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Truth in Fiction

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Overland

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\$8



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NINETTE DUTTON
One Perfect Day



I SHALL WRITE THIS in the red ink I bought at the newsagent's with my pocket money a few days ago. One of my treasures is a carved ivory pen, the old fashioned kind, which I found in the back of a drawer and kept for myself. But my most precious possession is a pair of fine white china candlesticks. They are over a hundred years old and are decorated with a pattern of turquoise ribbon, which curls around the base and is tied with a bow half-way up the shaft. Tucked into the bow is a pink moss rose. I keep them on the white marble mantelpiece above my bedroom fireplace. The marble is so icy cold that, if I touch it with my bare underarm, it burns like dry ice.

The fireplace can still be used. If I am sick in bed for a day in winter I have a fire alight and I lie and doze and watch the flames for hours. At night the last light from the coals makes a little glow in the room. When my sister comes home from school she toasts crumpets in front of it and tells me all the news.

She brings her pet rat to see me. Some people dislike rats, they find them repulsive, but she adores hers and talks to him all the time, though she knows he only lives in the house on sufferance. He knows all her secrets.

Sometimes I stand the candlesticks on my bedside table. One candle makes enough light to read by, but two are better, softer than my regular reading lamp. I may use bright blue candles, but generally I buy boxes of ordinary white ones. They look so clean and neat before they are lit.

All this has happened since they gave me a room to myself. Before this I shared with my sister. It seems They are always arranging my life for my own good. They worry about me a

great deal, I know. I hear Them talking as They go to bed while I am lying half asleep. I cannot make out the words but you can always catch your own name. My father's voice is soft, but gradually my mother begins to speak more loudly in the tone of resentful anxiety which makes me harden myself inside, as a protection, because I know that when she uses that note she may say something terrible. Gradually their voices cease and only I am left awake.

Falling asleep in a silent house is part of growing up. When I was a little girl it was luxury to go to sleep with the sound of voices in other rooms. Sometimes I would be wakened in the middle of the night by loud laughter. I hated that; there was something unnatural about it, dreadfully disturbing, and I was too afraid to cry out. Or a lonely dog would bark with a repetitive desperation as if suffering the most intense misery and that beat on my brain like flashes of dull blue light.

My sister slept beside me, but nothing seemed to wake her, which was strange. We did everything simultaneously. She is my twin and we are so alike that we even dream the same dreams at times. There is a house which we visit in these dreams, an old stone place, rather like our own, but with an extra room where we spend hours. We know all the furnishings well and exactly where everything is placed so that we can describe it to each other. We often talk about our house and I look forward to falling asleep so that I can go there again.

For a long time they dressed us alike, but no one could tell us apart so they began to dress us differently. We used to change clothes to confuse everyone and even our parents were occasionally taken in.

We have particularly long waving hair, honey coloured, which makes the trick easier. Girls at school used to pull it sometimes and we wailed about that, but later we were proud of our hair. We inherited this from our mother, who is vain about her looks, and wears her red hair long round her shoulders like a girl.

After a time I began walking in my sleep and that did disturb my sister so I was given a room alone. I am not sure that this pleases me. Everything is changing. Home used to be a simple predictable place. Now there is something I do not understand hidden in the air and I am afraid of it. Sometimes I am wildly happy here, though on certain days I can scarcely force my feet to cover the distance from the school bus stop to our front gate, I feel such apprehension about what tensions and threats I will find inside the house when I open the front door. On others I am perfectly sure that everything will go well. There are afternoons when I fall into a desperate sadness, over which I have no control. At these times I am incapable of doing anything at all except sitting and gazing out the window of my room at the distant hills. This annoys my family. I should be outside in the fresh air. They reproach me for laziness and everyone discusses my Moods.

Even my sister is beginning to be irritated. "You and your Moods. You frighten me the way you go on. I told my rat that you might do anything."

Once she would have understood me without a word. Now we quarrel. We almost fought each other with our fists over the candlesticks. I took them with me when I moved out of our room and she wanted them back again, but I absolutely refused, they were so precious to me. Finally she suggested a solution. We should have one each, but that was all wrong. Whoever heard of a pair of candlesticks being separated?

