my job to collect the mail from Bourke Street PO in the morning and hand it over to a senior with the more responsible job of distributing it. I'm the 'keeper' of the mail – and the postage book – and the postage petty cash. If anyone wants to send a telegram I'm the one to stick on the requisite number of stamps and run with it to the nearest PO. I run 'errands', lovely vague description I discover. I'm also the one to stick on the stamps of the daily mail (as it gathers in

a tray – I have a desk of my own in an office with seniors). Then I post it in the evening, a job needing slightly more care in days when airmail is a rarity and when it's necessary to catch the overnight train for mail to Sydney, which means knowing which post box will accept mail by which time – and if you miss out there's a surcharge and a special visit to Spencer Street station (to be avoided if there's a five o'clock film to see). Another job is to get lunch for those important enough to have their lunches got for them.

I soon realise that if those things are done swiftly and efficiently then it's a job with infinite possibilities for getting out and about. I don't sit at my desk waiting for mail to come in. No fear. I whisk around all the offices and get an estimate of what's due, collecting the odd letter and telegram on the way. After lunch and seeing that those important ones have been fed I do my first bit of licking and sticking. Off that lot goes. (By 1pm I can u-s-u-a-l-l-y estimate if I can make it to a five o'clock film.) Then the daily balance of the postage book and the petty cash, the scourge I'm told of all juniors. Well that's a bit silly isn't it when you're the one person handling the lot. So I balance to the best of my ability (I'm never out by more than sixpence, more likely a penny or a halfpenny), double check, and then make an appropriate 'adjustment' in the postage book. Who's to know that 'A.M. Smithers, Longreach' doesn't exist? After all, the important thing is to get all the names *in*. I adjust one way or the other for the six months I'm in the job and Miss Frost warms as she congratulates me on this amazing record of accuracy, hard to better (I bet it wasn't).

There's much to be said for being the most lowly junior, especially when you're not under anyone's direct supervision (except the mercifully distant, geographically and otherwise, Miss Frost). It's not worth anyone's time and effort to see if all the errands run and telegrams sent really exist. So heigh-ho I skitter in and out and get to know the Melbourne of 1946 – especially bookshops and record shops – very well indeed. I have a profitable sideline as well – no, not embezzlement. There's a weekly program, 3UZ the station, Roly Barlee the announcer, which tests musical knowledge by playing eight records and asking curly questions about each.

With eight correct answers you're almost certain to win the two guineas' prize – seven correct is usually enough. I can often pick four or five without aid but with extensive recourse to discographies in record shops I put myself in the winning seat. I'm cute enough not to win every week – and one week I'm disgusted to win the consolation prize of a 'full range of Eta products' (ugh to peanut butter ever since) – but I collect sufficient two guineas' to live beyond my means. The program lapses around the time I'm promoted but I'm philosophical about the drop in income. The 3UZ/Pat Healy Benefit could not last forever.

PROMOTION IS to the Marine Office, a two-room section cut off on its own on the second floor. I share one room with Bill Wright, ex-Lieutenant RAN. Bill is pudgy and red-faced, rather choleric-looking, and it takes a while to realise he's shy (in a hearty way) and good-natured: the redness and choleric look signal hangovers, frequent in the Marine Department where men go down to ships.

The Marine Superintendent, Captain Murray M. Johnstone, looks and acts the gay old seadog – his hair is cut to half an inch of his head and stands up spiky and salt-and-peppered (rare in 1946). Captain Johnnie reserves his gay old seadog manner for others – with me he's protective and gentle. My two bosses, often absent, are marvels at delegation before that word assumes its importance in business. It will be years before I meet other bosses who leave me to do my work with a minimum of interference or, for that matter, direction. So though I'm prepared for life being real, life being earnest, the perils of promotion, learning to type and do shorthand at the very least, I find large slabs of time in which I can work out my own schedule.

In retrospect it's a responsible job for a junior. Seeing that all the people going to Nauru and Ocean Island (a lot in 1946) have valid passports and taxation clearances, then getting them into the BPC ships when the port of embarkation is a moveable feast according to which port has least industrial trouble – much last-minute shunting. I may have to whizz down to Spencer Street, cash in hand, and wangle thirty seats on the overnight to Sydney, at a time when interstate trains have many fewer seats available than

prospective passengers.

I become a familiar at Spencer Street, and the Immigration and Taxation offices. Before too long I get discreet hand waves to jump the queues and do my business in side offices. I've become credible and popular because I'm accurate about my needs (no overbooking) and I've made sure beforehand that passport and taxation applications are A1 (not always simple when I find out that some of the prospective workmen are off to the islands to avoid their wives – and taxation). If pressed I can get a passport through in an hour but I save that for genuine emergencies. In the 1940s this consistency gets consistent results. Establishing credibility – that's the necessary and at times tedious part – and maintaining that credibility. Oh, I'm very straight-down-the-line. Come to think of it, it's the way I play it throughout my working life.

Learning to type is fun, once I've chucked lessons at Zercho's Business College. There the harsh-voiced teacher rapped me (and everybody else) with the steel edge of her ruler for each mistake. One lesson is enough. One leaves school for that sort of treatment. I get back the fees from Zercho's (quite a feat), use a simple textbook and repeat, correct fingering, 'Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party' and 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog'. I advance to the alphabet and then to fan letters to my favourite film stars. The BPC's time (and mine) is not wasted – Errol Flynn and Laurence Olivier send me photos with dinkum autographs. I learn copy typing from the Penguin editions of Bernard Shaw, in particular his Prefaces. I'm given an actual document to type – 'No hurry Pat' (and just as well) – listing minute details in the dry-docking of the 'Triona'. Columns, columns, large-carriage typewriter. It takes me six months and many reams of paper but at last I produce a fair copy – format like a page of *The Age* – and I believe I've learned all the tricks of the trade and become a good typist. Certainly I'm never again fazed by tabulators, multitudes of figures and 'setting out'. Was that document really necessary? I wondered throughout the six months and still do.

Shorthand, other than Healyhand, was never to become an accomplishment. Still, I could get back Captain Johnnie's dictation – even if I had to work on it all the way to the Passports office or wherever, often colliding with the trees of Collins Street as I went. One day Captain Johnnie called me in for dictation when he had a friend with him. Most unusual, very scary. I sat down, jaw clenched, legs clamped together as if to support each other as well as the shorthand notebook scrunched on them at an extreme angle for the left-hand squiggles. "Dear Whatsit", said Captain Johnnie, "Thank you for your letter of such and such a date – that's it Pat." He laughed, his friend laughed, and then, "I couldn't resist showing somebody else how you look when you take shorthand, Pat". I laughed too, but more from relief that he'd finished. From then on a casual air and some nonchalant leg-crossing was added to my shorthand 'act'.

THE MARINE DEPARTMENT may not be life on the ocean wave but there's variety in arranging work according to shipping schedules that rarely keep to schedule. When the ships chug out of port it's time for clerking, checking the bills of lading, checking the wages of crews. Sounds dull but not to me. I'm fascinated by the sheer effort and detail in stocking up enough food and drink and etceteras for a voyage; I note the enormous discrepancies in wages between white officers and Lascar crew (they're paid in rupees, annas and pice) and see that the Lascars (unlike the officers) send most of their money home, in their case to India. I enjoy working with figures which have reality – they give me an idea of the people behind them, how they live or survive – and checking and double-checking is no academic matter.

When the ships, the 'Triona', 'Triadic' and 'Trienza', are outward bound, I'm office-bound – clerking, preparing applications, and the odd moments for tip-tapping on the typewriter and importuning film stars. But as the ships approach port I'm the one who's outward bound – trekking to my round of offices (and renewing knowledge of book and record shops).

I've found (Saturdays only) another way to augment the 25/6d a week. I'm a bettor. No SP bookies for me – difficult if your father's a cop anyway. I've staked myself with five pounds –

when that's gone I'll quit – and I go to the races (by myself) most Saturdays. I dress for action (slacks, 'flatties'), no parading of fashions thank you. I check out the form in the mounting yards, have a nodding acquaintance with many race touts, zoom back and forth among the rails bookies to detect any 'plunges', and then hoist myself on railings, with the race touts, to watch the running. The bookies are kind to an underage bettor and I invariably get excellent odds. The touts are kind too – their tips are fine.

There's no sign of the five pounds being lost – in fact I'm at least 250 quid ahead when I quit. But the fun has gone. I find I shake when I win and shake when I lose, and I guess I realise my form of punting is a young girl's game. I wouldn't be treated so kindly as a legit bettor and I'm getting mighty close to being that kind of person. I retire at seventeen, well ahead, happy to join the ranks of the once-a-year mug punters at Cup time. Serious betting, in future, has little to do with racehorses.

BUT WHOEVER HAS heard of a jolly, satisfied teenager? Laughing on the outside, crying on the inside, angst up to the gills, that's me. Working with phosphate doesn't really appeal. Could it be that I'm becoming phosphate inside? I keep afloat by reading plays – I'm much more in the theatah of my head than in the British Phosphate Commission. Acting's no go – vomiting both before and after a walk-off part – no need even to walk on – up goes the curtain, I'm in a crowd and then we walk off. Even I suspect the reaction's a bit extreme. Type-casting too – an Irish play called 'Happy as Larry' (by Donagh McDonagh I'm astonished to remember) – and I'm a mourner at a wake. Frank Thring is the 'star', and at that early stage in his career he has full command of the accoutrements at least.

So I can't act and there's mighty little to see – Melbourne's still in the hangover of Gilbert and Sullivan and the J.C. Williamson revivals of revivals. Anyone for 'White Horse Inn'? I gravitate to the smaller theatres, see some New Zealanders at the Union Theatre – Ngaio Marsh is their director – do a wipe-out production of Pirandello's 'Six Characters in Search of an Author' – and that gives me my direction. I can roam the world's theatre with reading, producing all the greats and not-so-greats in my head. At the time I thought I'd see all those plays one day – and I've seen many – but no playgoer could approach the repertory in one teenager's head.

BY 1947 ANOTHER direction is looming. The Old Vic, headed by Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, is coming to Melbourne in 1948. I'll be seeing theatre, real theatah. Every ounce of effort, every successful bet, is aimed at their season. I send off one hundred pounds or so for preferential seats – once I have seats I'll be able to exchange them for others. I go twenty-two times in Melbourne to the three plays; in Sydney – first trip – I can only manage a week at the 'Y' and eight performances.

The plays are a splendid introduction for a neophyte. Some wit and style with Sheridan's 'School for Scandal'. But I most remember, ten times at least, the moment Vivien Leigh appears in a black dress with a red rose tucked between her breasts. Each time (an identical moment) the audience as if with one breath draws in a strangled but blissful 'aah'. Beauty to take the breath away – she has it whether or not she likes it. And she's a wow as Sabina in 'Skin of Our Teeth' (very twentieth century) and the play, despite some stodginess, almost matches her contemporary appeal.

Richard III is all Olivier. It's arguably his most famous role and it's THE Richard against whom other Rick IIIs measure their performances for decades. Forty-two years on I can hear him wooing the audience with the opening lines, but I don't see him – the rest is make-up, the occasional piercing ironic gesture and some most agile death throes. Vivien Leigh I can still see. A beauty, yes, and a real person (likeability has nothing to do with it). It's what makes her irresistible on film. But it's there on stage too, I believe with hindsight, despite the nay-saying of the critics of the time, so cluttered up with their own baggage of classical acting. Their ideas are mostly down the drain now, Leigh and Olivier are dead, and at sixty-five I realise I'm an 'expert' on that 1948 tour. But in 1948 the gods at the Princess is the place to be on the last night, queueing in Bourke Street for forty-eight hours being the major – poof nothing – price to pay.

Spring Street, the Hotel Windsor and the

Princess Theatre still looked good after that last night but no longer could you sight an Olivier or a Leigh getting in or out of a Rolls, or George Relph and Mercia Swinburne (who recognises the names? oh OK let's throw in some more – Terence Morgan and Peter Cushing) strolling in through the Stage Door. And 'Hamlet' had premiered at the Athenaeum, a premiere in Melbourne godwat, with a very young Jean Simmons, vowels still uncertain, along for the ride. Stirring days.

I STICK AROUND the BPC for a time after the season finishes but the Marine Office is not the same. Bill's amiable pudginess has been replaced by Mr Spic'n'Span, a pedantic humourless young man who tells me what to do (the cheek!). His idea of division of labour is for him to do the officers' wages (more status, and they're easier), me to do the Lascars. Since he's so predictable I work much as ever without him realising it. But it's most boring. I suspect Captain Johnnie feels the same but at least he doesn't have to sit within six feet of those 'lips-that-have-touched-liquor-will-never-touch-mine'.

I walk into the British Council – who brought out the Old Vic – and see if they want a junior. I'm exchanging British Phosphate for British culture. That's part of the story. It's also, more strongly, get out, I must get out of the BPC, so much so that I've been practising job interviews for a couple of months. I'm never offered one, but as I near the end of my practice-gos I'm scared I will be. I now have the confidence to take the steps from 515 Collins Street to 489 Bourke Street. Miss Frost regrets my departure and promises great things in the future if I stay. I don't agree. An 'old girl' from BPC said it for me at a recent reunion: "In our day – not like now – we knew what we were doing. We worked in Melbourne office for a few years, then we got a trip and worked on the islands and then we came back and got married in another few years." And so indeed it had happened with everyone at that particular reunion but me.

For me – as so often – I didn't know what I was getting into but I did know, at nineteen, what I was getting out of. Farewell BPC.

In large part I'd set the pattern for my working life – for the way I work and for movement from one job to another. Getting out, hooray, getting in – whoops – hardly matches the 'career paths' of the 1980s and 1990s. No 'role model' for a 'career woman'. How surprised I was to find myself categorised in those terms in the 1960s and 1970s. I've always known better – on that one anyway.

Barrett Reid writes: Pat (Patricia Margaret) Healy died on 30 July 1994, after a long illness. She had three distinguished careers, as secretary of the Politics Department of Melbourne University, as publisher, and with the Literature Board. A publishing colleague recalls that she was a first-class administrator and that her talent was shown early in the day-to-day running of the Politics Department where she worked closely with Professor McMahon Ball. She went into publishing with Heinemann and became one of the directors of Heinemann Education Australia. Soon after the Literature Board was established she was appointed Project Officer. She designed and administered for the Board and the Director, Dr Michael Costigan, its system of publishing grants. In all three careers she had considerable success and made many friends in the book and scholarly worlds. She is survived by her son, the dancer and choreographer Kim Walker.

ERASMUS IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

"I am weary of this Wise man."

Erasmus. Philosopher.
Goes walking in the high country
below the line of snow gums.
It is summer and the world is huge
and hot amongst the granite boulders.
He stops by a tarn to watch a fish.
The pool is stained by the oil
of the blackwood wattle and its deep
still green holds a certain
cloistered viridescence.

The fish is alone but not tragic
about this, instead he is playing the fool
and catching insects in his mouth
and twisting his tail to see how the light
will break, refract, spin at the slightest move.
The water is his whirligig.

The fish delights; turning around and
trying to swim on his back will amuse for hours
and Erasmus can see immediately
the similarities; man standing in direct
relation to god and mucking around
under his gaze.
Like that daring, darling fish
the age spots on his skin. So irreverent.
Laughing and crude in the face of spirit.
Stirring the scum of skeletons and pods
up with his belly
just for fun, just to shock.
The fish knows he has an audience.

KIRSTY SANGSTER

REMBRANDT'S MOTHER

You chose to trace your image
caught in the glass of time
but this hooded prophet
has gone before you, moved
into the canvas of loss
where death cloaks the mirror.

Her smile looks for you yet
in the invisible cradle of memory
but dares not disconcert the man
at his easel in the timeless moment
when pigment clots, eyes hemorrhage
and lips taste the blood of his palette.

Rich burghers will empty their pockets
for such gravid technique.

In her eyes you already contemplate
that journey beyond perspective
as brush works matter to beaten gold
and bankrupt flesh becomes the artist's
setting orb which moves before our eyes
into the horizon of grief.

CHRISTINE LINDBERG

A PICTURE FOR PAUL

You once drew me a curled up
vision, a quickly caught spell.
Hippie dreams soft and falling.
You draw, I write.

I read your pictures,
soft-edged like nights,
wishes kisses. My own
sight is in words.

Do you draw my words,
warmth shifting fear,
searching for shape.
Sweet round echoes. Somewhere

together we caught thoughts,
stretching like dreams,
changing form and whispering.
You draw, I write.

LISA FERGUSON

ELEPHANT

He liked the monkeys & the hippos,
the polar bears, & even the birds,
of course ...
but most of all, he loved the elephants.
The elephants were dependable –
solid and definite as the paperweights
he'd played with on his father's desk.
You could trust the elephants.
"The elephants," he said,
"the elephants are my friends."

So he learned their stories,
their way of speaking, their private jokes
& what they knew of love & keeping;
& by the time he was nine,
had mastered their vocabulary,
committing to heart their logarithms &
astronomy.
He could walk like them, talk like them,
& even recall small facts about
some of the really great ones
who'd made big names for themselves.

On special days,
before he was allowed to travel on his own,
he'd go with his father to the zoo
to say hello to his mates –
the Indian & the African –
waiting for the keeper to come
with leaves or hay,
or brush & bucket to scrub them clean,
transforming their skin
into an ineluctable rubberiness.

By the time he was eleven,
he knew their gestures & their joys,
imagining a life in other countries,
free of cages,
before *Loxodonta africana* stumbled
accidentally
into a crowd of peanuts & boys.

As he recalled it,
to touch the eye of his first elephant
he would've needed a hook & ladder;
it was so high, its grey head
scraped the ceiling in the animal enclosure.
Outside, you would've lost it
in a cloud.

Lost – the child grows down into the man.
And year after year, the elephants grow smaller.
The big one – though he searched for it
everywhere –
he never saw it again.

Behind the locks that keep us safe,
inside the Sundays of our brains,
hordes of creatures are detained
that can't be fed, & won't be named.
We play our parts.
The strongest cage: the human heart –
not good, not bad, not false, not true.
The incomparable comfort of sawdust
contains the fool.

BILLY MARSHALL-STONEKING

BRACKEN

(From the painting 'Numb fingers working while the eye of morn is yet bedimmed with tears.' By Jane Sutherland. 1888.)

Early morning, the world unmade,
you work among bracken.

Not for you the warmth of bed,
the lingering sleep, small touch of luxury.

Your breath thickens into misty air
as numb fingers break the stems,
the decisive featheriness of bracken,
leaping out of landscape so stunned by
indecision
that even colour is uncertain.

Your only escape, the track,
a suggestion overgrown,
and everywhere the bruise of indecisive bush.

But you are an enigma.
One hundred years on I see you
like morning, not yet formed,
a brush stroke of hair,
a brush stroke of dress,
imprecise as frills of bracken
and I wonder who and why.