I lost my temper completely. My temper causes me great trouble. However hard I try to keep it down, I sometimes feel it boiling up inside me and, just as surely as if I were about to be sick, I feel it come bursting up. Then it pours out in the most disgusting way, all over everyone. I loathe myself for it. The trouble is that when you are sick people are helpful and

comforting, but when you lose your temper they hate you. Yet that is the moment when you need consoling more than ever. My temper is growing worse and this is making me more solitary. I am the frightened one, not my sister.

SOMETIMES I WONDER if I am a complete person. Perhaps I am only half a person. I think I need to make some great gesture to prove my existence as a whole being. My furies shake and exhaust me so badly that I have no strength to speak or move when they are over and I sometimes fall on my bed and sleep for hours. When I wake from such a sleep I feel extraordinarily light and happy.

On the day of our quarrel my sister brought her rat to me as an atonement. When I woke up he was sitting on the corner of my pillow, preening his whiskers. I understood at once and I carried him carefully to her room and put him in his box, which she keeps hidden behind a curtain. She is afraid that They might take him away from her.

She came into the room as I was doing so and we caught each other's eyes. Suddenly we burst into fits of the giggles. We flung ourselves on the bed, rolling about until we had no breath left and we had giggled and ached our way to silence.

There was a reason for my anger over the candlesticks. It had to do with our dream of the old house. You see they stood on the mantelpiece of an unused bedroom there. No one wanted them, so I decided to bring them home with me. My sister was in the room at the time and agreed that we should do so, but it was I who actually carried them away. So I was entitled to keep them. That was a long time ago. She says she has forgotten it. She never remembers the time when they were not placed on either end of our dressing-table. How strange that she should say that. She is moving further away from me every day.

But today. Today I was totally and completely happy. Winter is past its worst and the garden was full of sun and flower-scents and a thrush called. I took some scissors to pick flowers and stood by the almond tree which grows against our fence. Of all the blossom I think that is the

most perfect. I love its delicate form, its pale, pale pinks and the touch of green where the sepals support the petals. I lay on my back under the tree, looking through the blossoms to the blue sky, the pink made deeper by the blue contrast.

Suddenly I heard the sound of the thrush nearby, noisily hopping through the dry leaves on the ground. I turned my head slightly to see him better, so round and grey and fluffy that he might have been clothed in fur instead of feathers. He came up to me boldly and, pausing, turned his head from side to side, his round eye here and his round eye there, like a precious gem gleaming from velvet. Then he hopped away, uttering a little chuckle before he flew into a rose bush and gave his long trill to me. I was overcome with joy; warm right through.

Holding my flowers, I went into the house, my feelings all open to the world. The instant I stepped inside I could tell that there was menace whirling in the air, but it was too late to armour myself against it. I had no time.

My sister was standing straight and white as a wax candle, with her hands clasped together as though praying. In them she held her rat,

dead. She made no sound.

My mother was poised in front of her, her beautiful face bloated in a way I cannot bear, her hair flying in every direction.

She gasped. "There! That's the end of the beastly creature."

My anger was too great to be held down. My sister's hurt was my own. We were at one again. I flew across the room, my scissors still in my hand, scattering my flowers on the floor. I grabbed my mother fiercely, clutching her hair and yanking it as hard as I could. Jerking her head back I hacked at the red mass with my scissors while she fought and screamed.

That was hours ago. The house is utterly silent now.

There are only the remains of my mother's hair black in my grate and a few singed red strands still left. She has gone to her room, my sister to hers.

The sun has set and I have lit the candles. An electric light would be too strong. The filthy stench of burning hair is thick around me.

It is very cold and I should make a new fire. That would clear the air. I wish my sister would come soon.