Why so early? Who sent you to work alone,
in emptiness so dense,
you can feel it, breathing at your shoulder.

You turn to face it,
but it is faceless, endless.

And I, looking into that landscape,
stifled by a gallery of silent paintings,
and a rigid strictness of the walls,
I too, can sense it, share it ...

a small echo reaching
from your world into mine.
An awareness of captivity,
of life suspended. Held within
the blurred, relentless bush.

CAROLYN MORWOOD

MULTIPLE KRONSTADTS

What smoothes the pliable into the mythical,
the ikon into its frame?
What makes the sockets of the eyes
always those of the carver?

I don't mind your being a somnambulist,
bumping your head on all the hard walls
in the new shoes of the flat-footed
like the hanged, the gassed, the electrocuted.

I'm interested in the footprints you leave
in the mud Russians call "roadlessness";
or are you coming by curtained car,
or by steamboat when the rivers are ice-free?

The more you shout about your strong nerves,
the more I want to fly in your air,
watching and not having to learn
the method of your wrecking hand.

EMMA LEW

JOEL DEANE

The Great Wall of China

EVEN THEN, AT SUCH A TIME, it was there – he could sense it behind the shutters of their faces (row after row, pink and greased with grief), above his head, in the rafters; poisoning their prayers and hymns. A tablet in their bellies dissolving at the sight of him, infecting their blood, threatening to burst their skins, clouding the church with dust which the sun (sifted by the stained-glass windows) carved into columns of coloured light. He didn't speak. Instead, he nodded to the organist; who, haltingly at first, with liver-spotted hands and knotted fingers, began to play 'Seek Ye First'.

And, as the introduction rolled out, he glanced at the polished white coffin with silver handles – hardly bigger than a briefcase. And, in the front row, he registered the stunned expressions of the coffin's parents. And he snatched a gullet-full of air. And he clasped his hands. And he squinted at the floor near his scuffed school shoes, focusing his heart. And he closed his eyes, then opened them again. And he tensed his diaphragm, preparing to turn that toxic air into something golden.

He felt invincible.

Simon Nguyen had first met Father O'Dea two months before; the boy had no inkling of how the older man was constructed, where his seams lay. The All Saints Primary School choir was lined up in the asphalt quadrangle, singing Christmas carols to the assembled classes. As the choir swung into its final song, 'Amazing Grace', a visitor, a man in a black suit with a silver crucifix pinned to his lapel, walked by with the principal, Mrs Muller, heading for the tuck-shop ramp that doubled as a platform. After assembly, the music teacher, Miss Ferdinands, ushered Simon before the black suit. ("Don't be sullen. I've told him about your singing", she told the boy, frowning, as she pushed him through the crowd.) "Simon, this is Father O'Dea ... Say hello ... You're very lucky to meet Father O'Dea, Simon, he's visiting from the Philippines. Father O'Dea's in Melbourne to tell people about missionary work", the teacher said, all smiles. Simon looked blank, "What's a missionary?"

"You sang well."

Simon looked away. Father O'Dea pressed a gelati cone into his hand. "No – you didn't sing well ... beautiful. It was beautiful. And," searching for an apt description, he lifted his chocolate-and-crushed-nut dipped cone Heavenward, "appropriate. Highly appropriate."

Simon's face was a sullen little mask. The armour of the song had long fallen away, abandoning Simon, once again, to the elements: an artless twelve-year-old. In such a situation what else could a boy do but seal all entrances and exits; prepare for a siege? The December sun was a welder's flame burning the harsh sand of Elwood beach, the ankle-high rollers of Port Phillip Bay, the concrete walkway (crammed with families and couples), steel sunglass frames, discarded aluminium cans, oiled backs, the chrome headlight on Father O'Dea's Vespa. Bodies of varied ages and sexes sizzled on their towels, paddled waist-deep in the water, bumper to bumper on the walkway – holding hands, reading, sleeping, rollerblading, cycling, jogging and watching. Always watching. The world appeared a reflecting mirror – all shining directly into Simon's sealed eyes.

Father O'Dea had ridden to the beach direct from the funeral with Simon's pipe-cleaner arms wrapped round his leather-clad stomach. On the

way they crossed Westgate Bridge, a steep ascent into a Melbourne summer sky from which Simon was sure there was no return. Listening to the wind and the labouring motor, Simon thought they threatened to break the sound barrier ("We hardly topped fifty", Father O'Dea informed him later). Beneath their wheels, the Yarra meandered through the docklands, depositing itself into the bay on the right (Simon could see the shore arcing around to the Peninsula). To his left sat the city's towers ("Commercial cathedrals", Father O'Dea called them). And, straight ahead, the eastern suburbs stretched out to the blue ridges of the Dandenong Ranges. The sight was more than the sum of Simon's known world: beyond this all was hearsay.

"Simon." Father O'Dea smiled at the boy's distant expression. "You don't have to stay in the altar-boy garb, y' know. Lord, it must be thirty degrees."

Reminded of the camel-coloured, woollen garment he was wearing, Simon began perspiring at once, stripped to his shorts, sockless shoes and t-shirt, then leaned against the Vespa on the carpark's edge, eating his gelati. Father O'Dea polished off his cone and licked his lips. "Do you like the beach, Simon?" he asked.

The question flummoxed Simon. He stammered, shaking his head emphatically, "Dunno. I've never been before."

SIMON THOUGHT FATHER O'DEA a singer. He never listened to Father O'Dea's words. He heard the formless cadence of the priest's voice, the way his sentences rose and fell; saw the symmetry of his hand gestures, the stature of that robust face.

The boy was transfixed by the theatre. Father O'Dea would start quietly, perhaps tell a story about buying a litre of milk and a newspaper at the supermarket on Saturday, to break the audience in – introduce a relevant topic: the theme. He would then punctuate that theme with movements of simplicity and strength – a pointed finger here, an open hand there, at other times a fist. After, Father O'Dea would stand at the pulpit tidying his notes, perhaps rattling off inane announcements or wishing a happy birthday or anniversary – filling heavy moments. "You've got to warm-down the punters", he told Simon, "otherwise you'll have psyched-up parishioners on the streets."

"What is a missionary?" Father O'Dea repeated the boy's question that first day, cutting short Miss Ferdinands' indignant retort. He sighed: "Anybody." The boy nodded with a blink of his eyes. The priest repeated "anybody", then added "anywhere".

After Simon accepted Father O'Dea's invitation to sing in the churches, priest and boy had a short conversation ...

"So when can I meet your parents?" "Parents?" "Yes. They might want to meet me." "Nah. Mum works." "Does your father work?" "Dad's dead ... I think." "Oh." "But Grandfather's not dead. Not yet."

... which concluded in Simon's kitchen.

"Grandfather?" Staring absently out the window, puffing on a rolled cigarette, the gnarled face ignored Simon. He tried again. A column of ash fell from Grandfather's cigarette, marking his new white t-shirt. "Sit down", Simon whispered to the priest. Father O'Dea sat, facing the old man across the table.

"This is Father O'Dea", Simon said.

The priest smiled and offered his hand.

Grandfather's gaze never left the window and the offered hand hung above the polished tabletop. "Grandfather can't speak English", Simon said.

"Translate."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I can't speak Vietnamese."

"Then how do you talk with your grandfather?"

"I don't talk. I know enough about him, anyhow. He was rich. He owned a department store in Saigon. The communists took it away. Now he's poor. Simple."

Father O'Dea crossed his arms: "Who looks after you?"

"Me. I cook. I clean. I'm the man of the house. I don't need him."

The priest shook his head. "But Simon, if we don't know our past how can we know our future?"

Simon turned to his grandfather. The old man's eyes were locked on a patch of blue sky

framed by the kitchen window, cigarette burnt to a stub.

IT WAS NEAR DARK when Father O'Dea's Vespa whined to a stop in front of the commission flats. The floodlights atop the four towers were shining – guarding the estate's common ground. Simon slid off from behind the priest, gave a cursory wave of his hand and made for the far right tower, cutting across the common ground past a fallow patch in the lawn. Last spring, his mother had planted vegetables in that spartan square of dirt. She had spent her one spare day of the week planting regimental lines of carrots, snow peas and tomatoes and a portion of every day thereafter tending and feeding those plants. Until one morning, Mrs Nguyen found her garden smothered with petrol and set alight. "They burned food", Simon's mother said over and over. There was no more gardening after that.

Simon took an elevator to the sixteenth floor and let himself into his family's two-bedroom flat. The place was dark – his mother was working night shift with his older sister, Sue. He undressed, listening to next door's muffled voices (Mrs Rogers was deaf and always had her TV up full bore) in concert with his grandfather's snoring. The room reeked of tobacco – Grandfather had smoked himself to sleep again. Simon checked the bedding (it was dry) before clambering in. He fell asleep quickly.

Simon dreamt seven dreams that night, yet, when he awoke, only recalled one: the last dream.

In this dream, Simon is standing inside a department store with a checkerboard floor and no walls or ceiling: just a seamless black dome that could have been light-years deep. The boy is standing before an electric Great Wall of China. Thousands of Sony televisions make up the bricks in Simon's Great Wall, which rolls on endlessly into the oblivion of the black dome. And every television displays the same image, the same face. It is Simon's father as he appears in a family photograph – a thin man with jet-black hair and a pencil moustache. But this Father is different. He is in colour, not the picture's black-and-white. And this picture is alive, electric, beckoning Simon closer. Each smile, each word the lips of the mute picture speaks is multiplied thousands of times by Simon's Great Wall. Its silent seduction lifts the boy off his feet, willing his body across the chequered floor, planting him at the foot of the wall, eye to eye with his father's televised countenance. The face smiles, beckoning. Simon smiles in return and places his right palm upon the nearest screen. A bolt of static electricity makes his hand fly away and wring itself immediately. Simultaneously, as if triggered by a fingertip, the electric wall explodes. Thousands of television screens erupt, showering glass, light and smoke, but no noise. The boy's face is covered with warm blood that is not his own; and, in the midst of this audio vacuum, he turns. Asian men – perhaps Viet Cong – dressed in black with AK-47s pressed to their hips are standing in a line; hosing the wall with concentrated small-weapons fire. Simon can see the blazing destruction, smell acrid smoke, feel the blood of his unknown father dripping from his chin.

Simon dove deep – a seal torpedoing beneath the water's surface. *Flying*. Sunlight refracted by the water-painted patterns on his walnut-brown body. *Flying*. Before Father O'Dea he had been a boy with no identity. Just Simon – the boy kept down for two years in grade four because he couldn't read; the boy without a father. *Flying*. The water was cold now, telling Simon the sandbank had fallen away beneath him. When he surfaced, the boy was thirty metres past the nearest line of paddling swimmers. Somewhere ashore, amid the sand, harsh colours and assorted bodies lolling about, the priest was watching for him – Simon knew it.

CHRISTMAS EVE. The flat was humid, so Simon went downstairs and sat under a tree. He lay on the grass, eyes closed, and sang to himself. Simon drifted away with his singing and didn't hear the three boys approach. He only felt the first volley of fists and feet.

When he awoke, Simon thought himself swimming in the bay.

"I like swimming", Simon murmured.

"I know", a voice said.

Simon's eyes fought to focus on swirls of colour. Here: a pink circle. There: a yellow star. Behind them all: darkness. Father O'Dea's voice and words dove down to Simon; a sponge washed his swollen face. "Take it easy ... Loss of blood ... Swimming in blood ... Lying in it when they found him alone." The words were

cool liquid on his lips.

Simon awoke just after midnight. It was dark and he was alone, staring at the white, his face numb from injections. He croaked to himself, "They broke my teeth." He sat up – unsteady, weak from shock. The electric Great Wall of China had returned to his dreams, but it was different. The wall was still there. And the chequered floor. But it was different. Simon was staring at the wall of television screens. But it was different. The multiplied, reproduced image was different, but Simon could recall how the televised face appeared before his unconscious eye. He ran a hand over his face, noticed he wore a plastic bracelet with *Nguyen* typed on the label and tried to remember whether the Great Wall of China housed the face of his father or the face of the priest.

WAVES

From the beginning Brunswick Street
was awash with migration, memories, nostalgia.
English migrants settling into terraced houses
(imitation of those at home), rocked to sleep
in tides of memory, recollections of seas
lapping at familiar shores now far away –
Atlantic, North, Irish, the Channel.

Greeks and Italians arrived, dreaming
of Mediterranean days and nights,
villages of their childhood closed
around centuries-old patterns.
Wave after wave came victims of war,
clinging to the wreckage of other times,
huddling in houses on the city's edge.

Those Brunswick Street houses, worn
by the coming and going of lives,
crowded used abandoned
were taken over by newer generations.
How quickly the young expanded
old kitchens and laundries
installed the latest technology,
refurbished courtyards, asked
an artistic friend to paint a mural
hide a blank brick wall
with a landscape nothing specific
something to take eye and mind away
to other countries, a dream of travel.

Dinner guests seated at a cedar table
gaze at the scene – a lake surrounded
by wide-spreading trees; on a terrace
a sculptured couple in classical style;
on the water a red-sailed boat
going away towards a misty shore.
They could be in northern Italy
or the Lake District.

MARGUERITE VARDAY

JOHN HEROUVIM

Where's the Fire?

Thoughts on the Racial Hatred Act (1994)

MY PARENTS SAILED to Australia from Greece in 1955 aboard a converted German cargo ship, the S.S. Patris. Launched on the high seas – a foetus of international waters – I've grown up largely untouched by ethnic emotions and national passions. If everyone in Australia felt this way, we wouldn't need the Racial Hatred Act. Many people believe we don't need it anyway, but I find their arguments unconvincing. If Racial Hatred Acts were distributed on the basis of need, Bosnia would have half a dozen, and Australia would be still queuing.

When Gorbachev pulled down the Berlin Wall, the west rejoiced all the way to the bank. Along with most varieties of socialism, the Titolitarian system in Yugoslavia evaporated before the windy puff of global dollarocracy. Somewhere along the way, Bosnia collapsed into a gory shambles. Before this, Bosnia seemed fairly free of racial hatred. In truth, the ostensibly harmonious Bosnians were for forty years a mere Tito's gasp away from rampant, atavistic butchery.

How different might things have been if the disparate ethnic entities in Bosnia had thought to pass a Racial Hatred Act before getting down to business. With racial hatred proscribed by law, someone could have called the police when the name-calling started, and nipped in the bud this crudest of recrudescences.

If this seems far-fetched, so, once, did liposuction.

In 1968 my family shifted to a middle-class suburb peopled by exsanguinous, leather-souled, psychically constipated, Anglo two-bob capitalists. When their progeny chalked 'WOG' on our footpath, it was hurtful, but not illegal.

If I had to describe the Racial Hatred Act in one word, I would say: "late".

'Wog' still grates, even when it's just another word for the flu. The first time I heard someone say they'd caught a wog, I thought: "Oh, no! Now they're allowed to hunt us!"

Then, in the 1980s, 'wogs' seized 'WOG', redefined it, redesigned it, and made it a tag of pride and defiance. This shift in attitude and meaning was detonated by the pathbreaking stage show 'Wogs out of Work', precursor to the pathfollowing 'Acropolis Now' and 'Wogarama'.

The sub-cultural phenomenon of 'Wogs Who Want To Be Wogs' emerged as part of a transnational tendency which, among other things, saw blacks in America complimenting each other with: "You [are] one bad nigger!"

Today, you can say 'nigger' if you're Afro-American; you can say 'faggot' if you're gay; you can say 'spastic' if you're Steady Eddy, and 'wog' if your Personal Pigmentation Profile falls somewhere between Olive and Swarthy.

If you're an Anglo, best check with your lawyer before you say anything.

On stage as a stand-up comedian, I sometimes do the following joke:

> How do you spell hospitality in Australian?
>
> B-Y-O.

The response is a hugely rewarding combination of surprise, laughter and discomfort. The discomfort arises partly from the 'now-it's-our-turn' element in the routine. The Greek on stage is holding a microphone, and a grudge. Both the laughter, and the tension it dissolves, illustrate the extent to which the racist shoe is now on the other foot. Not everywhere in Australia, and not every time, but to a noteworthy extent, the chalk is now on the other footpath.

At the level of public policy, Australia is capital 'm' Multicultural, but not so Australia's public face. The ethnic composition of our media moguls, mainstream mafias and major institutions is over-whelmingly Anglo.

Australia's public monuments are racist, most flagrantly so in the statues erected to honour British explorers. When Burke and Wills buggered up the expedition and died a thoroughly amateurish

desert death, they got a statue. When a group of Vietnamese boat people landed in the far north and actually made it through the desert, they got locked up!

No wonder people fire starters' guns at Prince Charles!

It used to be said by Anglos of Greeks that we were money-hungry, sly and untrustworthy, lived fifty to a house, and ate smelly food. By and large, Anglos no longer say this sort of thing about Greeks. Greeks say it about Vietnamese.

The first prosecution under the Racial Hatred Act might be a Vietnamese grocer taking a Greek to court. The charge: conduct involving the hatred of other people on the ground of national origin as expressed in certain remarks made by the accused (Ulysses) in relation to certain exotic foodstuffs displayed on the shelves of the plaintiff (Ng).

I hope the second prosecution is an African taking Ng to court for stocking 'Darkie' toothpaste. A popular brand in Asia, 'Darkie' toothpaste featured on its packet the face of a black man wearing a top hat and a broad smile (that's right: an old-style 'darkie').

Are Asians racist towards Africans? Is it racist to ask? Are Africans racist towards Asians? Does Archbishop Desmond Tutu brush *his* teeth with new Ultramint 'Slanty Eyes' toothpaste?

A protracted and persistent international campaign succeeded in persuading the manufacturers of Darkie toothpaste to change its name. They changed it to Darlie. The 'darkie' remains on the packet, still smiling. And why wouldn't he?

A further campaign raised a further smile. This time it was against Coon cheese, which is named after the man who established it and does not sport a picture of a 'coon'.

> What did you do during the nineties, Mr Mandela?
>
> I overthrew the system of apartheid. And yourself?
>
> I overthrew a cheese.

Intended as a deterrent to racist violence and intimidation, the Racial Hatred Act functions also as a contact ad. on a prominently located billboard: "Alacritous Social Justice Careerist seeks Willing Skinhead Martyr for mutually beneficial publicity feast".

To dedicate an Act of the Commonwealth Parliament to the discouragement of neo-Nazis and related pariahmaniacs seems to me excessive. A much cheaper and more efficient method would be to mince a couple of them.

Only those who continued to shout "death to niggers!" and "death to Jews" as they passed through the mincer could be deemed to be serious about their views. I bet we wouldn't find many. Not in Australia.

As a Greek, I don't even think Australians are particularly good at racism. We don't have borders with anyone. If you want stubborn, bone-deep, murderous, fair dinkum racism, speak to Europeans.

Ask a Greek about Albanians. Or Turks. Or Rumanians. Or Bulgarians. Or anyone they've ever had a border with. In Europe, people have been burning each other's villages and slaughtering each other's people and bayonetting each other's children for centuries. Every square inch of the European countryside is soaked with ancient blood and ancient grudges.

Not so down here at the arse end of the world. For a typically Australian form of racial hatred we may look to Queensland in the first world war. So strong was anti-German feeling that English lepers at the Peel Island lazaret in Moreton Bay complained about having to mix with German lepers. Today the German lepers could take the English lepers to court.

'Need' is a troublesome notion in a society like ours. We may not need a Racial Hatred Act, but do we need chicken nuggets? Or Peter Reith?

Australia's history and national temperament are very different from Europe's. I was raised with a deep and unshakeable suspicion of anyone who doesn't wave their arms when they talk.

The closest Australia has come to a revolution is the Eureka Stockade – an armed uprising against colonial authority staged in 1854 by goldminers in Ballarat, Victoria. Thirty-three people died. In South America, that's not a revolution: it's a soccer match.

Whatever else the Racial Hatred Act achieves, it will almost certainly exacerbate the already serious Australian problem of xenophobiaphobia: an irrational fear of being accused of an irrational fear of foreign things.

It's a Greek word.

John Herouvim is married with one son. He lives in Melbourne, where he writes and performs comedy for the stand-up stage, TV and radio. His cassette 'Prime Cuts' is available in ABC Shops.

GEOFFREY DUTTON

The Public and the Private Max

MAX HARRIS died of cancer on Friday 13 January, 1995, in Adelaide.

He is best known as a columnist in various newspapers, especially *The Australian*, and a writer of articles for journals, notably *Nation*. And he was, of course, the victim of the Ern Malley hoax. He should be remembered, rather, as a poet, editor and publisher and man of ideas.

I knew Max well for more than forty years, and was associated with him in a number of successful literary ventures. These included *Angry Penguins* (of which, as is often forgotten, Donald Kerr was one of the two original editors); *Australian Letters* which we edited together with Bryn Davies, joined later by Rosemary Wighton (who also later joined Max and myself in editing *Australian Book Review*). Max was, with Brian Stonier and myself, part of the original team responsible for the creation of an Australian publishing list for Penguin, and he had the same involvement with us when we all resigned from Penguin and established Sun Books. When Sun became part of Macmillan, Max was adviser both in Britain and Australia. He was also involved in radio and in the ABC's TV session, *The Critics*.

We lunched regularly and consumed large quantities of red wine and made lots of notes of our brilliant ideas, but although I was fond of him and got on very well with him, I would never have called him a close friend. I have often wondered if anyone would have done so. He was devoted to his wife Yvonne, his daughter Samela and his two grandsons, all of whom survived him.

Max was a very complex character. Delighting in being known publicly just as 'Max', he was intensely private about himself and his family. Max was born in Adelaide, but was raised in Mount Gambier. The south-east of South Australia is an essential ingredient, both loved and hated, of some of his best poems, such as 'The Tantanoola Tiger' and 'On Throwing a Copy of the *New Statesman* into The Coorong'.

He was a scholarship boy at the most snobbish of Adelaide schools, St Peter's. He rejoiced in putting the boots into the Adelaide establishment but later owned a mansion in Edwin Terrace, Gilberton, in the heart of conservative Adelaide. A socialist in his youth, and influential in Don Dunstan's coming to power, he later voted Liberal. At the time of a federal election, one of the Adelaide newspapers invited Max and myself to write about which way we would vote. We had a whole page each, facing each other, Max for the Liberals, myself for Labor.

Max was always a vociferous supporter of the Little Man, yet he travelled to and from work in his own chauffeur-driven Daimler. He was a dandy who was also a good Australian Rules footballer when young (proud of being described in a newspaper as a "nippy little rover") and remained a fanatical fan. A lover of Blake, Schubert and Australian jazz, he was, at the opposite pole of sensibility, for many years an extremely successful and shrewd businessman. He was a supporter of many Australian writers while running and finally owning Mary Martin Bookshop. Through it he made his fortune in selling some new books, but mostly remainders – from which, of course, writers make nothing.

Max was a brilliant publicist, and he felt strongly about certain causes, but in most cases he was not a joiner, perhaps because of his intense love of privacy. His intuition and zest as a loner were a vital part of his success with Mary Martin. Brian Stonier has pointed out to me how Max made Mary Martin into an influential cultural supplier of important works. His hunches were good and his actions swift. For instance, he made a special deal for Mary Martin customers of a paperback edition of *Grove's Dictionary* (before the new one came out), which sold many hundreds of sets. His practice of buying big quantities at good discounts and firm sale set the scene for new retailing philosophies, long before people like Kevin Weldon.

Max also sponsored all sorts of

diversions through Mary Martin. Many Australians bought their first packets of Twinings Teas – Earl Grey, Irish Breakfast, Russian Caravan and so on – from Mary Martin. Max caused a vogue for certain records, notably mandolin music by Vivaldi and others and, long before they became sickeningly popular, adagios such as Albinoni's. Max interested many people, over the vast area covered by his mailing list, in reproductions of modern art. He kept up his old friendship with Arthur Boyd and, until near the end, with Sidney Nolan. Russell Drysdale was a strong supporter of Max.

One of Max's most attractive characteristics was that he was unafraid of the rich and powerful, who in turn usually admired him for standing up to them. One of the world's greatest publishers, Sir Allen Lane, in 1961 asked Brian Stonier, Max and myself to start an Australian publishing program for Penguin. This was a most important enterprise, and Lane deserves great credit for it. Yet in our meetings Max would rib Lane unmercifully, and Lane enjoyed every minute of it. The reason Max got away with it, apart from his personality, was that he was a fountain of ideas. He never minded some of his high-flyers being shot down, but would argue passionately and convincingly, head forward, eyes intent, for his convictions. And with these ideas went a great sense of humour. Max could be very funny indeed, and his monthly Booklists for Mary Martin's were worth reading for their humour alone.

I never had a falling-out with Max, public or private, although there were some occasions that called for great restraint. Nevertheless, he could be almost as ruthless as Patrick White in tearing up old friendships, often in public. Sidney Nolan told me that no one was capable of wounding him like Max, and that was in the early days, before Max took White's side in the quarrel with Nolan.

People often wondered about Max the dandy – why the silver-topped cane, the coat made of the skins of unborn lambs, the beautiful shoes and suits, the Daimler? When Max went overseas he flew first class and stayed, at enormous expense to the companies involved, in suites at the Pierre in New York or the Savoy in London. Max was one of the first men in Adelaide to go to a unisex hairdresser. He took a very keen interest in food and wine, while smoking incessantly. At the same time, he could be inventively coarse in his language, and crude in some of his attitudes, and often, at work or lunching at his regular table across the street in Horst's restaurant, he could look anything but fastidious. The origins of this dandyism were, as might be expected of Max, very complex. Its true beginnings were in Max's passion for Baudelaire – the life and prose, as well as the poems. (Characteristically, Max could scarcely read French, although his German was good.) The most obvious literary manifestation of this is in his novel *The Vegetative Eye*.

Although dandyism is often a pose for a lack of character, this was not so for Max any more than it was for Baudelaire. In Max's case it was part of the slow building of a persona that would make up for his humble origins and his early rejection by Adelaide snobs. It helped him disguise his public nervousness – though not when he was foolish enough to debate with John Singleton on TV. It helped to establish him as no mere colonial when abroad. It helped distance him from any too close personal involvement outside his family.

It was also a salve for the two deepest wounds to his literary sensibility and public image: A.D. Hope's review in *Meanjin* of *The Vegetative Eye*, and the Ern Malley hoax. Max's uncontrollable ego helped to lead him into both disasters, although in fact he deserves sympathy in the matter of Hope's vicious attack on a very young writer of great abilities, whose first and only novel was a failure but at least full of ideas and devoid of kangaroos. Hope never showed any remorse, and in fact allowed his diatribe to be reprinted; McAuley, if not Stewart, came to regret that Ern Malley had been not just a literary experiment but a rallying-call for Philistines and reactionaries.

People still feel strongly for or against Ern; Max's enthusiastic support of Ern, if not his over-the-top presentation, has been shared by eminent literary people around the world, and Ern's poems have been reprinted again and again. But the hoax, and the infamous subsequent prosecution and conviction for obscenity, hurt Max deeply, although he behaved courageously at the time.

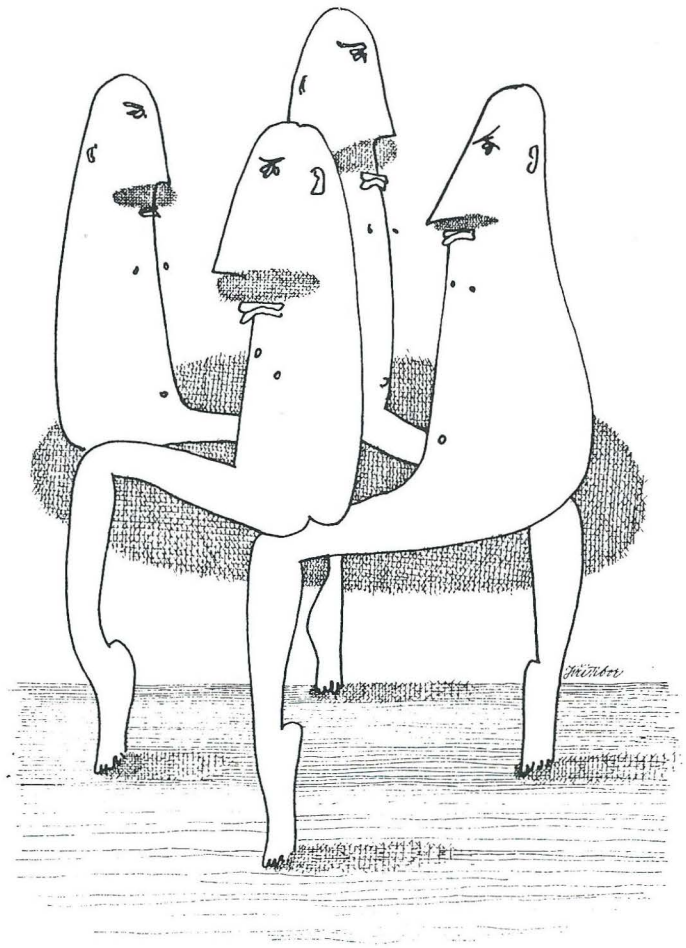
It did not, however, stop him writing poetry. Apart from some delicate, beautiful early lyrics, all Max's best poems were written after the Ern Malley affair. It is deplorable that he is not more highly regarded and discussed as a poet. Ken Slessor and his co-editors included him in the first Pengiun collection, as did Harry Heseltine in the later one, and Les Murray in his collection. David Campbell only included Max in our Sun anthology after I remonstrated with him. But other anthologists and taste-makers have ignored Max as a poet. This exclusion has been due to a number of reasons, none of them to do with the quality of the poetry.

Max easily made enemies, often without realising he had done so. David Campbell, for instance, scorned him for an entirely unjustified attack which Max had made on Rosemary Dobson. Then,

despite his Australia-wide public persona as a journalist – although that probably counted against him in higher literary circles – he hid himself away in Adelaide. (Colin Thiele is another fine, neglected South Australian poet; A.D. Hope once wrote that Australian poetry stopped at the Victorian-South Australian border.) Max held himself aloof from literary magazines (except *Overland*) and self-published his own books of poetry, which were seldom reviewed. He took no part in the university scene, nor in critical conferences. In fact, he pretended that he liked being neglected; it made him feel free, and he enjoyed the role of Thersites. But it is nonetheless a disgrace that he is not more highly regarded as a poet.

I also think that it is no credit to our academic and literary community that, apart from my chapter on Max and Walter Murdoch in my *Snow On The Saltbush* (1984), there has been no extensive survey of his involvement in the Australian literary scene, which was long and fruitful. One could go so far as to say that you cannot truly understand Australian literature, and a wider culture, in the 1950s to 1970s without taking into account Max's writings.

However, now that he is dead, no doubt people will start writing articles about him.



Jiri Tibor

McKENZIE WARK

The Republic of Sadness

Abstract State
Soon the state will become so abstract that all it manages are the referents.

Bad sex
What is the point of bad sex – if not the purity of its pointlessness?

Bio-pessimism
All bodies reveal is the ambitions of water.

Blue reason
Hope is a hopeless virtue. To hope for hope is a crime.

Communism for Decadents
From each according to their manias; to each according to their compulsions.

Destruction Manual
This is our curse: that intelligence does not come fully equipped with intelligence about its intelligent use.

Dialectic
That which is impossible is real; that which is real is impossible.

Divine madness
Is there a meaning in madness?
To remind us what it would be like to be God.

Ether
You are in love when every word, every sigh, every note of longing in every song on the radio seems addressed to you, only to you, and to your desire.

Ethics
If you're not part of the signal, you're part of the noise.
Do I make myself clear?

Exchange Value
Who would sell their soul – in such a buyer's market?

Frequent Flyer
The appeal of constant travelling lies in the lure of novel boredom.

Generic
The tragic reveals those illusions indispensable to both life and fate.

The gospel singer
Jesus died for our sins. Big deal. Elvis died *from* them. To be merely a sinner makes a saint; to be merely a saint is a sin.

The hanging judge
The purpose of good criticism is to kill bad art.

Hello? Anyone there?
Do you copy? The very idea of communication is a lie. Were I to communicate to you fully, you would have to be identical to me. You would not be you, you would be me. For you to be you and not me, you must be different from me. So you cannot understand me fully. You must misunderstand me in order to be you. A home truth for the information age.

High Fidelity
The complete relationship: to love and to lie; to be loved and deceived.

Last Reel
The last wish of the intellectuals: when the light comes up at the end of history, we will not be dancing – we will want to stay in our seats and read the credits.

Last Rights
She 'lived life to the full' – she died owing money.

Late Capitalism
The will to virtuality made concrete.

Methodology
Good aphorisms: knowledge that aspires to non-

knowledge.
Bad aphorisms: non-knowledge that aspires to knowledge.

Monster truck
The insomnia of reason breeds modernity.

My pessimism
True love is the love of death in the other and of the other in death.

Night of the living dead
Scholastics: knowledge cut into meat.
Aphorisms: the meat cutting back into knowledge.

Noise
It is only through perpetually misunderstanding others that we can understand ourselves.

The Nonchalance of Fate
We no longer have roots, we have aerials.
We no longer have origins, we have terminals.
We no longer have the family silver – we have the satellite dish.

On the good foot
Being an antipodean is neither here nor there.

Oscilloscope
The antipode is to space what the postmodern is to time.

Progress
And now we have killed God's murderers – not for revenge, but from boredom.

Resistance
It is only the inhuman in us that makes us human.

Roll over Fred Engels
Irony is the wetnurse of history.

Seduction
Spare me all but your most elegant lies.

Seminar
Why do people breed? From the endless false presumption that boredom is not hereditary.

Survival of the wittiest
First and last ethic for intellectuals:
Never ask any meta-question that results in total paralysis of the will.

Taster to the king
Last chance for aesthetics – to find what is truly fascinating about boredom.

This is incorrect
What do you mean when you say I cannot speak for others?
What makes you think you can speak for yourself?

Triumph of the will
When I hear the word culture I reach for the remote control.

Use Value
As much as I'd like a drop-head sports car, it seems wrong to buy one. They must be either stolen, or accepted as a gift for sexual favours.

Worker's Paradise
Now we have everything to lose but our chains.

Paramount Hotel, New York, April 1994
Sheraton Walker Hill Hotel, Seoul, June 1994

McKenzie Wark's book Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events *is published by Indiana University Press. His essays, or as the literary administrators say "creative non-fiction" writings, have appeared in* Overland, Meanjin, New Statesman, Cultural Studies, *and in the anthologies* Columbus' Blindness *and* Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader.

ENDNOTES from page 23

1. For recent discussion of Stella Bowen's painting, see Lola Wilkins, 'Stella Bowen. Australian War Artist', *Art and Australia*, 28, 4, 1991, pp. 493–497; Caroline Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists – First Fleet to 1945*, Canberra, 1992; Victoria Hammond, *A Century of Australian Women Artists 1840s–1940s*, Deutscher Fine Art Catalogue, Melbourne, 1993.
2. Jean Rhys, *Quartet*, New York 1928; Ford Madox Ford, *When the Wicked Men*, New York, 1931; Jean Lenglet, *Sous les verrous*, Paris, 1933 (Edited English translation by Jean Rhys, *Barred*, London, 1932).
3. Stella Bowen, *Drawn From Life*, London, 1941. Reprint London, Virago Press, 1986.
4. Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900–1940*, Austin Texas, 1986.
5. *Drawn From Life*, p. 97.
6. *The Correspondence of Ford Madox Ford and Stella Bowen*, ed. Sondra J. Stang and Karen Cochran, Bloomington, 1993.
7. Arthur Miziner, *The Saddest Story. A Biography of Ford Madox Ford*, N.Y., 1971; Alan Judd, *Ford Madox Ford*. Cambridge, Mass., 1991.
8. Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownsky, *Mothering the Mind. Twelve Studies of Writers and their Silent Partners*. New York, 1984.
9. The exception is Judd.
10. Quoted in Mizener, p. 346.
11. Letter to Julie Madox Loewe, quoted by Loewe in her introduction to the 1984 edition of *Drawn From Life*. p. xv.
12. *Drawn From Life*, p. 35.
13. For a call for Australian history to focus on Australians, Donald Denoon, 'The Isolation of Australian History', *Historical Studies*, 22 (1987), pp. 252–260.
14. Jim Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising. Louise Hanson-Dyer of Oiseau-Lyre 1884–1962*, Melbourne, 1994.

slippage

FOR THOSE OF US who grew up on a diet of English authors, the literary landscapes of Britain are as familiar as our own. Yet they are also unfamiliar, for, unlike the English, we can neither take them for granted nor own them. Andrea Goldsmith, who is leading a twenty-two-day literary tour of Britain next September, says that this combination allows us to see them more clearly for themselves, and so understand how they shaped the work of writers who lived in their midst. The tour, which celebrates forty years of publication of the Penguin black-covered classic authors, has been shaped by her own enthusiasms and a concentration on nineteenth century poets and fiction writers, but it has been bent to allow visits to the places of Beatrix Potter, Henry James and Virginia Woolf. It will also include a special half-day tour of the British Library, culminating in the domes of the Reading Room and an inspection of a selection of Woolf's manuscripts. Goldsmith became fascinated with these manuscripts when she was working on her second novel, and lent the experience to one of its characters. Readers interested in joining this tour should contact Travelrite International, 182 Canterbury Road, Heathmont 3135.