John McLaren writes: As we go to press, there has been no announcement either of the changes to be made in the Literature Board's magazine's policy, to take effect from 1997, or of the grants for 1996. We live in hope that things may change for the better, in fear that we may continue to be threatened with death by a thousand cuts. That this death is continually postponed is due to contributors to the Floating Fund, who regularly refute the suggestion that the literary and artistic worlds in Australia lack generosity. We thank the following donors:

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ROBERT ADAMSON and JUNO GEMES

The Language of the Oysters

*And the ghost in old trousers moves a leg
to kick the wind in the face
used to be an oyster farmer before wearing thin
on the river's life.*

*... Caught in the flood once more
and left in Flat Rock – Bywater –
the place of changing names.
Max Williams, 1975*

*sacrificed to their eating time & space up like fish
Fish-people their own UFO's the end of Pisces
could be the end of species Nature herself
left to each flying object passing in a mucus
surrounding the earth*

Charles Olson, 1965



Under the Shell

Charles Olson sat back in his oyster-shed,
working the words, “mostly in a great
sweat of being, seeking to bind in speed” –

looked at his sheaf of pages, each word
an oyster, culled from the fattening grounds
of talk. They were nurtured from day one,

from the spat-fields to their shucking,
words, oysters plump with life. On Mooney Creek
the men stalk the tides for corruption.

They spend nights in tin shacks
that open at dawn onto our great brown river.
On the right tide they ride out

into the light. In their punts, battered slabs
of aluminium with hundred-horse Yamahas on the stern
hammering tightly away, padded by hi tech.

Sucking mud into the cooling systems
the motors leave a jet of hot piss in their wakes.
These power-heads indicate

the quality of the morning's hum.
The new boys don't wake from dreams
where clinkers crack, where mud sucks them under,

their grandfather's hands fumbling
accurately, loosening the knots. Back
at the bunker the hessian sacks are packed ready

and the shells grow into sliding white foothills.
A freezing mist clenches your fingers,
the brown stream now cold as fire:

plunge in and wash away last night's grog.
In the middle morning, stinging and you wanting
the week to fold away till payday.

After the Flood

In '56 the flood came down, a dirty orange
slid over the tidal brown. It came with
the king tides of Christmas. The surface

buckled. They opened Warragamba Dam.
Shags trailed loops of bloated wallaby gut.
Pumpkins bobbed loose from their vines.

The leases were six foot under.
Some racks drifted free, little black barges
sailing under the bridges. A week

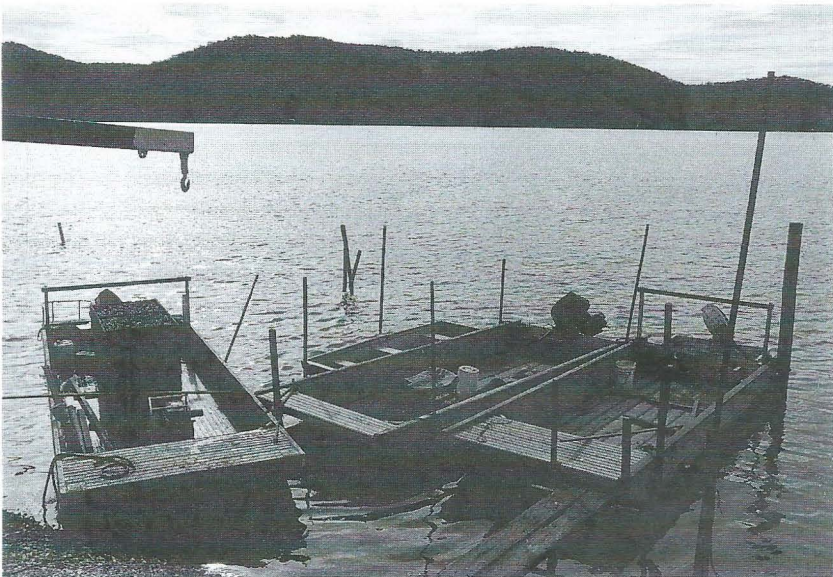
On the bank spur-winged plovers stroll in pairs,
their beak-wattle chipped by frost,
each day they ping at the crack of sun.