ABC RADIO HAS commenced a new program on storytelling. Called 'A Swag of Yarns', it is presented by David Mulhallen on Radio National on Saturdays at nine in the evening, and combines recordings of oral yarn-spinners with readings from published works from Australia and abroad.

THE LITERATURE Board has announced that it intends to review its program of support for Australian literary magazines. The ideas being put forward for the new policy, which is to commence from 1997, include redirecting subsidies to One Big Literary Magazine or using them to encourage commercial magazine publishers to print Australian writing. This would certainly provide a change from syndicated horoscopes and tales of royal and celebrity bedrooms, but is scarcely a substitute for journals dedicated to the nurturing and publishing of Australian writing in all genres, including reportage, history and essays, and to the application of consistent standards of criticism to this work. *Overland* welcomes a review of present policies, which often seem arbitrary and inconsistent, but we have joined with the editors of other journals presently subsidised by the Board to urge that a primary aim of any program of assistance must be to maintain a diversity of editorial voices and outlets for new writing of every kind.

Readers who feel likewise should send their views directly to the Chair of the Board at PO Box 788, Strawberry Hills NSW 2012.

THE 36TH (or thereabouts) *Overland-Meanjin* Annual Cricket Match was, contrary to rumours, played this February on Melbourne's Herring Oval and, contrary to recent habit, won by the team from *Overland*, capably led by historian Stuart Macintyre. *Meanjin's* demon bowler, Christopher Cyrill, did not appear this year, no doubt recovering from the plaudits he has received for his fine novel *The Ganges and its Tributaries* (McPhee Gribble, 1993). This novel, reviewed by Adrian Marshall in *Overland* 134, uses cricket as one of the themes in its tale of migration, adolescence, settlement and confusion in and around St Kilda. *Meanjin's* captain, Laurie Clancy has also recently published a new comic novel, *The Wild Life Reserve* (Angus & Robertson, 1994), which takes out of academia any mickey that may have been left in it. Steve Carroll and Chris Wallace-Crabbe for *Meanjin*, Ross McMullen and Mike Berry for *Overland*, ensured a balancing of genres on the field.

JOHN JENKINS has moved to the perimeter of Melbourne and has been forced to relinquish his role as Associate Editor of *Overland*, a position he first assumed in 1990. His contribution in commissioning new writers and artists and encouraging established contributors has been immense. No less significant has been his assistance in the mundane but essential tasks of

marking up and proof-reading and his participation in the continuing discussions that decide each issue's particular contents and the overall direction of the magazine. Fortunately, he will continue in this role as a Consulting Editor.

WRITING IMAGINATIVE truth may be becoming more difficult everywhere, but individual writers continue to attract attention from those least interested in listening to their truths. Fundamentalists in Tehran keep a vast price on Salman Rushdie's head, and are now offering a prize for the best short story describing the writer's "life of anxiety and terror". At the same time, Florence Nolville informs us in Le Monde (*Guardian Weekly*, 5 March '95), the rights to translate his latest two books into French have been sold to the highest bidder, a subsidiary of Group de la Cité, for $US450,000. Excluded by this price were Rushdie's two previous French publishers, Stock and Christian Bourgois, who has spent years living under twenty-four-hour police protection because of his courage in publishing *The Satanic Verses*. Nolville comments, "It is almost as if Rushdie were now a helpless prisoner, pinioned on one side by those who want to kill him because that is what they think their religion tells them to do, and on the other by those who are determined to make the most of his predicament by subjecting his writings to the sacrosanct laws of the market."

John McLaren

Collected Works

DO SIX booklets bound together make an anthology? Are they more or less than when read individually? The *Scarp/Five Islands Press Second Series* of first book poets (featuring Peter Boyle, James Bradley, Paul Cliff, Peta Spear, Beth Spencer and Adrian Wiggins, $25) actually feels like an anthology. Boyle and Cliff may be my favourites but due to their proximity the others offer unsought pleasures! More than favourable comparison with the Penguin quartets suggests itself. From the same prolific press is *Anthology of the Illawarra*, genuinely regional though, Ron Pretty allows its definition by both local subject and locally residing writers (including Corris, J.A. Scott, Turcotte and Mansell, $14.95).

PATRICK ALEXANDER'S *Effects of Remembrance* (Earthdance, $10) contains elegies for the late Jas Duke, Robert Harris and Rex Buckingham, and further afield, Elizabeth Smart and Francis Webb, all known to the poet and affectionately celebrated. Lisa D'Onofrio has recently returned to Melbourne from overseas with *Looking for an Echo* (Lilliput, $6), twelve little pages of sweet and sour poems. Similarly, Jo Chumas, after living in France and the UK, self-publishes *The Uncomplicated Life of a Woman* ($10); intriguing erotic tales in a familiar (Nin, Bataille) accent. Ricardo Valdes' *Follow Your Star* (in the late Denis Davison's Medal Poets series from Monash University) is exile poetry of political longing and desire; bilingual, Spanish and English ($7).

The latest books from the trans-Tasman Hazard Press, Louise Crisp's *Pearl & Sea Fed* ($16.95) and David Herkt's *The Body of Man* ($19.95), crown the promise of both the poets and the press. Crisp's juxtaposition of maternity and particular country landscapes' history and politics, and Herkt's black comedy in which the fictive self displays its excoriated personae, are second collections of differently innovative poets. Along with Kevin Hart's *New & Selected Poems* (A&R, $16.95), these volumes wear beautiful covers; a fragment of Kristin Headlam's Red Tree painting distinguishes Hart's. His selection of twenty years' work retrieves the out of print poems constantly sought by readers, albeit slightly changed here. An early candidate for book of the year?

John Millett's *View from the Turret (WWII)* (Five Islands Press, $12.95), his twelfth book, is another of this underrated poet's autobiographical narratives, salvaging history as it tugs moral and political consciences. Years ago Tim Thorne's Cornford Press in Tasmania published Barney Roberts; now he offers the son, Bruce Roberts' *In the Church of Latter Day Consumers* ($14.95). Almost a running-mate for Millett, but angrier, racier in his politics.

RECENTLY received anthologies from the USA include W. Harmon's massive *The Top 500 Poems* (Columbia, $55), presenting the most anthologised poems in English; and *The Classic Hundred* ($27.95), ditto. The Bread Loaf anthology editors, Pack and Parini, have published *American Identities – Contemporary Multicultural Voices* (New England, $49.95), a collection of religious, racial, class and gender writings now defining American identity. Their *Poems for a Small Planet: Contemporary American Nature Poetry* (New Eng. $27.95) similarly emphasises the political urgency of this traditional subject-matter.

Resurfacing older poets include Marvin Bell, a Reader of whose poetry and prose is published in the New England series ($27.95); and Mark Strand, *A Dark Harbour* (Knopf, $33.95). Collections by late poets include William Stafford's *The Darkness Around Us: Selected Poems* (Harper, $21.95), and May Swenson's *Nature* (H–M, $39.95). Poets in mid-career include Joy Harjo, *In Mad Love & War* (Wesleyan, $19.95), Anne Waldman, *Kill or Cure* (Penguin, $26.95).

New British poetry is well represented by Vernon Scannell, *Collected poems, 1950–93* (Robson, $29.95), Jackie Kay, *Other Lovers* (Bloodaxe, $18.95), Jeremy Reed, *Kicks* (Creation, $24.95), Alexis Lykiard, *Cat Kin* (Sinclair–Stevenson, $19.95) and performance-poet Joolz, *The Pride of Lions* (Bloodaxe, $21.95).

The pick of recent poetry-in-translation includes Rachel Hadas' versions of Baudelaire and others, *Other Worlds Than This* (Rutgers, $22), Jim Powell's *Sappho: A Garland* (FSG, $18.95), Alain Bosquet's *God's Torment* (Ohio, $39.95), and the magnificent *Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (Canongate, $59.95).

Of the numerous books about poets and poetry, two are recommended. *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Mass., $63), *The Frost Family's Adventure in Poetry* by Lesley Lee Francis (Missouri, $49.95).

[All books mentioned available at Collected Works Bookshop, 28 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, (03) 9654 8873.]

Kris Hemensley of Collected Works will provide this regular survey of recent poetry.

If the Medium is the Message I'm Out

THOSE 3-D ILLUSIONS that are popular just now irritate me – as do video games. The explanation for this could be simply that I'm not very good at either (I wonder if you are good at one you are also good at the other?), but beyond this, it is the physicality masquerading as something more that unsettles me. The same is true of a lot of technology: that while it is essentially a physical facilitation or extension it so often has the cachet of an intellectual, emotional and, especially, social enhancement; that children who are computer literate, for instance, are somehow better equipped (a noteworthy word in this context) for life – beyond the obvious, though debatable strength of 'job skilling'.

The insidiousness of so much of technology is that while it is supposed to lighten the burden of physical and more menial mental processes so as to free us for our own higher functioning, it instead elevates the physical and menial to occupy the higher space it is meant to free for us. In giving us the illusion of 'being there' television weakens our ability to participate, and by providing such sensorily rich narratives replaces our narrative skills with those of mere recognition; the car is basically a means of transport, yet for the yobbo squealing his wide wheels or the executive in a car worth four times the average yearly wage the car is part of his soul.

I am not a neo-Romantic or neo-Luddite longing for (a return to) a simpler, more 'natural' way of life. I suppose the argument I have put could be applied to books, to which I have no answer except in that most personally persuasive but usually non-transferable field of experience: that the threshold of too much reading is much higher than that of too much television; smart people do not watch a lot of television – though this is not to say that stupid people necessarily don't read a lot of books.

I don't want to dwell on the problem of our being worked by our tools – or played with by our toys – except to say that this happens as a result of the common fantasy that given the right paintbrush I could be Leonardo, the right shoes, Carl Lewis or Fred Astaire. Devices of empowerment can easily become masks for very primitive wants which given our fallibility, vulnerability and mortality can never be fulfilled or satisfied. And the more convincing the mask the less likely the reality beneath it is to be apprehended. It is perhaps a major flaw of any (particularly, humanist) standpoint that its depiction of reality is or becomes so familiar – so accessible – that it can be confused with that which it attempts to describe, so the critical tool of comparison is lost and an even more debased re-presentation is likely to follow.

Somewhere between your ears popping in a plane and remembering where you've put something you've lost, is the sense of relief and even satisfaction you get from 'getting' a 3-D illusion. The sellers of 3-D illusions say 'expand your mind' but I don't believe the adult human consciousness can be expanded *unconsciously*, and further, that any device or process which affects – and especially which effects – our behaviours or perception unconsciously is likely to do the opposite, to shrink our consciousness. While to shrink one's consciousness might be a good thing for the purpose of focusing it, it depends what is focused on, what is excluded, and by whom and for what reason the shrinkage is deemed desirable.

For instance, to imprison someone in time is similar to physically imprisoning them (in space) in terms of limiting their ability to experience, interact with and affect the wider world. It is no accident that totalitarian governments seek to destroy or fabricate the past so that no realistic point of reference can be brought to bear on the present. Persuading people to concentrate exclusively on the latest – news, views, trends – is another way of limiting the context in which their thoughts can move. As Tolstoy remarked, people in the habit of prefacing their most cherished opinions with 'these days' are invariably idiots.

What if the hidden picture in a 3-D illusion were an accurate portrayal of a real angel or devil? What if the 3-D illusion were like a microscope or an infra-red lens

that permitted you to see a real but otherwise invisible world that is extrinsic to and significant beyond the medium which allows you to see it? What if there was a way of looking that allowed you to see something that objectively existed which is not immediately apparent to anyone, never apparent to some, and required a special apparatus, technique or effort to be seen? Isn't it this knack that is the aim of religion, art or a world view: a way to see or not to see the emperor's new clothes?

At night without my glasses on I can't read the luminous time-display on the digital clock on my dressing-table, but if I squint the right way I can see it for a split-second, though it often takes me several tries. The ability to find focus in this way is acknowledged, even for people with much worse eyesight than mine, and makes one wonder what the limits are; could you, with the right method and or sufficient effort, look at a speck in the distance and tell what colour his eyes are?

SEPARATING OUR unrealistic yearnings from our actual potential is an extremely difficult thing to do, and our confusion is easily exploited by charlatans, quacks and conmen, as well as being abetted by those similarly confused. On the other hand 'some things have to be believed to be seen' – you'll never see what you haven't dreamed. There are those who are most concerned with *why* and those more interested in *how*. The latter are always the great majority and because of this they tend to prevail in their pursuit of means over those whose task is to identify the ends to which the means are directed.

The question begged by promoters of the 'Information Highway', for instance, is of the quality of the information. Television was hailed as the universal educator, printing as the dawn of a golden age of piety through access to the Gospels, and as the saying goes: information isn't knowledge and knowledge isn't wisdom. The *how*s assume that the ends (mine or ours, that is) are graven in universal stone, where really (and indeed, deconstructively) they were said yesterday by someone who had misunderstood something said the day before. ('Can't see the wood for the trees' might refer to a missed opportunity in the timber industry.)

Your average *how* finds it difficult to understand that great discoveries do not come primarily from applied research; the wheel was discovered by a priest trying to build an altar out of sun icons who found it kept rolling away. When the *how*s have it all their own way you get the situation described in the Sex Pistols song 'Anarchy in the UK': "I don't know what I want, but I know how to get it."

DENNIS NICHOLSON

ALLIANCE IV

You kissed me as tears welled in my eyes
Just before Christmas.

You came back and loved me unconsciously:
I refuse to pay for that.

I've written a strong but very dignified reply.
It simply says "lost".

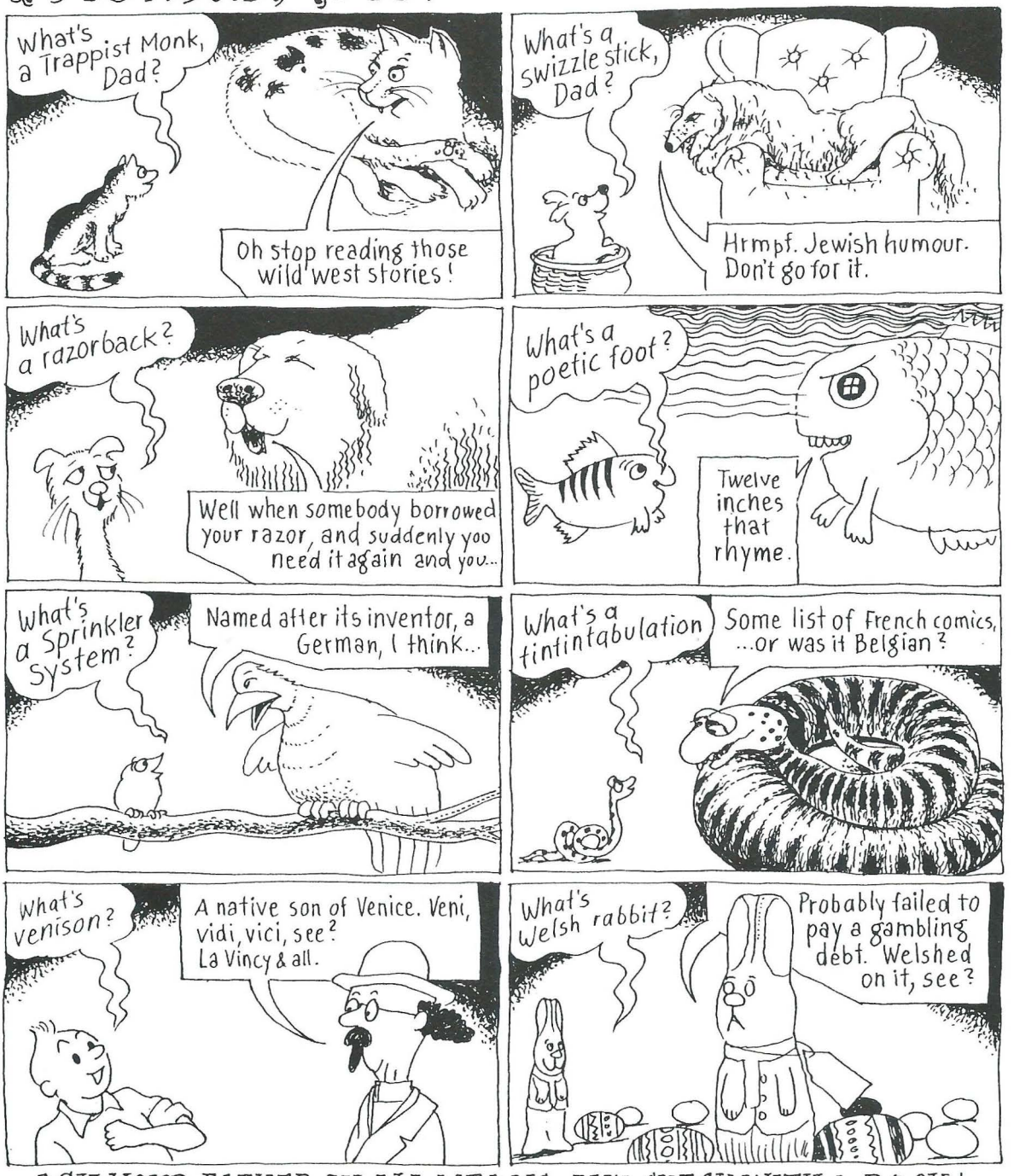
You cannot count on me for anything,
But suppose I volunteer to be harnessed?

As you know, I will be desperate
If that's the costume you want me to wear
tonight.

EMMA LEW

Questions, questions...

by Lofo



ASK YOUR FATHER BY ALL MEANS. BUT CHECK WITH A BOOK!

comment

CLARE BRADFORD

Australian Picture Books: The Anglo-Celtic Hegemony

THE AUSTRALIAN Multicultural Children's Literature Awards were established in 1991 and are open to authors who have submitted books to the Children's Book Council's annual awards. The final selection of award-winners is carried out by staff within the Office of Multicultural Affairs and awards are made in three categories, Junior, Senior and Picture Book.

Last year's press release from the Office of Multicultural Affairs explains that the aim of the awards is to "encourage themes that reflect Australia's cultural diversity, so that all Australian children will see themselves reflected in the books that they read."[1] The picture book section of the awards, according to the same statement, "mainly features stories and illustrations that, without comment, *naturally* (my emphasis) include Australian children from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds."

It is the word 'naturally' which is the key to some of the problems surrounding the Multicultural Awards. Certainly, picture books have the advantage of being able to incorporate reference to a multicultural context through illustrations alone, without necessarily referring in an explicit way to the cultural backgrounds of characters. But the emphasis on the 'natural' inclusion of "Australian children from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds" seems to imply that as long as characters in picture books *look* right, with a mix of cultural backgrounds signalled through the illustrations, they *are* right in multicultural terms. And there is also a worrying sense in which representation is seen as reality, so that the 'natural' inclusion of characters from diverse cultural backgrounds is seen to mirror in quite a direct and unproblematic way a 'natural' diversity within the Australian social context.

The language of the press release also signals a misapprehension about picture books, which, as I have said, are described as "naturally" and "without comment" including characters from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Books in the junior section are said to be "set against the background of cultural and ethnic differences existing in our society", while books for older readers are said to "dig deeper, examining the issues that underlie notions of difference, racism and bigotry, and how they affect growing up in Australia and forming concepts of identity." There is here an escalating hierarchy of seriousness and 'depth' which places picture books at the bottom, with its 'without comment' and 'natural' inclusion of Australian children from a wide range of backgrounds, and senior books at the top of the ladder, 'examining issues' concerned with multiculturalism.

This construction of picture books appears to place them in a kind of ideology-free haven by virtue of their association with young children, and to imply that picture books are necessarily disbarred from the kinds of explicit reference to complex issues available to the novel for older children. In fact, picture books are just as inescapably ideological as any other kind of discourse, and are often explicitly so.[2] Nor are they any longer associated solely with young children, as is clear if one scrutinises the recent picture books of author-illustrators such as Raymond Briggs, Anthony Browne and Chris Van Allsburg.

It is clear that within the scope of a picture book, with its usual length of around thirty-two pages, there is not sufficient space for large numbers of characters or of thematic strands, but a picture book such as *Do Not Go Around the Edges*, by Pat Torres and Daisy Utemorrah, demonstrates that picture books can accommodate considerable complexity of ideas and of narrative forms.

An examination of some of the award-winning picture books in the Multicultural Awards might well clarify what I see as shortcomings in the selection process. In 1991, the first year of the Multicultural Awards, Jeanette Rowe's *Scallywag* was awarded a Highly Commended prize. *Scallywag* tells of a cat which is fed by a number of neighbours, each unaware that the others regard the cat as their own. Louis, one of Scallywag's 'owners', seems to function in

Scallywag as the 'token ethnic', and is represented in stereotypical terms which focus on what Linda Hutcheon has called 'ethnically coded' symbols.[3]

The 'ethnically coded' symbols in *Scallywag* are the salami and cheese provided by Louis, the only character whose appearance demonstrates his love of food, even though the narrative is built on a sequence of meals. Louis is represented visually as a rotund, jolly Italian or possibly Greek character surrounded by tomato plants and vegetables, an unironic Con the Fruiterer; the name 'Louis' serves as a suitably 'ethnic' marker for a character depicted not as Italian or Greek or French but as an homogenised 'European' or 'Continental' foil for the other characters.

The way in which Louis and his neighbours are united around their concern for Scallywag also provides an example of the image of a unified Australia promoted in much of the publicity for the bicentennial celebrations in 1988; this kind of emphasis is, as Sneja Gunew notes, "usually seen as the necessary ground for a nationalist subject",[4] and offers the facile and unexamined image of "one big happy family" in which cultural diversity is subsumed. Presumably, *Scallywag* received a Highly Commended award because it 'naturally' includes Louis among its cast of characters, but its stereotyped representation of ethnicity should have eliminated this book from even the first selection of possible award-winners.

AN EVEN MORE disconcerting choice was the 1993 winner of the Picture Book section, Gillian Rubinstein and Terry Denton's *Mr Plunkett's Pool*. This book begins with the following text:

> Kim and Lee were twins. They lived in a street with Alex and his mother Despina and her mother, father, brothers, sisters and grandparents, old Mrs Castlemaine and the cats young Ted and Shirley and the babies and middle-aged John and Pauline and the dogs.

We have here a catalogue of the inhabitants of the street: the young, the middle-aged, the old; the cats and dogs; the twins and singletons; most of all, the Anglo-Celtic, the Chinese and the Greek. The illustrations add to this 'shopping-list' effect by presenting first Kim and Lee and then the entire population of the street.

There are two problems with this kind of representation. One is that the list of characters seems peripheral to the narrative, so that it appears as a self-consciously inclusive device which points to the text's 'correctness'. The other problem relates to the representation of the inhabitants of the street through a totalising discourse which emphasises uniformity at the expense of diversity.

But there are more serious problems in the ideological underpinning of *Mr Plunkett's Pool*. The central dynamic of the narrative focuses on the predicament of the children who live on the street and who, in the heat of the summer, have nowhere to swim (although the inner-suburban setting gives rise to questions about the availability of a municipal pool). The old mansion at the end of the street is bought and renovated by Mr Plunkett, an advertising man who "hired lots of people who sweltered for him" in order to install a swimming pool. But Mr Plunkett refuses to allow the children to swim in his pool, and they listen longingly to the splashing and laughter of Mr Plunkett and his friends.

Mr Plunkett is depicted through the text and through Terry Denton's exuberant illustrations as without redeeming features, being selfish and greedy and disliking children. When he is about to be fired from his advertising job, Kim and Lee save the day by demonstrating their invention, a Vintoopling Machine which catapults them into Mr Plunkett's pool. To Mr Plunkett, the two children look "just like a commercial", and indeed they become stars in his lemonade commercial, make a great deal of money and build their own pool (presumably hiring lots of people who swelter for them) in which "even Mr Plunkett" swims, "now and then".

The ideological basis of this book is that greed is good and the acquisition of material wealth the only desirable goal. In effect, Kim and Lee assume Mr Plunkett's entrepreneurial mantle and become commodities through their involvement in his television commercial. In the final double-spread, when everyone in the street is seen swimming in Kim and Lee's Australia-shaped pool, a gesture is made towards communication values, but all that can be said of the 'multicultural' values for which this book received the Multicultural Award is that they rely on an assimilationist model in which Kim and Lee, far from 'naturally' displaying cultural diversity, are subsumed into Mr Plunkett's brand of self-serving materialism.

IT SHOULD BE SAID, in defence of the Multicultural Awards, that two of their picture book prizes have been awarded to books which display a more thoughtful approach to cultural diversity than *Scallywag* and *Mr Plunkett's Pool*. In 1991 Elaine Sharpe and Jennifer Inkamala's *The Rainbow Serpent* won the main prize (and in this case my only question is about the inclusion of Aboriginal material within the context of multiculturalism, an issue too complex to discuss here), and in 1992 Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder's *Big Dog* was the prize-winning book.

Big Dog tells the story of a girl whose little sister, Jen, is fright-

ened of a dog which lives in the same street as the family. Together with her friend Diep, the girl and her little sister dress up in the lion head which the three are preparing for New Year celebrations, and in a broadly comic sequence they frighten their families and neighbours, finally discovering that the big dog is more interested in having its stomach rubbed than anything else. In this book, the children use the cultural symbol of the lion in a way which both alludes to its function in Chinese New Year celebrations, and also provides them with a psychological defence against fear. Plurality and difference are thus seen to offer the children strength and to link them in a common goal in which however their individual identities are not subsumed.

As I have said, the selection of *Scallywag* and *Mr Plunkett's Pool* as prizewinning picture books seems to suggest a measure of confusion about representation and about picture books. But the Multicultural Awards depend on the existence of a field of picture books from which the short list can be selected. And it is here, within the children's publishing industry, that a more serious problem exists.

Last year, in his speech at the presentation of the Multicultural Awards, Nick Bolkus said that of the more than 240 books submitted to the Children's Book Council, only about thirty included characters from other than English-speaking backgrounds. This is a pitifully small number when placed against the cultural mix of today's Australia, in which

> ... well over 20% of Australians were born in another country, of whom more than half came to Australia from non-English speaking countries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and South America. Combined with their Australian-born children, they constitute 40% of the population.[5]

A key to the problem of the non-representation of cultural diversity in Australian picture books is undoubtedly the conservatism of publishers' choices of writers and illustrators of picture books. As a rough guide, it is instructive to consider the list of authors and illustrators who have won the Children's Book Council's award for picture book. Between 1972, when multiculturalism became Australian government policy, and 1993, eighteen authors and illustrators won the award (several in more than one year). Of these eighteen, twelve were born in Australia, one of whom, Dick Roughsey, was Aboriginal.

At first glance, seven out of eighteen appears a healthy proportion of writers and illustrators not born in Australia. But three of the seven were born in England, one in Scotland, one in South Africa and one in New Zealand. Of the eighteen, only one, Junko Morimoto, comes from a non-English-speaking country. I suspect that if one were to conduct a much larger survey of authors and illustrators, the results would be similar. The solidly Anglo-Celtic origins of most authors and illustrators goes some way towards explaining why it is still rare to find Australian picture books positioned from within non-Anglo-Celtic cultures.

More generally, Australian publishers of picture books have usually employed a conservative and 'safe' approach to the selection of texts and illustrators. The processes of literary production involved in institutions such as publishing houses are intimately associated in post-colonial societies such as Australia with the development of a national literature. In a settler colony struggling to define itself as distinct from the imperial centre, it is especially difficult for groups at the margins of society to gain representation through publication. Thus, there are broad and pervasive reasons for the fact that few Australian picture books are produced by authors and illustrators from other than Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, and that most are written from within the subjectivity of mainstream culture.

The Multicultural Children's Book Awards are an important means of drawing attention to the fact that Australian children of various ethnic backgrounds ought to see themselves and their cultures represented in Australian books. If they do not, they will feel themselves to be invisible; for Anglo-Celtic children, this invisibility signals that people of non-Anglo-Celtic background are not important or valued within the culture. It is therefore important that the Multicultural Awards recognise picture books which avoid stereotyping and which genuinely celebrate cultural diversity.

ENDNOTES

1. Press Release, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 10 July, 1993.
2. For further discussion of ideology in fiction for children generally and in picture books in particular, see John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, Longman, Harlow, 1992.
3. *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 40.
4. 'Post Modern Tensions': Reading for (Multi) Cultural Difference', *Meanjin*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 1990, p. 26.
5. *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: Sharing Our Future*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1989.

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books

Interpreting the Isms

MAX TEICHMANN

Peter Beilharz: *Postmodern Socialism: Romanticism, City and States* (MUP, $19.95).

THIS IS ONE OF a series of monographs under the general rubric 'Interpretations', being brought out under the editorship of Ken Ruthven; these being "up to date introductions to recent theories and general practices in the humanities and social sciences." Beilharz sticks to his last, so we get a rapid tour through structuralism, poststructuralism, modernism and postmodernism, and the fifty-seven varieties of socialism. We also look at romanticism and the enlightenment, which are by no means recent phenomena, but presumably still relevant. And so, it appears, are Spengler, Ortega, Simmel, Carlyle and Tönnies. Weber and Durkheim appear and reappear along the way; Nietzsche and Freud are mentioned but not employed.

But one had to draw the line somewhere in a monograph of 116 pages of text, for coming out of all this are accounts of modernity and modernisation, the city and the state, globalisation, the overworld and the underworld. This last is not only the rich-poor divide in the global system, but the poor and marginalised in every western country and city. Their numbers are swelling as economic rationalism and globalisation have their way.

There is here a veritable feast of important names, and quotes from their works, which should help sociology students, and spur laymen to chase up the authors concerned. Thus Foucault appears frequently – and nowadays is being used for everything except mending stoves. But perhaps I speak too soon. I have but one caveat. Quoting others can mean that you don't have to say what *you* think, where *you* stand on the matter, and I thought that this happened from time to time.

Overall it is difficult to decide what Beilharz is recommending or what his final conclusions are. Perhaps, like Mr Jingle's luggage, they are coming by water. Certainly one should not look for clear answers to the question, "What is to be Done?" – rather what might one *say* about these social phenomena; which classificatory system fits best? As the series says, Interpretations. Of course the monograph is but the latest instalment in the author's search for some order, some meaning in the system, some hopes for the future, so he shouldn't be interrupted.

But Beilharz has time to be brutally frank. Socialism has had its last chance. The Enlightenment stream of modernity hoped to organise life rationally; we know now that this cannot be done and the image of a rational society is a chimera (p. 54). Where does that leave not merely socialism, but democracy?

Further, "What is called Post Modernity may well be a rediscovery of the idea that both romanticism and Enlightenment radically overestimate the plasticity of human behaviour and social institutions". Edmund Burke 'discovered' that, not to mention St Augustine. And one of the author's favourite authorities, Marxist Walter Benjamin, is quoted as saying that civilisation always rests on barbarism, and the best of cities and societies will always rest on underworlds.

This was Plato's argument for slavery – so it

seems as though the underworld denizens might just as well enjoy their station. This, I take it, is the function of the Tall Ships, Cain's Tabaret, Kennett's casino, and Murdoch's disinformation highway.

Beilharz runs through some interesting observations by Spengler and Simmel, in his large discussion of the city and its effect on our lives. In Spengler's modern city "in place of a type of true people, born and grown on the soil, there is a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical city dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, clever, unfruitful, deeply contemptuous of the country man." "Cities were too big, too close; in this setting people would turn into rats, or at best into ants." Ole!

Simmel writes of the new type introduced by modernity – 'The Stranger' – not those who come today and go tomorrow, but those who keep coming, and with whom we develop no relationship beyond perhaps the bare nod of recognition. The antithesis of community, which has just about gone, with the social bond. Money, and the calculative intellect govern all. Creativity and imagination become superfluous.

Socialism embraced the city from early on along with modernity, and Beilharz accepts the city, modernity and the money system. And yet he quotes Tönnies saying that traditionalism at least prescribes a morality, whereas modernity generates no values at all.

It's difficult to appraise the lasting value of the disquisitions on the various 'analytic tools', or terms of art which Beilharz produces. For one thing, as he says, each term – e.g. modernity, romanticism – can be variously defined, and often are. Some would call this shifting sand. It's interesting that he is now trawling among pre-World War I writers, still the standbys of our few educated conservatives. Is it because they write clearly, have problem-free definitions – because grounded on reality? Or their skepticism about the endless plasticity and ultimate goodness of human nature? Their warnings against social engineering based on wish fulfilment? Do their warnings about the effects of industrialisation, the city, globalisation, mass society, and materialism upon the human psyche, make a new kind of sense?

Beilharz seems to be shedding old banners in his search for answers, and the answer needn't be yet another banner, or a new formula.

Max Teichmann taught politics at Monash University. He has co-written or edited seven books on politics.

Electronic Arts

RAINER LINZ

Frank Popper: *Art of the Electronic Age* (Thames & Hudson, $75).

THIS IS A WELL-PRODUCED book, containing hundreds of colour photographs documenting the work of many well- and lesser-known artists working in electronic media. Apparently designed for use in undergraduate fine arts courses, the bulk of the material is neatly compartmentalised into four broad streams: Laser and Holographic Art, Video Art, Computer and Communication Art.

While an overview of thistype demands some sort of structure, the assumptions behind these (often unjustified) categorisations can belie the interdisciplinary nature of much electronic work and leaves one to speculate more about what has been left unsaid than what has been included.

A case in point: the work of two Australian artists receives coverage in this book – the holography of Paula Dawson and the performance work of Stelarc. While Dawson's work fits neatly into the chapter on laser and holographic art and warrants a number of photographs as well as descriptive text, we find a photo (captioned 'Robot performance for amplified body and third hand') but no textual reference to Stelarc in the chapter on computer art. Computer art? Stelarc's recent performance work exists squarely in the electronic realm, employing as it does a maze of interconnected technology interfaced to his own body. Yet his work is neither 'about' computers, nor do they occupy a central place in the artist's thinking. Small wonder when that the author, having seemingly categorised himself into a corner, could find little to say about (arguably) one of Australia's best-known living artists.

With a title like *Art of the Electronic Age*, I

would also have preferred to see some greater focus on the sonic arts. Pedantry aside, music is also undeniably 'art', with its own history of (increasingly multi-disciplinary) involvement in the electronic domain. To be fair, reference is made to a number of visually-based works such as Xenakis' 'Polytopes', the music/video interactions of the Vasulkas, and the operatic performances of Otto Piene and Paul Earls. Yet some mention, for example, of the theremin as a truly interactive (in the modern sense) performance tool would not have gone amiss, given its extra-musical applications in dance and so forth. The origins of electronic sound art seem to predate any like attempts in the plastic arts, and in my view would warrant some mention in the chapter titled 'The Roots of Electronic Art'.

This is a thought-provoking book and, notwithstanding the above reservations, the author has done well with the scope if not the depth of his coverage. He goesa long way towards one of his stated aims of "justifying the claim that [electronic art] is a recognisable global phenomenon". The book should find a welcome placeon the coffee tablesof the uninitiated as well as the library shelves of art institutions, though perhaps alongside other, more specialised, treatments of the subject.

Rainer Linz is the founding editor of N.M.A. magazine. His most recent book is Violin Music in the Age of Shopping, *co-edited with Jon Rose.*

Read This Backwards

ROSALEEN LOVE

Damien Broderick: *The Architecture of Babel. Discourses on Literature and Science* (MUP, $19.95).

THERE IS A SECRET to reading this book. Read it backwards. Start with chapter 10, 'Synthesis', then pick whatever title next takes your fancy. Go with your own particular interests, whether they be for Rhetoric, Reduction, Models, Creative Noise, or, for those with a taste for the recondite, Formulae.

Why start with chapter 10? Here Broderick tackles the topic of science popularisation, where scientists do their best to get their ideas across, but frequently fail. He quotes Richard Feynman: "The reason you might think you do not understand what I am telling you is, while I am describing *how* Nature works, you won't understand *why* Nature works that way. But you see, nobody understands that." Chapter 10 helps focus attention on what Broderick means by the 'science and literature' of his title. More often than not it is 'literature and science popularisation' he is talking about. And although in the introduction he claims that within science he is principally focusing on physics, there is, I suspect, more commentary on biology and social science than physics in these chapters. This is of course entirely appropriate for the time, which has seen the decline of physics and the rise of the biological and social sciences in the academy.

Who is the audience for science popularisation? Take the way the audience for the old BBC Third Programme radio talks was conceptualised as the 'intelligent sixth-former'. This seems an eminently reasonable way to conceptualise also the public for science popularisation. Of course the intelligent eighteen-year-old, prepared to read anything, wanting to know it all, has today more resources than print to draw on, with TV and CD-ROMs conveying new kinds of awareness of the natural and technological worlds. Consideration of the electronic media lies outside the scope of Broderick's book, which is a pity in some ways.

He deals with two broad constructions of science: that popularised in scientists' own writing, and 'science as discourse', that scrutinised by literary theorists, with this notion of the discursive construction of knowledge also embracing social construction. Who is the audience for the 'discourses of science and literature' of Broderick's title? I would suggest that this is a more specialised audience than the putative intelligent eighteen-year-old. Broderick's book is for advanced tertiary students and their teachers, those who know their aporia from their phallogocentric practices. It is a book for the academy, and as such might disappoint the numerous fans of Broderick's fiction. Surprisingly, Broderick draws little on his extensive knowledge of science as popularised in science fiction, knowledge he possesses from the distinct vantage point of both novelist and scholar.