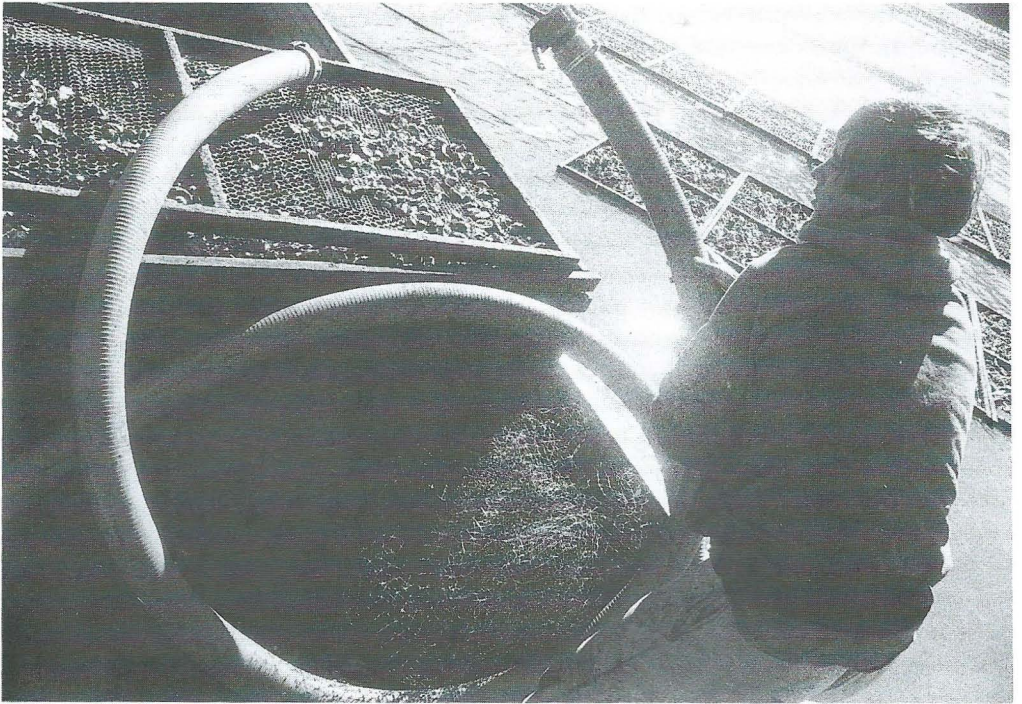
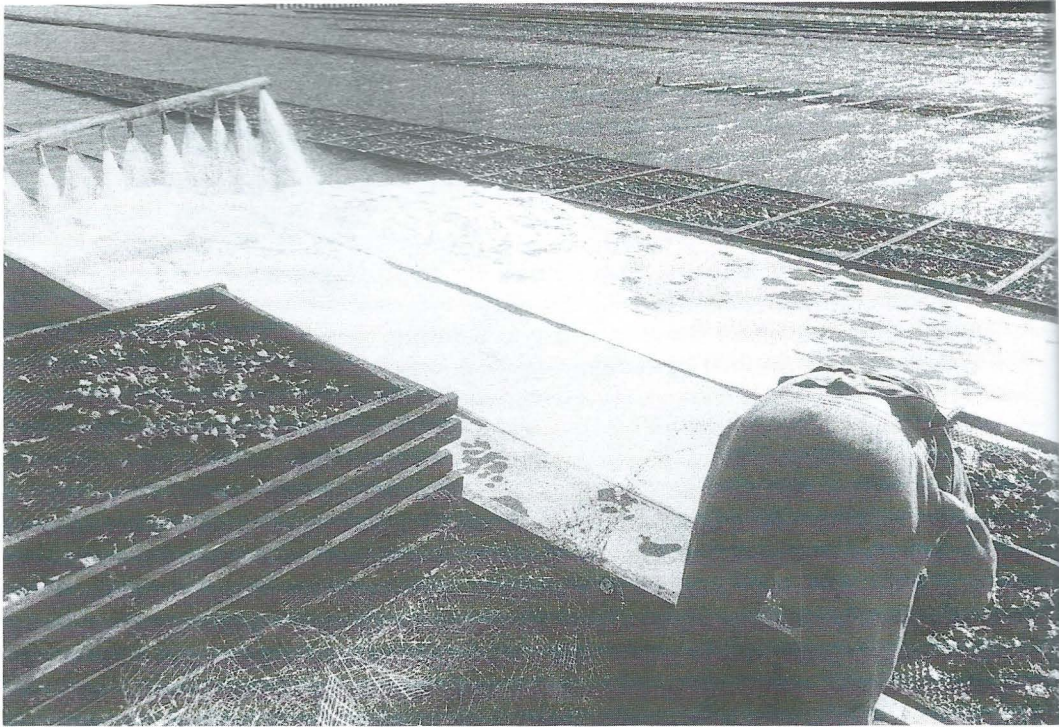
Stalking for corruption? Signs.
Blue algae drifts through your brother's dream
of Gold Coasts, golf courses. The first settlement.