Perhaps he is holding this in reserve for *Reading by Silverfish*, his next book on the literature and science theme from Routledge, U.K.

Broderick takes his starting point from C.P. Snow and his famous 1959 Rede Lecture, *The Two Cultures* (reissued 1993 by Cambridge University Press with an excellent introduction by Stefan Collini). Snow argued that there are two main ways of knowing the world: one the domain of natural scientists, the other the domain of literary intellectuals; and these two cultures are separate and hostile to each other. Snow catapulted to international fame because he so clearly articulated the cultural anxiety of his (and our) times; how can knowledge best work for us, not against us? The social ends of knowledge, Snow argued, are the alleviation of poverty and hunger as well as ignorance. In so far as academic disciplines can contribute towards solving the problems of the world, then they should do so, and transcend their parochial disputes.

Broderick begins by asserting, against Snow, "an unseverable link between the two cultures". He argues for this link on the basis of theories of the text, theories which have entered the academy and changed it out of recognition since Snow's time. Each chapter analyses particular instances of links between systems of discourse in literature and science. Broderick concludes his book with the "rapprochement that serious enquiry into the sciences and humanities must finally discover itself: in the underdetermination of all theory, evaded by the defiantly or unknown uninscribable, and its overdetermination by a multitude of factors beyond computable assay; in the discourses of a worldly brain dedicated to the understanding of others like itself, and yet dwelling in a world rebuilt by its own ingenuity". Snow, of course, would then have Broderick take the next step: use this insight to tackle problems of global justice; think through how best to cope in practice in governing the world as knowledge outstrips social control on its use.

But Broderick stays with the text, within words. "There is no outside-the-text ... there is no inside-the-text." Perhaps the 'two cultures' issue was never as clear cut as Snow imagined, and Broderick is more modest and more realistic in his aspirations.

Yet in other ways this is not a modest book. It tackles large questions of knowledge and illuminates even if it sometimes mystifies. Broderick has a tendency to deconstruct a difficult concept such as undecidability by appeal to something still more difficult, such as Godel's metamathematical program. He delights in texts which expose the rhetorical play in the most abstruse research papers. His pleasure is infectious. He wants it all, science, literature and everything; yearns for the distant beloved, omniscience.

As I read this book, I kept finding myself saying, "Yes, but ..." with the "but ..." trailing off as I, the reader, began to nurture the gloomy suspicion that I might not be clever enough to cope. Or perhaps I should not take it quite so personally. It may be in the order of things which Broderick so astutely describes; the limitations of human mind, language and thought may prove such as to make it impossible to encapsulate the world as given, science, literature and everything, in a mere 150 pages. Broderick has made a marvellous start, and I look forward to reading his second book on the topic.

Rosaleen Love is a leading exponent of New Australian Science Fiction.

A Mis-en-Scene in the Feu-Follet Theatre in Chemin Rouge

SUBHASH JAIRETH

Peter Carey: *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (UQP, $29.95).

Inside the Feu Follet (pronounced Foo Follay) Theatre-Sirkus in Chemin Rouge. The circus is shaped like a slice of a pie with its stage at the apex. It's midnight of a cold November in the year 426 EC or 1994 AD. On the stage Tristan Smith (TS) in his Bruder Mouse suit is sitting on a swing. Beside him on the floor on a garbage can sits SJ.

SJ: *(Taking a bite of an apple pie.)* Tristan, why does your story have so many footnotes?

TS: *(Swinging leisurely.)* Because I have no feet. They are clubbed and carried on legs which are twisted like old pipe cleaners. When I walk I use my ankles as soles.

SJ: *(Still busy eating his pie.)* I am asking about your story, not about you.

TS: *(Smiling.)* Do you think I am outside my story? We are what stories make us. We make ourselves in and through stories. Stories complement us as we move from one plot to another mapping ourselves as corporeal selves *(Noting that SJ wanted to speak).* Don't ask me about my lips or mouth. I know I only have a hole, and my voice is like a bird without wings which is unable to stir ripples in the air. That is why the famous scribe has lent me his voice and his masks ...

SJ: *(Interrupting TS.)* And not only masks but three fathers; a general excess of passion as you yourself put it.

TS: *(Keeps on smiling.)* What about your own father? Do you know who your father was? Aren't we all born to accept someone as a father? My three fathers are three plots of my narrative, three possible origins, three probabilities, three narrative devices through which I can keep the story going. But let us leave my fathers and talk about my masks. You think they were masking my monstrosity, my ugliness. To a certain extent they were, but they were also hiding my horridness from my own eyes, and empowering me over others. By hiding my face from other persons I was hiding it from my own self.

SJ: *(Again interrupting TS's potentially long monologue.)* You sound like Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher who was overwhelmed by his own discourse of dialogism ...

TS: Didn't he love Dostoevski? He was right when he said that our external appearance is not given to us directly but is experienced as a *bricolage* of images seen in and through the eyes of other persons. You always need the other to look at your own self. If the other does not oblige, you start inventing him or her, turning into some sort of a self-caller, an imposter, and the tension seeps into your narrative.

SJ: *(As if satisfied with himself.)* I can feel that tension in your story especially when you describe your ugliness in the voice of a third person narrator. You seem to eject yourself from your body and start addressing it like a third person. Isn't that right?

TS: *(Slightly irritated.)* You think you are smart. But if you are so clever, tell me why did I change Jacqui – the female spy of the DoS, into Jacques – the male nurse? *(Seeing SJ confused.)* Did she only wish to sneak into Voorstand? I don't believe it. Was she in love with me; or did she fall in love with me because I was miserable and needed help? She is my most confusing invention, much more complex than Voorstand or Efica with their maps, languages and glossaries.

SJ: *(Realising that he did not have any answer.)* Listen Tristan, you are very pretentious, in fact your long and sometimes self-indulgent monologue is boring. You think you are clever with your footnotes, maps, poems, tales and languages. Your verbal acrobatics such as dab instead of dad, VIA instead of CIA, and Sirkus instead of circus are useless. You know very well that after only a few pages perhaps even the most stupid of your readers would have guessed that Voorstand is nothing but the United States of America and that Efica is not Africa but some sort of Australia. Don't tell me that you were following the postmodernist mode of storytelling, and that your aim was to foreground the fictional nature of the fiction and reality.

TS: *(Touched by his outburst TS slides from the swing and tumbles towards SJ and starts speaking softly.)* I did not know that you were capable of playing the role of that famous Marxist literary critic of Voorstand so well. I was thinking you had changed and were mastering Foucauldian genealogies and Derridian *differance.* Were you acting then or are you acting now? Why don't you agree my friend that we always act, play roles, exploiting the age-old theatrical convention on the suspension of disbelief. You know that all protagonists of my narratives are actors. They change costumes as well as names: Felicity

Smutts becomes Felicity Smith and Tristan becomes Tristan Actor-Manager. Every event of their lives is measured in terms of the plays enacted in the theatre. Don't you remember how as a five-day-old child I played my first role in *Macbeth* with my mother who was playing the witch? Let me remind you of the Russian philosopher you are so fond of. Didn't he say that all real and fictional narratives are structured with the help of chronotopes? In my narrative the theatre-circus/Sirkus is such a chronotope. This is a time-space in which my biographical narrative takes on flesh and is infused with blood. *(TS comes close to SJ and whispers something in his ears, but because of the hidden electronic gadgets in the suit his voice can be heard.)* While I was talking to you my friend, the breasts of my (fe)male nurse Jacques were dangling in front of me. You know my porpoise is stiff and hurting. Please call my nurse. I want to have a bath.

(SJ comes down from the stage and goes to the door and calls.)

Subhash Jaireth has published poems, prose and book reviews. He is finishing a thesis on contemporary Russian drama and theatre.

Live Fragments from the Poetry War

KEVIN BROPHY

John Mateer: *Burning Swans* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, $16.95).
Geoff Page: *Human Interest* (William Heinemann Australia, $14.95).
David Reiter: *The Cave after Saltwater Tide* (Penguin, $16.95).
Peter Nicholson: *Such Sweet Thunder* (Wellington Lane Press, $19.95).

IN 1934 ANAIS NIN visited Marcel Duchamp. He showed her a book he had written. It was contained in a box – scraps of drawings, old papers, notes torn from a notebook, odds and ends, half finished comments, a word by itself on a piece of paper. Nin and Henry Miller were enthusiastic over this idea of a casual book. Duchamp called it a symbol of the times, Nin called it "a way to capture a description of life and character without killing it, a way to capture the living moments." Duchamp was serious enough about his prank/symbol to have it meticulously copied so that there were several identical versions of it. From Nin through to Kerouac, Burroughs, Plath, Moorhouse and Garner modern writers have worked in the tensions between casualness and artifice to bring not just truth, but life itself into the box of art. These tensions remain acute for poets, those obsessive followers and inventors of form. If the fragment is the symbol of our times, how can we make a poem of it.

John Mateer's first book, *Burning Swans*, offers one way into the poem as live fragment. His poems adopt the tone of simply reporting experiences. Mateer comes closer than most to that Wordsworthian aim of writing as people talk:

> In a dingy stairwell I was told
> that the army had certified him
> and that he always lived in the present.
> "If he watched a movie he would
> never know what was going on;
> he couldn't remember." This building
> had once been on fire. When we'd
> climbed these steps water slurred
> their edges. The fire was in the basement.
> ('A Friend's Story')

Violence seems to force its way into many poems which stand as nonplussed witnesses:

> What do you say to your best friend
> after he hits his girlfriend. And
> they laugh. And he hits her again
> ('Their Fight')

The passive, detached tone of these poems gives them their distinctiveness and provides their method. It allows the poetry to swing from the surreality of violence to the absurdity of the mundane:

> After eating a slice of my cousin's
> wedding cake
> I ate a cream-filled Easter egg, rolled a
> tight

ball of the foil and threw that to the
corner
of the room. I drank a can of beer,
returned to what
I was reading, conscious that something
somewhere
was being postponed.
('For Those Who Remember and Forget')

Like Ken Bolton, Les Wicks and Pamela Brown, Mateer gives us fragments we wouldn't normally see as material for poetry, so the writing, like Duchamps's collected scraps, becomes both document and art object. More and more it seems to me that poems are the places where we do see how people live from moment to moment, what it's really like to be alive now. Here we have the docu-poem.

GEOFF PAGE IS a veteran poet, already writing beyond his first *Collected Poems* (1991). He has a feel for the well-made poem. Sure there are fragments, and the poems mostly use the ordinary words of people, though not in the way people talk, not like Mateer anyway. Page's poems can use metre and alliteration, and can even rhyme. The basically iambic movement of 'What Is It In These Folk Museums?' for example, has a music which is alien to Mateer:

The hardened memories under glass?
The ache of dust across the bottles?
The yellowness of local news
stiffened in its acid?
The rusty white of christening gowns?
The copperplate with curlicue?

There is modern and there is modern. Page is playful in his poetry, though in a technical rather than iconoclastic way. 'Not For The Card' plays with the caesura as a kind of dying moment, mid line:

Nine weeks in another town ...
Each day you feel you're getting thinner
And grow eccentric with your change,
Invite yourself each night to dinner

Page turns to violence, too, in the title poem, 'Human Interest'. The violence, this time, is found in the news rather than the personal imagination:

So much the news
does not contain.
A woman from one's own home town

on bail for walling up a husband ...
62 and 63
and such dexterity with bricks.

That iambic lilt measuring out the lines makes of horror something neatly mild and amusing. Is it satire? Is it a failure of imagination? Is it callousness? Is it poetry? Why did so many of the moderns throw away metre when they threw away inflated poetic vocabulary? I like what Geoff Page is doing here, because its calmness works to bring us to an act as sadly deliberate as the poem itself:

The fridge is open and switched off,
an old one that requires defrosting

and has no snap release.
She would have taken out the shelves;
they'd be there draining on the board

as now she walks across the lino
and with a short ungainliness
climbs inside and grabs her knees;

pulls the darkness shut behind her.

David Reiter is a winner of the Queensland Premier's Poetry Award. His smart-looking Penguin book, *The Cave after Saltwater Tide* is one of the series edited by Judith Rodriguez. This is an impressive collection. Like Geoff Page, Reiter has a sense of form. 'Washing Her Back' tells a small story which expands into the story of all our longings and then returns to the small incident we've witnessed. Each image is placed in the poem because it belongs there and nowhere else. Reiter's work brings to mind Eliot's claim that, after all, it doesn't matter whether we use rhyme or not, metre or free verse, because the point is to write effective, memorable poetry regardless of stylistic choices.

Let's get back to violence. Reiter finds it too, and plays with it in a more showy way than Page, a more cerebral way than Mateer:

The first one hit the windscreen
just above my forehead and burst
like a ripe metaphor. As it pitched

down the bitumen chased by a confetti
of feathers it still seemed alive enough
to screech its indignation

Reiter writes elegant, tough, long-lined poems that always bear more than one reading.

Peter Nicholson's *Such Sweet Thunder* is his second collection and comes with a lengthy introduction. "Poetry has to be useful to people, though not necessarily in an obvious way", he writes. Who would argue with that? Rhythmic vitality is important to him, he says. He wants something like Whitman's barbaric yawp in preference to the doubts and hesitations of Beckett's last poems.

Nicholson bemoans Stephen Hawking's scientific account of existence in his introduction:

A brief history of time:
Mother chained to sink,
Father sees a shrink,
Son is keen on coke.
Daughter cannot cook.
Daughter cannot cook!
Make her read this book –
Kitchen Etiquette.
We start with serviettes ...

I don't get it. Is this yawp or yelp? If this absurd doggerel is a return to classical values in poetry, then give me Beckett's silence.

Kevin Brophy is the author of three novels and a collection of poetry.

A Just World For All

ROSEMARY KERR

Susan Blackburn: *Practical Visionaries: A Study of Community Aid Abroad* (MUP, $19.95).

THIS BOOK IS NOT just called *Practical Visionaries*; it is the work of a practical visionary. Set against the context of the times it becomes a practical and comprehensive reflection of Australia's response to world social injustice. No attempt has been made to either labour the difficult patches in growth or to gloss over them. This includes the conflict between the volunteers and paid workers that frequently afflicts aid agencies.

The continuance of the vision of a just world for all, which saw the initial practical response at the grass roots level in Father Tucker's 'Food for All' campaign in 1953, is evident throughout. This campaign was the beginning of Community Aid Abroad and its structure of volunteer groups which makes the organisation unique. The study contains information which shows the growth of other Australian aid agencies and CAA's connection with them as Australians responded to the need for development and aid in an unequal world.

The writer's own practical vision is especially evident in the concluding chapter. Blackburn summarises the lessons of the past and predicts a possible scenario for the future as CAA moves forward after its amalgamation with Freedom from Hunger. The book has multiple values. Apart from the obvious value to the organisation it is a reflective record of changes in attitude towards development as they have evolved. A catalogue of failures as well as successes set against time and place allows us to have access to a valuable learning resource. The book has an appendix and is fully indexed.

Rosemary Kerr has been working on educational programs in Nepal and Bangladesh.

The Feel of History

LEWIS T. CHADDERTON

Ann Moyal: *A Bright and Savage Land* (Penguin, $16.95).

THIS IS AN INTERESTING but curious little book. I read it twice. First chapter by chapter on successive evenings, and then in one big Sunday afternoon bite. And to be honest it left me hungry rather than satisfied.

The flavour, to my opinion, is more that of a partly specialised history of Australia, than of our broad scientific heritage. The chapter headings tell Ann Moyal's story – the Great South Land, Under a Virgin Sky, Entrepreneurs and Explorers, Navigators and Ships' Naturalists, Science, Societies and The People. And more chapters on rocks, the weather, the sky, evolution, colonial science and universities, and experimenters and inventors. There is a laudable chapter on The Feminine Touch which was, until recently, only a background, supportive but vital artistic touch.

It is a nice book! It left me feeling somewhat empty, however, and slightly depressed. As a no-doubt accurate historical record it must certainly have intrinsic value, and there are occasional splashes of the colour of colonial scientific life. But I am so tired of reading of Joseph Banks and the long litany of botanical excursions and the endless visits to our shores of still more indefatigable yet squabbling collectors. The first half of the book is almost entirely botanical and biological – with a wee bit of anthropology. Occasional anecdotes ease the reader's journey slightly. But if our colonial ancestors had the kind of inquiring scientific minds they demonstrate today, where is their account of the cantilevered and streamlined bounding motion of the kangaroo, the unique engineering mechanics of the woomera, and the remarkable aerodynamics of the boomerang?

One very good thing about *A Bright and Savage Land* is that it ends with a fine set of endnotes, a select bibliography, and a good index. I found that the names of people in Australasian science and technology were at least brought more to life by the narrative. Names such as Audubon, Angas, Bass, Blackwood, Bragg, Brisbane, Cobb, Daintree, Darwin, Flinders, Franklin, Huxley – and so on. There are also some nice quotations. For example, Lieutenant-Governor Franklin of Van Diemen's Land (1837) wrote:

> We are endeavouring to set up a small scientific society ... if it should tend to excite an interest and disseminate anything like a taste for pursuits which have no tendency to excite the inflammatory propensities of our oddly constituted community, it will have a moral advantage of which we are greatly in want.

Neatly put, wouldn't you say? And Charles Gould – "your Govt. is illiberal in the extreme in not furnishing you with the means ... the work is left to the zeal & love of Science of an individual to accomplish at his own expense."

I recall my first-hand experience of the demonstration held by scientists before the New Museum of Science & Technology at its official opening by the Japanese Prime Minister, less than ten years ago. Evidently we now face the selfsame dilemma that we did 150 years ago. Historian Moyal details the remarkably similar propensity of the forbears of our present dignitaries to associate only with scientists in the limelight, and with gigantic exhibitions. Sydney's great exhibition of 1879 attracted more than a million people, and the Centennial of 1988 in Melbourne a minimum of two million visitors. Of course this slavish aping of all things British – the Great Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 – did little at either global extreme to press home the fact that the path from applied science to technology and to commence inevitably begins with fundamental research. It did, however, have the legacy of the '1851 Exhibition Scholarships' to the major English universities from which many Australians have benefited.

Like all authors Moyal writes certain passages particularly fluidly, doubtless on topics she is particularly devoted to and rather well versed in. I liked the account of early studies on atmospheric sciences by Leichardt in 1852, and also extracts from correspondence with the German professor Heinrich Dove. The argument turned on whether our hot north-westerly winds were masses of air which had been heated and had arisen over the tropical part of New Holland, and which were surely a clear pointer to the existence of a desert in the continental heartland. In the event Leichardt, the man on the spot, was proved to be right.

The treatment of the voyage of the *Beagle* and the impact of Darwin's ideas on Australian thinking is also well done. Contemporary Australian thinkers naturally rejected evolutionary ideas – their lives were governed by religious beliefs and a special fervour which had its roots in the harsh lives of convicts, settlers, scientists, governors and plenipotentiaries alike. Perhaps it was that same kind of life, and the need to look it starkly in the face, which brought Australians

around more quickly to the new ideas as to the origin of species.

There is no real discussion of Australia's more recent science in this book. Nothing on modern vital botany – gene-shearing, for example – nothing much on radio-astronomy, bio-engineering, environmental sciences, advances in manufacturing robotics, lasers in surgery, and so on. And there is nothing on the negative aspects of today – particularly those having their origin in antipathetic governments concerned so much with today, and not at all with Australia's future. Perhaps that could be the case for a new, fully-researched book, because Ann Moyal can write very well.

Lewis T. Chadderton is Regius Professor of Physics, University of Copenhagen, Denmark and Visiting Fellow, Research School of Physical Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra.

A Good Read with a Good Red

LES HARROP

Sara Dowse: *Sapphires* (Penguin, $14.95).

THIS IS A longish novel with a sizeable cast of characters, and a big geographic and historical range. It is the product of many hours of concentrated effort by an intelligent author. Its main strength is its style – which however is variable. The prologue explains to us, through the mouth of the narrator's grandmother, that female knowledge is a forgotten but precious gem. Thence the sapphires of the title. The immediately following pages pick up the family narrative, and a reviewer on the strength of them might declare Dowse the equal of any current Australian novelist. Alas, this early estimate is not sustainable. There *are* brilliant passages in the book – enough to convince us that with a more fixed self-scrutiny, Dowse could produce a remarkable work. This is not that work, however. Its unfinishedness arises in part from its flawed construction; and in part from a more personal lack which is connected with the author's taste – what used to be called 'culture'.

To take the more tangible element – construction – first. Dowse's plan calls for a number of key characters to run in relay, chapter by chapter, down through the generations (for this is the fictionalised history of the author and her recent forebears). The concept is a neat one, but its execution is bungled. The handovers between characters are on occasion untidy: the baton is tossed away, or a character hangs onto it and takes off for another lap.

So the breaks between chapters, and between the episodes within chapters, are too often jagged; nor is the pacing within episodes always happy. Here is one source of the book's lack of purchase: the narrative line gets frayed and broken, and readers may tire of it well before the end. The same genial fuzziness is a feature not only of the book's ambience – its emotion – but of its implied, matrilineal argument. The words are often notable, but in themselves they are not enough. There are too many words; and a lack of clear space between.

A different reason for the lack of focus is the author's casualness about genre. A single tale seeks to hold her disparate matter together, yet the mode of narration shifts arbitrarily – without warning – from chronicle to memoir to travelogue to fiction proper; and each shift demands complicated shifts from the reader. The result is a roughness which the author seems unaware of.

Construction is a definite matter. Deficiencies of taste are harder to comment on. Sara Dowse is by now an experienced writer, and well able, I feel sure, to defend her attitudes and how she presents them. I will only say that for my part I find her glib, a little cosy. Sentimentality appears not to worry her – about history (the Diaspora), about her characters or general experience. She writes without rigour, despite her book's trumpeting her zest for the intellectual. She asks us to soak in her mental jacuzzi, when a run and brisk shower might have made us more thoughty.

It's hard to have confidence in a writer who gives us a Parisienne talking in seventh-grade French – "Australie, c'est une belle pays", or who takes us through a poker game played with five jacks. These slips would not be worth a mention were it not that *Sapphires* rather preens itself on what it knows. It associates information with career success. Thus we're assured that a character who "knew everything and everyone ... was on first name terms with Linda

Ronstadt and Jerry Brown" (phew!). This same estimable character orders, from her San Francisco pad, not any old flagon of grog, but "the best Napa Valley wines". And in case we don't register enough excitement about this, we see her next minute gulping "a vintage red from a family vineyard near Yountville", while her sister (continuity?) sips at a "glass of Mt Vedeer cabernet". Those we admire tend to know their wines well. A reviewer could worry that the writer thinks this is civilisation.

Dowse's surface views are benign. She will please the lifestyle reader – especially those among us who are now middle-aged and have soft-feminist assumptions. Her novel will be valued by migrants who are thinking of recording their personal histories. She describes herself in the book as "a sober-eyed eagle swooping on the world". I expect she is being ironic. She eyes but she does not swoop; and she is not always sober. She belongs to that class of comfortable liberals who re-fight our past revolutions for us, over and over in front of the television. She's at her best in vignettes of the Midwest at the turn of the century: in the engraving (for instance) that she gives of her grandmother dying. The more up-to-date she gets, the more she's a victim of placid vulgarity.

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Lost

JOHN JENKINS

Antoni Jach: *The Weekly Card Game* (McPhee Gribble, $14.95).
Liam Davison: *The White Woman* (UQP, $14.95).

JACH'S HIGHLY ORIGINAL "tragicomic novel" is in part, a social satire of life in inner-city Melbourne – a droll compendium of the attitudes, interests and anxieties of a group of middle-class fatalists approaching middle age (and various crises) in the mid-1990s. In tone, the writing is finely balanced between sympathetic humour and a sort of bruised yet gleeful melancholy bordering on despair. The antecedents in Australian writing are easy to trace: there are reminders of Lawson in Jach's temperament and outlook, and of Frank Moorehouse in the sly and insinuating irony and ever-present 'smile behind the style'. Jach has also absorbed various 'highs' and 'posts' of international modernism, and sometimes feels like a cross between Luis Bunuel (particularly in films like *Exterminating Angel*) and a less-surreal Raymond Queneau. His literary urbanity seems at one with a readiness to experiment, evidenced by Jach's indifference to plot and relentless use of third-person narration throughout.

In one sense, nothing much happens in the book. In another, everything does: because the interest lies in the telling, rather than the tale, with shifts in the narrative and consequences of the characters being the sort of people they are – as they spin a closely patterned fabric of ritual and repetition around themselves, inhabiting habitual places and gestures like sleepwalkers, yet living in fear of suddenly waking up to find their destinies derailed and desires denied.

For fifteen years four friends have played a weekly card game at Bernard's flat. Although he is married, Bernard has carefully preserved the flat's student-like ambience, to remind him of better days. Bernard is a successful desktop publisher bored with his work – it has taken over his life, and he often feels his thoughts and emotions are no longer his own. He cherishes the escape into reminiscence the game offers. Otherwise, Bernard spends much of his time hungover, or in bouts of mental dissociation, poring over any piece of printed matter he sees, particularly labels on cans and other products. Timboy is a lawyer, has never married and still has his looks. The other players feel he has "possibilities", from which Timboy himself increasingly feels detached. He lives alone in a near-empty flat, and often seeks distraction overseas – travelling at whim just to feel that he is "still moving".

Jolly Roger makes the third hand. Once "full of promise" he is now morose and weighed down by family worries. The fourth player is Harry, minor celebrity and director of a boutique advertising firm. To Harry, stories of his own success are pure fiction. "He heard so many

bits of gossip and rumour about himself that he sometimes had trouble piecing a view of himself back together again ... The Harry talked about wasn't the Harry he knew, or the one the card-players knew." *They* simply know Harry as their sad friend who lives alone – because his wife left him and his children no longer need him.

Also present is Dolores, Bernard's wife. She hates the card game, and its weekly intrusion into her life. She wishes the men would grow up and engage in intelligent conversation rather than the coded, giggling banter that substitutes for it at the card table. Dolores' – and her women friends' – opinions of men-in-general, elaborated under the heading of "the hopelessness of men", are scathing and hilarious, and usually aired at her weekly discussion group, "for intelligent conversation of a structured kind", which has met every Monday night for four years.

The women taking part include Diana, a procrastinator who poses as a socialist film-maker; Christine, a stressed-out ex public servant turned gardener who is looking for the right man, but would "settle for the wrong man"; and Susannah, a highly articulate and competitive barrister. The group, Dolores' answer to the card game, has also become habitual and ritualised, and enforces a high-minded and positive tone at all times, in contrast to the morose resignation of the card group.

Fast approaching middle age, the four card-players have begun to reflect upon their lives, and agree that the world is a stupid, unpredictable and dangerous place. They may have blundered through, but for how much longer? Their scrap-book lives paper over the total absence of any organic order or manifest harmony. Anything – anything bad – could happen at any time. They accept that life's mundane details are glued in place by habit, convention, (good?) luck and sheer willpower.

But what if everything became unstuck? What if they got sick, or one day simply decided to throw in their hands out of sheer boredom or despair? Their only comfort is the round of pleasant routines and habits that keep chance, which is "malevolent", at bay. So they strive ever harder to impose order onto chaos. Insistently, relentlessly, they have shored up their lives with rituals and schedules, toiling securely on a treadmill of their own making.

The novel is divided into chapters which describe the week's routines. There is the weekly Sunday lunch at Delores' parents, in which travel tales are *always* told over bottles of wine. (These tales are superb miniatures in their own right, and something of a bonus for the reader.) There is Bernard and Dolores' weekly shopping and cleaning, always done the same way (and always done *badly* by Bernard), and their weekly family night – highly regimented at the insistence of their young daughter, Georgia. There is Dolores' weekly social night out, always spent with the same old school friends, all of whom have outlived their friendship; as well as her (highly structured) 'free' night of a swim and massage – that looks like becoming a chore. (Bernard's own free night causes him stress. He's forgotten what 'free' could possibly mean.)

Bernard also takes part in a weekly squash game, with three other (non-cardplaying) friends, where the aim is to 'earn' two hours of drinking afterwards, followed by bad food and abusive service at their 'favourite' pizza restaurant. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. All the characters, men and women, seem stuck in some kind of rut – at work, at home, or even in their heads, where thoughts pile up in predictable ways that leave them feeling exhausted.

This sounds pretty grim, but grimness is not the main or final impression. True, it is a sad book. But also very funny. The characters are drawn so sympathetically, and with such warmth and humour, that it is neither bleak nor depressing. *The Weekly Card Game* faces up to the tragic aspects of life in the '90s – not glossing them over with hollow maxims from self-help books exhorting us all to produce, think positive and *achieve* in a complex, anxiety-ridden world run by economic rationalists, in which modern technology merely insulates people from each other and even micro-communities of middle-class school friends are under advanced stress-siege.

On the way to the end game (to mix metaphors) Jach plays a trump card of his own: an hilarious chapter entitled 'The Personal Mottoes of The Cardplayers', in which the players decide to display the sayings that sum up their lives – each written in copperplate and elaborately mounted. (Timboy's is *Life is an oyster and you*

better eat fast before it goes off.) Dolores helps with the penwork, believing the mottoes will act as warnings to all women – who will have the sense, once they see the fatuous signs, to stay away from such "totally hopeless" men.

Towards the middle of the novel it is clear that something has to give, as the cardplayers all head for some sort of crisis. Fortunately for them, there is an alternative to breakdown – the possibility of change. And change they eventually, reluctantly, do. Dolores takes a week off from her job as a copywriter to 'babysit' a flu-struck Timboy, filling his Spartan flat with furniture, kitchen gadgets and other things he doesn't want. Not long after this, Timboy is fired from his job – for being *weird*. Recognising that he was literally dying on his feet, he immediately feels relieved and, ominously, takes a chess set to the next card game. Timboy may even settle overseas, or write a book. Meanwhile, Dolores drops out of her weekly discussion group, not-so-quietly suggesting that the cardplayers might think about abandoning their card game – or else! And Bernard, who has been acting strange, for two weeks changes places with the painter in the studio next door to his office – half entertaining the fantasy of switching lives, and even wives!

The final chapter, as if summoning the ghost of Sandy Stone, is called 'Just Another Pleasant Evening'. Everything has changed, or perhaps nothing has. The four play chess now, but might return to cards. Further change might be in the offing, or things might slip back to 'normal'. We don't know, and the cardplayers don't know. It all depends on how life – or fate, if you like – deals the next hand.

This is bittersweet comic writing of some accomplishment.

THE HISTORY OF European settlement's impact upon Australia's Aboriginal population remains one of our great unwritten books. It would necessarily be a jigsaw of fragments, because some tribal and language groups have disappeared, while others survive as remnants. Evidence would be incomplete and patchy and there may be few still able to tell the tale – while official accounts have already been skewed in the telling. A single, final record is perhaps impossible, while a *written* history may itself be inappropriate; at best a dubious, cross-cultural artefact.

This 'history' must remain imaginary, a point to keep in mind while reading Liam Davison's third novel, *The White Woman*, which tells of the search for a lost white woman in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria in the middle of last century.

Davison uses a somewhat histrionic device to frame his narrative. Forty years after the event, an un-named son – who is on a quest of his own, to discover the truth about his father – questions one of the survivors of the white woman expedition, who tells him a rambling and bitterly ironic tale. The son's quest mirrors the narrator's, but both – which seek to impose acceptable meanings upon the *dark* frontier – are inadequate, much resisted by the way events actually unfold. The white woman – who seems to stand for Christian decency and European civilisation – is a mirage, while the truth of the father remains deeply unpalatable.

"White Woman Expedition Departs, Great Hopes Held for Her Imminent Rescue" and "The Happy Band of Bold Adventurers: brave men willing to risk their lives without fee or reward ...", said the headlines, as Melbourne newspapers told the story in rousing romantic terms, appealing to the popular imagination of the time. Davison's 'fiction' is no less objective, perhaps, in its understanding of the white woman as a collective projection:

> weighed down ... with all the hopes and fears of our still-young colony ... They made crusaders out of us ... We were characters, you see, waiting for the plot to unfold before us. We watched the land slide past in the distance – the blank wall of bush behind the line of surf, the rivers opening into it – and wondered what signs we would find to follow.

What the band of 'crusaders' do discover is grisly evidence of massacres carried out against the Gippsland Lakes tribes by both settlers and self-styled 'police', including dragooned 'black police', and largely swept under the carpet by local officials. And the myth of the white woman, of which there are many local variants,

has in part served to justify the slaughter. Indeed, official newspaper accounts have told of unhappy white women, captured, tortured and worse by the heathen savages. If she did not exist, it might be necessary to invent her: "Death descending as a blessing upon this poor woman, who has undergone a trial far more harrowing and terrible than even death's worse moments." Furthermore, the son's lost father was a ring-leader among those who clubbed and shot the blacks and piled up their skulls beside Lake King.

The white woman expedition is led by the skeptical and sophisticated de Villiers, who has little faith in the 'quest', yet continually delays bringing it to any conclusion, because he knows that his image as a hero of colonial decency grows ever more vivid in the popular imagination for as long as it continues. His party includes the paranoiac black-hater McLeod, the newspaperman Cavenagh, the amateur scientist Hartnett, religious idealist Dingle, and the self-confident and practical Warman, who would like to assert his superior technology and values upon natives and nature alike.

In contrast to the reporter's ability to embroider and distort events for eager readers back in Melbourne, which makes Cavenagh grudgingly respected by local officials – who are otherwise suspicious of these itinerant 'do-gooders' – Harnett's detached objectivity leaves him oddly powerless: he is only able to measure and record things, but never change them.

Interestingly, the narrator himself seems untroubled by notions of objective 'truth'. Plainly obsessed by the white woman, for him she is the (dis-)embodiment of all his sexual and romantic longing, for his need to make sense out of an exhausting, random, zig-zagging search through lakes, swamps and grasslands that unfold with a logic that is deeply un-European.

> There were great trees pushed out into the lake at the river's mouth, upended and snagged on banks of silt, with their tangled roots looming above us as we passed. Enormous things they were. Who would have thought the water could have moved them? Not one but ten or twelve of them with their great trunks shafting down through the water, draped with weeds as if they were the masts of ships dredged up from the bottom of some inland sea and spat out by the Tambo on Lake King.

As the search continues, the false clues, found at the end of ever-ramifying false trails, steadily accumulate until the white woman assumes an odd, composite identity: she was taken by blacks and left a huge heart-shaped cipher scratched into the floor of the bush. She is the owner of abandoned shoes and trinkets. She is a ship-wrecked eldest daughter of a failed merchant. She is the initials 'H. B.' and the word 'Brit' carved into a sapling. She is the story of an abandoned cloak, of a red-haired figure glimpsed for a second by troopers. She is a native grass dilly bag knitted in a European pattern. She is an excuse for massacre, the very soul of the frontier, and haunts both stories obligingly told by tortured natives and official ones recounted by the great McMillan himself – the discoverer of Gippsland.

There are even counter stories: of a pioneer's native wife who was made to cover herself with white clay, carry a bible and wear a filthy bonnet "for decency's sake". The white woman is alive because everyone has a story about her. She is the mysterious wife of Bunjil-ee-nee, king of all the Gippsland blackfellas, and may even have born him royal sons. Finally, and perhaps most appropriately, she is the figurehead of some wrecked ship, carried up from the sands of a deserted beach.

In the end, the search for her may not be fruitless. She is a polymorphous trope of white dreaming and desire, revealing those points the dream connects with, and fails to connect with, the new land.

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New Collections

PHILIP SALOM

Philip Hammial: *With One Skin Less* (Hale & Iremonger, $12.95).
John Tranter: *At the Florida* (UQP Poetry, $16.95).
Philip Hodgins: *Dispossessed* (Angus & Robertson, $14.95).
Sudesh Mishra: *Memoirs of a Reluctant Traveller* (CRNLE/Wakefield Press, $14.95).
Dane Thwaites: *South China* (Hale & Iremonger, $12.95).
Leith Morton: *The Flower Ornament* (Island Press, $12.95).

THE FIRST HALF of Philip Hammial's collection *With One Skin Less* contains many short prose-poems made in very surrealist manner. Arranged two or three to a page, just a few lines each, they are sudden suggestions, they flash only briefly, like fish in a school, before one sees/looks for the next, then the next – which becomes in time almost like reading a book of anecdotes or jokes. The images are struck with the kind of unexpectedness and quirkiness common to surrealist invention; in the best of these there is the feeling of parable, or aphorism without overt statement.

They develop a cumulative presence (momentum seems too strong a word for it). This 'man' while no one man in particular, becomes a persona very like Michael Leunig's cartoon figure: whimsical, vulnerable and given to dreams and delusions, wandering quietly into folly. They are charming, and odd, but if they do not offend, nor do they jolt or challenge. They lack the disruptions, the odd breakage and shudder of more developed, more intense surrealism. And it follows that some are just too easy, even boring.

The second half of the book features poems which are far more discursive, sharp and even belligerent, as if the poet turned from lounge-whimsy to front-bar rave. These are very much more energetic and confronting poems. There is sting in these and a breathlessness I like.

Dane Thwaites' *South China* is a blend of the discursive and the openly imagistic – image giving physical substance and setting to many of the poems, but voice winning out, saying much and saying it in both a lyrical and a tetchy monologue to the presumed self and reader and generating a strong sense of personality along the way. He is ironic, humorously and therefore agreeably self-deprecating, and companionable.