later a big low revealed the damage.
On the run-in that night a dead cow got caught
out in the middle of old Dutches.

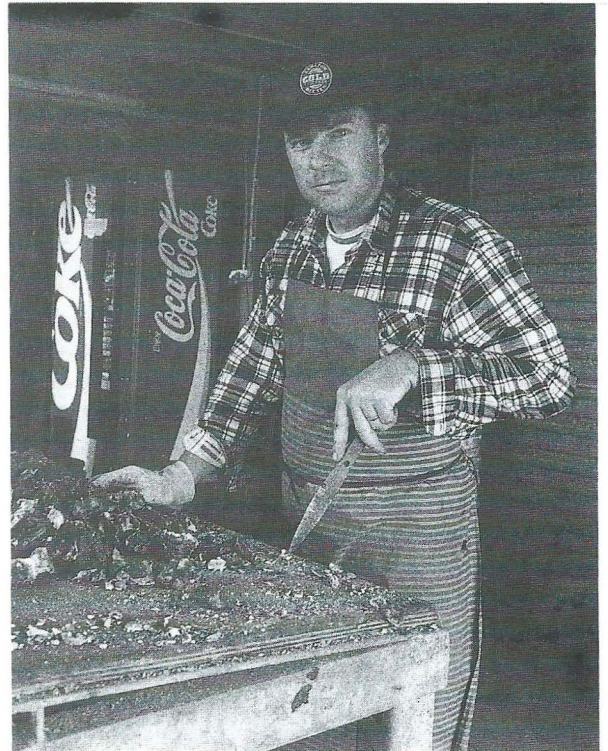
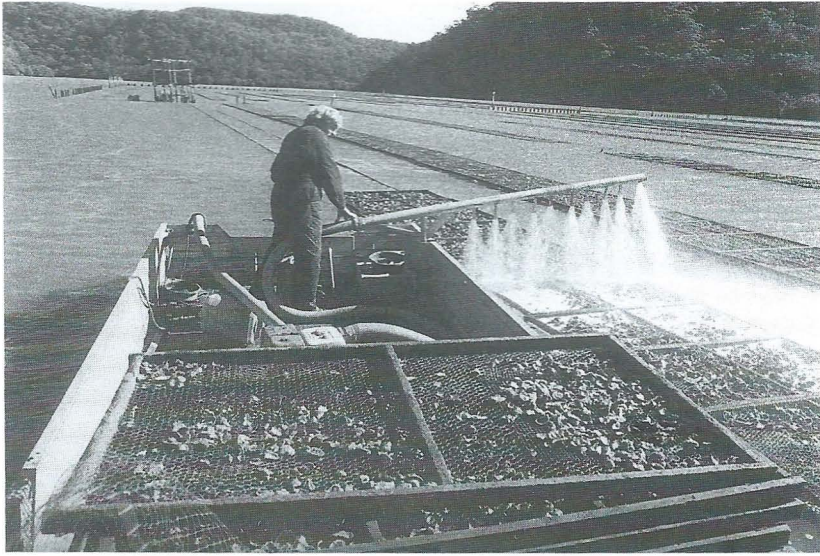
The racks scratched its back, leather work.
The crows. The crows and a sinking sky.
This year fires. The lyrebird's half-jump-flight.

ROBERT ADAMSON









On Mooney Creek: The Geography of the Imagination by Juno Gemes and Robert Adamson will be published by Craftsman House in 1996.