These poems seem very close to the poet himself. They work personally and forcefully as they parade politics, opinions, moods, and responses to a lived-in world of poetry and reflection on the one hand, and book-production, selling, and the politics of conversation. And, as with earlier work by Thwaites, there is the presence of China and Chinese poetry here (almost the sense of identity cross-over, being among the Chinese poets) with a political shift though – specifically, a continual reference to the Chinese invasion and destruction of Tibet and a sustained protest against it.

The problem is, one senses this is very much Thwaites' own 'China', a head-space filled with philosophers and poets and there is in his tone something both judgemental and thin, not quite convincing. Most of the poems are short – complete within the page – and are distinctive for their clarity and verbal fluency but the voice becomes, despite the energy and disillusion-with-fight, very one-minded (even, dare I say it, inconsequential), finally to the point of feeling a trace dogmatic, a feeling that is no doubt increased by the stylistic sameness of the poems and a somewhat unvaried line of discussion.

Brevity and sameness are coupled in a quite different way in *Memoirs of a Reluctant Traveller.* Sudesh Mishra is a Fijian poet born to an Indian family and his ten-line rhyming poems also read personally, recounting as they do the poet's trip through India. They detail incidents of the trip, picking up both observation of India and writing of the self, especially the clash between expectation and discovery. They are clever, colourful, urbane. Despite the formal frame, they are anecdotal and easily forgotten. Mishra is a good poet, but these hardly seem to warrant a whole book.

The Flower Ornament is yet another book set firmly overseas in reference, but whereas Mishra's poems 'happen' in India and Thwaites' happen in the Blue Mountains but are sounding the bamboo, Leith Morton's poems, like Hammial's, move in the language space of voice and sudden unexpected connections, both in poems

as constructs and in the references (worn throughout like a kimono) to Japan. Morton's style is lyrical and yet when it does jolt, does so with greater power and intensity than the overtly surrealist creations Hammial has made; they, too, read with a kind of breathlessness.

If Thwaites is punctuated, much of Morton rolls on without. His poems are more lustily imaginative than either of theirs, the reference shifts are greater, while for all the lyrical feel these poems are not simple lyrics. There is a strongly cerebral mind behind them, giving firm order and argument to the flow of sensory impression; and beating away insistently within the poems are many sado-masochistic encounters. "My back was broken in two but I loved the pain. Hurt me! I lashed out with a broken bottle and cut off his penis. Shredded his face and stuck it up my arse." While this is surreal there is much that is literal throughout the poems. There is violence in this love, blood in this passion.

Several pieces are more narrative in manner. These (e.g. 'The Izumo Stories') also seem to rise directly from the Japanese, surfacing like carp, the mythic waters dripping from them. But so, too, the blood.

PHILIP HODGINS' latest poems concentrate into a kind of laconic rural romance. He describes the physical functions and tasks of a farming life in poems which are matter-of-fact enough but lively and especially visual, with images and sparkling similes galore. This is extremely fluent poetry, and Hodgins' skill and light touch are undenied – especially satisfying when the vitality contains echoes and shadows, but uninteresting if you don't need to be shown how to bale hay or milk cows.

In this book he's at it again, albeit with a few differences. *Dispossessed* is a verse novella which follows a farming family briefly through the last stages of bankruptcy. It is written in blank verse of unrelenting iambic pentameter. This ponderous stress creation means lines are filled out and fall into the set pattern with a strange rhythmic gormlessness which can clearly work against any other gains. It makes bland and very plain phrases sound over-significant. This combined with Hodgins' desire to over-describe can become simplistic to the point of sounding silly: the sunlight is "bright enough/to kill off any challenge from the pair/ of tubes clamped parallel at ceiling height,/ the right one slightly stronger than the left." Ah, fluorescents ...

It is narrated in third-person throughout, with Len and Liz and their daughter Amanda given at least one turn each in main focus. Len's insensitive and acerbic father features frequently but only in general scenes. There is not a lot of story as such, more a matter of accumulating impressions and deftly placed detail as the characters interact. This certainly achieves a subtle effect by the end of the book, but there are some worrying faults. The characters are seen in crisp detail without gaining that level of conviction a realist style such as this should achieve. They remain one-dimensional. It is all so decidedly undramatic; in fact, the main activity in the novella is *seeing*. This, like the rhythm, is relentless, and I began to feel *everything* that happened on the physical plane would be turned arbitrarily but quite predictably into a dose of visuals.

And yet this visual 'rendering' is paradoxical: brilliant as it can be overall, it also has the effect of rendering everything equal. There is a loss of scale. It skims the surface and comes away with a veneer, vivid but thin all the same. It results in a strange standardising, and this includes the structuring of the perceptions of the characters, which are also almost entirely visual, with none of the interior monologues we all have to bear of ourselves. So the main character of the book remains the cosy, seeing narrator. Deft, talented but not convincing.

With *At the Florida* we have John Tranter at his virtuoso best. Greatly varied, at times quite moving, technically disciplined, but also uneven. The poems display much of the highly mannered styles he has made his own: the 'Tranter' feel is everywhere, but Tranter is not. His poems are like well-controlled scatter-shot – the disruptions of surface, the shocks and shifts of tone, the jolting metaphors and at all times a strong guiding intelligence which challenges easy reading, easy style. These are not poems of answers or reassurance, but of questions.

For me, some of the poems, such as 'The Moths', create a greater narrative intensity of character than Hodgins' much longer novella, and more emotional identification, too. Given Tranter's deliberately detached stance and use of

undercutting technique, this may sound rather surprising. But welcome.

There are many longish poems, three to six pages of full-on charge. They struck me quite differently. There are poems I didn't like, such as 'Opus dei,' which becomes plain boring, 'Decalomania' with its he/she/I seems willed (an occupational hazard with Tranter's highly determined style), is obscure and short of effect. But then 'Dark Harvest', which follows straight after it, I thought was wonderful.

There are also shorter poems and especially, a tightly made sequence of haibun, a seventeenth-century Japanese form of poetry and prose mixed, altered or adapted in this case to twenty-line poems with a paragraph of prose following. I think these seem very suited to the poet, allowing hugely free-ranging references within a space which is both poem and narrative – albeit briefly and often (teasingly) as illusion – without the trickiness and obscurity getting overdone.

If this collection shows more empathy than one is used to from Tranter, then there is humour everywhere, as usual. Or, more accurately, wit. Tranter interrogates the reader and the literal subject/s in an energetic and disciplined display of poetry. I have found his references to 'girls' and a kind of constant teenage menagerie of Janes and Debbies quite irritating from book to book, a mannerism at its worst, and for all the parade of silliness and weakness the set-up feels cheap, the dice too loaded in the speaker's favour, and a sneer seems to get through. Thankfully, there is much less of this in his previous book *Under Berlin* and, now, in *Under the Florida.*

Philip Salom is a widely published poet based in W.A.

Strong, Brave and Obnoxious

HANK NELSON

Peter Elphick and Michael Smith: *Odd Man Out: The Story of the Singapore Traitor* (Hodder Headline Australia, $39.95).

THIS IS A BOOK of tenacious but sporadic research, and many attempted leaps across gaps of credibility.

The authors pursue the trail of the British officer spy in Malaya, the man who generated rumours, but has just the briefest mention in published histories. They present convincing evidence that the spy was Patrick Heenan who was born out of wedlock in New Zealand in 1910, spent his early childhood in Burma, and had his secondary schooling in England. Having failed to gain entry to Sandhurst or Woolwich, he qualified for a commission by part-time soldiering, and was appointed a Second-Lieutenant in the Indian Army. As an officer in an Indian unit he was posted to Malaya, and was with the Air Liaison Section in northeast Malaya when the Japanese made their first assault on the nearby coast. Within days of the Japanese landing he was arrested, court martialled, and probably killed by the British just two days before the surrender of Singapore.

Heenan, strongly built, an excellent boxer and brave under fire in India, was a careless predator among women, obnoxious to his fellow officers, and disliked by those who served under him. He had been to Japan, had contacts with disaffected Indian soldiers, and he seems to have had a secret radio transmitter and unauthorised documents.

Elphick and Smith have added greatly to the little previously known about the officer spy, destroyed some myths, and gone beyond what their evidence allows. We do not know what information Heenan gave to the Japanese, and we do not know whether the Japanese believed any of it, or acted on it. Their suggestion that Heenan "certainly played a substantial part in the Allied defeat" is unproven. Much of their commentary on Heenan's motives is speculative: the specific case of Heenan may not fit the generalities about boys and men of his background and experience.

Two obvious points are worth stressing. First, the Japanese in Malaya did not need Heenan. They had other information, they were superior in the air and on the sea, and they could bring a more powerful force to the critical points in the land battles. Secondly, the Japanese would have wanted a more efficient and discreet spy than Heenan – one who did not have an army driver take him to what his accusers thought was contact with a fellow spy, and who was not so often in pursuit of sexual pleasure.

Throughout the text there are many judgements of the Australian forces in Malaya and Singapore. Nearly all are to the disadvantage of the Australians, and nearly all are wrong. Some can be dealt with quickly. There is the assertion that "as early as March 1940, Japanese agents had identified the behaviour of the Australian soldiers as an Allied weakness ... 'They made themselves unpopular with the local inhabitants by drunkenness, rows ...'." But the Australians had not yet arrived. Even the small advance group for the 22nd Brigade of the 8th Division did not reach Singapore until early 1941.

The story is told of a group of Australian "deserters" who "stormed" the gangway of the *Empire Star*, shooting and killing a British officer in their determination to get away. In a footnote there is an assertion that one in five of the deserters was shot in Java. It is true that there were about 160 unauthorised Australians on the *Empire Star*, but they did not shoot anyone, and no British officer died. They were held in Java, but released after a couple of days. None was shot – at least not by their own side.

Many of the Australians were marched on board by their officers, some scrambled on and were prepared to use force to stay although they did not do so, and others had made the rational decision that it was better for themselves and their nation to get out of the shambles of Singapore and fight another day. There is no evidence that Elphick and Smith have seen the reports by the captain of the *Empire Star* and by the intelligence officer who met the ship in Fremantle. Both reports are held in the Australian Archives. A more careful use of authoritative contemporary reports rather than hearsay would have avoided some of the mistakes of detail.

The most disturbing statements about Australians come from the recently released report by General Sir Archibald Wavell and the comments attached to it. One attachment, taken from a letter intercepted by the censor, said:

> thousands upon thousands [of Australians] just came pouring into Singapore. Before they went into action – and mark you they were the last to be put in – they were seen lying all over the streets of Singapore dead drunk. It really was a disgusting performance. I have never seen men such absolute cowards ...

There are several ways to answer these claims. One is to point out the obvious errors. In the battle for Singapore the Australians took the brunt of the initial Japanese assault: it is just untrue that they were "last to be put in". Another is to examine the conclusions of those who have had access to much evidence. In the British official history Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby says that late in the battle for Singapore the Japanese again attacked the Australians, "found them too hard a nut to crack", shifted south, and broke through. That battle was after the Australians were supposed to have withdrawn in disarray, been drunk, etc.

A further defence is to look at the casualties. Australians made up about fifteen per cent of the Allied force, and they suffered thirty per cent of the casualties. The obvious conclusion is that they did more than their share of the fighting and dying. Finally it might be thought worthwhile examining what the Australians who were there said about their own performance – and that of their allies. Elphick and Smith, having considered none of the strong counter evidence, shift from jumbled hearsay to an assumption that the case against the Australians is established.

The puzzle, not investigated here, is why Wavell thought he had to defend his own role by condemning the Australians, why he bolstered his report with such careless evidence, and why some Englishmen were so enthusiastic in their exaggeration of what they said were Australian failings.

The uneven research and the uneven application of scepticism detract from a strong narrative and the exploration of interesting byways.

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Sexual Vivacity & Niminy-piminy Poetry

PAM BROWN

Deb Westbury: *Our Houses are Full of Smoke* (Angus & Robertson, $14.95).
Kate Llewellyn: *Crosshatched* (Angus & Robertson, $14.95).

Peta Spear: *My Sweet Sex* (Five Islands Press, $7.50).
Beth Spencer: *Things in a Glass Box* (Five Islands Press, $7.50).
Jemal Sharah: *Path Of Ghosts* (William Heinemann, $14.95).

OUR HOUSES ARE FULL OF SMOKE is a personable kind of book. Uncluttered, familiar, recognisably Australian, this poetry represents daily life – work, love, family, friendship, travel – measured by commentary on world events. Just as conversations in the workplace, kitchen or cafe might ramble naturally from everyday trivia into more serious realms, so does the range of these poems.

Deb Westbury is from Wollongong. The Illawarra coast, a mining and steelworks area, is basic to her unsentimental tone: "looking for you/in traffic,/from windows;/finding/the same woman/collecting cans at the beach,/the usual flashers behind the dunes".

And a summer morning, driving to the city: "insect movement drones/along the road/fog settles in its hollows/dew on the heath-covered plain//birds stealthy with silence and speed/bisect these roadways/as they follow a receding moon/towards dawn/the city's outline appears through the smog/like a ruined Avalon/burning".

Deb Westbury sometimes over-reaches when she attempts big issues like capital punishment. 'Singing, free' which seems to be about a botched hanging, is unconvincing: "he waited on death row/his neck like steel cables/in a column of muscle/would not break".

In 'Touching Ground' she tends towards a kind of unthinking moralism: "we cruise the art galleries/where paintings by desert artists/sell for thousands". Why not? Non-Aboriginal painters' works sell for thousands. In spite of her occasional small acceptance of a standard response, Deb Westbury's willingness to write culturally and politically-grounded poetry is one of her strengths.

This is only her second collection and if her American travel poems – "On the balcony of my first exile/I'm waiting,/listening" – are read as an indicator then she is lining up as another consolidating poet.

Angus & Robertson should have put more care into the production of Deb Westbury's book – with less stinginess, a blank page could have separated the final poem (an emotional poem about loss) from the 'Index of First Lines' (which looks, at first, like another poem) allowing the reader some reflective space.

In contrast, A&R have over-produced the latest collection of niminy-piminy poetry by Kate Llewellyn. Distracting 'tasteful' drawings of eggs resting on pages of Greek text which in turn rest on a beige towel, or, possibly, a brunch coat, smother each poem's title.

Crosshatched begins with comfortable-minded, family-value-centred relationship poems followed by a series of potted musings on historical and mythical figures (Cleopatra, Joan of Arc) reduced to vernacular caricatures without a hint of true ironic intention.

The cover blurb likens this poetry to that of Gwen Harwood and Judith Wright – this is an extremely inflated claim. There is not a skerrick of either of those poets' wit, intense commitment to ideals or high-density intellect present in Kate Llewellyn's book. It's more like the poetry of Dorothy Drain – popular in the late 1950s for her horticultural homilies published in the *Women's Weekly*. Although the publisher's blurb so thoroughly misrepresents this light verse, on the front cover Marion Halligan is perfectly noncommittal – "She celebrates simplicity but also complexity". Another great gift idea for Mother's Day.

PETA SPEAR'S sexual vivacities in her frankly-titled book *My Sweet Sex* are utterly female, sometimes droll, sometimes romantic – and self-consciously so. There are love/sex poems set in France – where else? "Remember Provence?//Ah, Provence!/The wine was becoming less elegant/but no matter/you and I, we racked up the bottles in our room/la la/every time we moved we clinked/together like a song".

This poetry runs on instinct with a kind of uncooked energy which really cooks. Peta Spear's territory is unpretentious erotica – and yet her acuity is never overwhelmed by the heightened verve of the sexy rush. This extract is from a poem called 'Kissy Kiss': "Kiss me/put your hand on my leg/unwrap my body/from this white ghost fog/called a dress."

My Sweet Sex is one of the booklets in the Five Islands Press New Poets Program, as is *Things in a Glass Box*. Beth Spencer's condensed narra-

tive elides the categories of poetry and prose – she uses poetics to nudge fiction over an edge. Episodic, surreal ("I want to pick up the lobster phone/and call you"), tender and tough, these poems traverse suburbs studded with the encoded artefacts or 'things' of family, popular culture, memory and desire.

There are several long, witty, conversational poems like 'Pandora on the Eve of Destruction' – a critique of life with CNN news and popular television written at the time of the U.S. war against Iraq: "The house surrounds us like a set of sheets/(continuous coverage)/we make love on the floor/(young, bold, beautiful & restless)//In the night sky, far off, cameras follow a little light/endlessly, obsessively, their talk fills the airwaves/(click click)//I reach out and touch the fine tuning./Wheel of Fortune spins into the living room/tongues of fire from each spoke,/& questions answered weeks ago/(a delay button for everything)."

Beth Spencer's remarkably cool, understated prose won her *The Age* Short Story Award. 'The Mummy's Foot' is a young girl's experience of events around her brother's near-fatal car accident. The fragmented narrative is interspersed with quotations from Mildred Place's *Wrapped for Eternity*, describing a slightly gory dissection of an ancient Egyptian corpse. It's set in 1969 – the family is in a strange town to attend to the hospitalised boy and they fill time with a visit to the museum: " ... The room is dark with lit tables. Long gold boxes with/smooth serious carved faces and black-rimmed eyes. The/Egyptians, says a sign, were 'great sensualists and/lovers'. Under glass on the table is an unwrapped mummy's/foot, withered and yellow. Note the painted toenails: says/the sign."

Things in a Glass Box is a complex, considered and fine first collection filled with mercurial imagery underlined by aptly-timed perky jokes: "We had a friend/who wrote letters/to Althusser,/drives a tram now."

Jemal Sharah's tiny book *Path of Ghosts* is a collection typical of poetry written by someone very young: "There is a sparrow frozen on the lawn,/in the snow that lasted through the night/and the cold dawn/that killed it. Now sunlight/drops about the corpse a pall of white.//So ends an unimportant life, and brief./It spent some seasons lightly on the earth,/then doubtless with relief/found one lungful of breath/was all that stood between itself and death."

While not all of these poems are as formal, the same kind of youthful philosophical imputation flows confidently throughout the book, written when the poet was between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four. Jemal Sharah takes a kind of universal aim. Her use of formal lyricism (not to be mistaken for New Formalism, the language-based American movement) creates an oddly old-fashioned or traditional style that seems over-influenced by institutional English poetry. A poem about the tragic death of her father and brother is written in rhyming couplets which totally diffuse any emotional impact. It becomes lullaby-like and seems far too private and not a good enough poem to have published. Whilst it displays precocity, the tenor of *Path of Ghosts* is of an unknowing vulnerability. Perhaps Jemal Sharah should have waited for a larger first collection which would have allowed her to omit many of the weaker poems and to have arrived at the end of the twentieth century rather than at its beginning.

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ISSN 0030-7416