CODA

Simply because a message is, in substance, visual, it does not follow that all its codes are visual. Visual and non-visual codes interpenetrate each other in very extensive and complex ways.

Victor Burgin
Photographic Practice & Art Theory

OYSTERS ARE CONSIDERED a rare delicacy – they slide down your throat, in a second.

Here, on the river, the oyster farmers work the tide – beginning at 4 a.m. We go out on the low, a strong westerly blowing. Mutual respect is the code between us. I'm seated on the cover of the pump motor, the most protected spot on the punt, as we roar up the channel. The master of his craft, Garry Davidson, a fifth-generation oyster farmer, roars curt instructions to his young apprentice, Adam – "hold that hammer and wire mesh steady, keep moving" – every second counts.

Balancing on the wedge of the punt, I scan the shape and rhythm of their labour – extracting meaning – flesh from shell.

It takes five years to nurture an oyster. It has taken me five years to begin to see how to photograph it.

So often, photography is dead-weighted by terminology. Philosophers, cultural theorists rage at its apparent power, its imagined freedoms; they hang elaborate fictive constructs onto its invisible skeleton. Yet the creative dynamic of the medium eludes them.

The photographic image contains its own transformative language, its own syntax. I am a photo-activist. The pen, the paintbrush, the camera.

During the 'dog days' of December 1951, Axel and Roslyn Poignant worked on the Riverboat Postman. Their book *Mangrove Creek 1951* was published in 1993.

Adamson has trolled these waters for thirty years. His first published poem, 'Jerusalem Bay' (1967) appeared in *Poetry Magazine*. Now we work the same source, each on their own tide, inspiring each other – a true collaboration.

JUNO GEMES

BARBARA BLACKMAN

On First Looking Into Blackmans' Home Life



THE CHARLES BLACKMAN Retrospective Exhibition, 'Schoolgirls and Angels', paintings and drawings with guided tours, annotated catalogue and biographic video, opened its Australian tour in Melbourne in May, 1993. Four decades of the artist's work were represented. For three of those decades we were wed. I visited the exhibition in its second week.

I approach through the Botanical Gardens, gold russet leaves thick on paths, people in overcoats and scarves, distant perspectives through bared branches, voices brisk on chill air, 'Charles Blackman' bannered on the National Gallery facade, Alice in the Boat flies skywards.

There is a 1960 photograph of Charles and Barbara with two infants outside the Gardens kiosk. We are leaving Melbourne after a decade to go to live in a small inherited house in Brisbane. I wish, I promise myself, always to be in Melbourne in May, always to be out of it by June. All through the Fifties the pleasures of autumn, the comforting in cosy knitted jumpers and scarves to shuffle through fallen leaves in Hawthorn streets, is followed by miserable winter bronchitis. We read Verlaine beside the lake beneath the trees in these Gardens, and Rimbaud's *Illuminations* with the pink-legged Cape Barren geese listening like flamingos on a croquet lawn.

City kids both of us, the Botanical Gardens are a comfortable familiarity, a public privacy, from childhood birthday parties, parental tea-house treats; in Sydney, first kiss close under an umbrella on a wet deserted path, last legal kiss in the great green house, a Rousseau world of difference secreting us.

Exit gardens of memory. Cross singing tram lines. Enter galleries of present. "When entering the exhibition it is advisable to commence viewing from the Murdoch Court to gain the full effect of the artist's development." Walk through a life. Stills from an autobiography.

Art is the means by which the essence of humanness is given form by which it becomes transcendent, or the means by which elements of a personal experience are transformed into universal truths. ... Art makes chance into history, the mundane into mythology. Mythology deprives the object of which it speaks of all history. In it history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant. It prepares all things, brings them, lays them out. The master arrives, it silently disappears. All that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from; or, even better, it can only come from eternity.

— Barthes

This is a balancing trick, how to fit so many angels on the head of a pin, so many memories into the present moment. Angels, I ask for invisibility. I do not wish to have "the look of roses that are looked at." I am an old tree now, knotted and gnarled; their gaze carves into me to release the maiden Daphne, early photographs to go by.

In the moment of death all one's past life rushes before the inner eye in a flash: "and the moment of death is here and always."

My first visit to Melbourne, May 1950, from Brisbane which knows no such autumn; utter shock to see through a train window the whole

sun, a golden ball on the horizon, painting by Paul Klee; bareness of fences and brick walls, nudity of tree trunks with gilded garment leaves fallen about their feet, an earth bowed down before advancing sky; on doorsteps, pots of daphne with their icy breath of Heaven.

BARRIE REID has brought me to Melbourne with him on his annual leave from the Public Library. He is giving me the chance to improve my knowledge of current Australian culture and meet important people. Barrie is my big brother, mentor. In Brisbane, May 1944, he has taken me on the first steps of this journey, he in his first year out of State High School, me still schoolgirl in my penultimate year. He takes me to the Sunday afternoon Lyceum Club rooms for a meeting of *Barjai*, he being editor of this Magazine for Creative Youth, people under twenty-one, me a poetess having discovered free verse; takes me to meet those people among whom my life will be spent for many years – the writers, painters, critics, poets; gives an armchair talk on the poetry of Sidney Keyes; sits on the arm of my chair and says, “We’ll publish you one day.”

Now he is uplifting me from my bed of suffering where I am beset by a nervous breakdown, brought on by the loss of beliefs, eyesight and past year’s lover, a paintingless painter from the south.

On the way down in the train he briefs me on the coffee shops – Gibby’s, The Blue Room, Cinderella’s – where I shall meet the Langley family and people from Montsalvat; the Murrumbidgee potteries where I shall meet the Boyds, and most of all, Heide, the farmhouse behind the low lavender hedge at Heidelberg where, if I am good, I shall go to meet John and Sunday Reed.

Actually it is all well planned. He is taking me to people and places where I shall hear of the scandal of Charles Blackman who passed through early in the year leaving a trail of heresies, misdemeanours, stolen neck ties, pawned books, arrogant remarks, irreverent questions. Among them I meet again one who speaks my language, an independent nonconformist anti-mythologist, John Yule, a reliable narrator who sees the running out of town of the “scruffy

evasive little fruit-picking person whom I am well rid of” as pure comedy; gives me his mother’s address in Sydney, to which I send a telegram announcing my date of train return.

By the next May, Charles, John and I have moved out of the tin shed in East Melbourne where we have been living, three peas in a pod, with our rolled-up mattresses, row of chairs painted along the wall and enamel eating bowls. John moves into a gardener’s cottage in Alphington, we into our Hawthorn coach-house. Our Melbourne lives take shape. In mid-June John is best man at our Registry Office wedding. By walking all the way home to Hawthorn we have just enough money to buy a tin of sausages in Wellington Parade.

THIS IS MELBOURNE forty-two years later. This is all about schoolgirls and angels. “Begin the promenade of the work on show, chronologically, passing the juvenilia, moving into the 1951 sequentes Schoolgirl series.” Where memories begin is childhood, is school-days. Lovers learn each other by exchanging tales of childhood, grafting together by this attenuation, making of their separate pasts the twin soul inhabiting two bodies, the mutual dreaming.

Brother of three sisters, he wears girl’s underpants, girl’s shirts to school. Brother without a key, he sits on the doorstep waiting for schoolgirls to come home. I start High School during wartime austerities; have to make do with a left-over mis-make school hat, its brim outlandishly large, and school shirts made by my dressmaker aunt, their collars outlandishly wide – ‘Bubbles’ photographed in school uniform, complete with black stockings, pleated skirt and lace-up shoes. History is made of the years before and after the 1953 first showing of Schoolgirl paintings. Video pronounces. Guides explain. Viewers look through the window panes of the picture frames. For me the paintings, the walls, the visitors, the video screen are all the same, invisible in my invisible world of blindness. My world visible is a virtual reality of recollection.

I visit Barrett Reid, retired Public Librarian, retired editor of *Overland* magazine, living at Heide, the house behind the low lavender hedge. We sit and talk in the old library, now

carpeted, but still with a wood fire. Virtually, it is a night in May 195-. Sunday Reed, in powder blue corduroy slacks and Cashmere sweater, is sitting beside the fire on the hearthside stool hunched over a book talking about the reproductions in it with a little dry laugh. John is sitting on the big soft sofa with pale canvas covers, legs thrust forward, hands linked behind head, intermittently, skeptically, taking part in a conversation. Seven or eight of us in the room, little tray of coffee cups on the low table, anecdotes and speculations stirred and consumed.

Outside the circle of talk I muse to myself. Forty years ago when this house was young, other people whom we do not know – except in a way for smelly Mrs Brown whose ghost goes up and down the passageway – sat around this room, arguing, planning, joking. Now in forty years' time, who will sit here, whom of us will still be talking here ... our elders gone before, our contemporaries scattered, just two of us left, an old moth Barrie and an old moth Barbara smiling together over memories, cross-wiring present projects, correcting each other's forgetfulness, redolent as autumn fires, fuelled by all that we have known and have been known by. So it transpires: *An Emperor dreams he is a Blue Bird singing in his garden. Or, a blue bird singing in a garden dreams he is an Emperor.* And all the time the White King writes it down lest it all unhappen. I turn to Sunday and I say, "Sun, how about that Superville book about stolen children you promised us?" Outside it is chill, damp, musky, a very old earth communes with a very ancient sky, so clear tonight.

A television documentary, 'Dreams and Shadows', is made about the artist's life by a filmmaker, one of the enquirers, voyeurs, gazers into our fish bowl, a generation away from the Blackmans of Crystobel Crescent. To make a scene more delicate, a make-up world is made up. On cue Righton schoolgirls swarm on and spill off a much arriving tram. They will have copies of faded videos to show their grandchildren – "That's me, third from the left. What funny old uniforms!"

Only a few of those captured schoolgirls are here on the gallery walls, so few. They jostled for space night after night in the cubby-house sitting room in our coach-house home. It is mid-

night, coffee time on radio 3UZ, *My Little friends it's coffee time.* Our milky coffee heats up in a saucepan balanced on top of the kerosene heater. Charles and I stare at them, sitting side by side on an improvised sofa made by roping a soft old kapok mattress covered with green burlap over a couple of boxes.

MY DAMP COAT and cap hang outside in the brick-floored stable. I still wear my many winter layers. I am not long home from doing a life class for the Vic. Arts, journeying home by change of empty trams and resounding footsteps in silent winter streets, past Martin the picture framer in his loft over the road still tapping away, the prince in the tower condemned to frame a thousand paintings before he can sleep with the princess. Charles is clowning in paint-smearing ragged jeans and unravelling jumper, tea-cosy cap and paint-daubed shoes; has been painting since I set out this morning as the quarter-to-eight news began for my first Tech life class of the day.

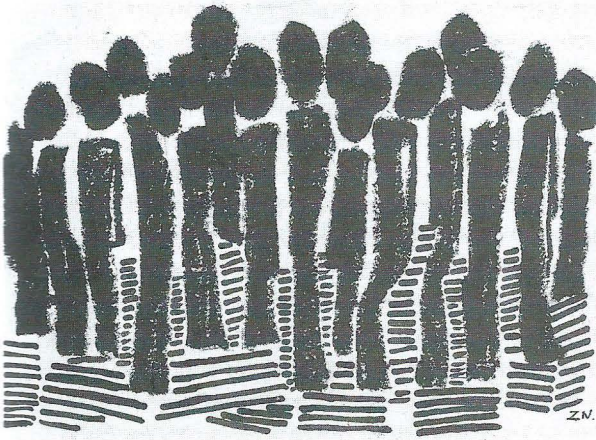
We drink out of big Swedish mugs, yellow or dark blue, and dig into a paper bag of fresh crisp biscuits, a pound packet of loose assorted. All around us are wet shining panels of painted schoolgirls. He has just carried them one by one down the vertical wall ladder from the studio loft trapdoor, one at a time so as not to rub against the wet paint.

The jonquil yellow bought on Monday is doing well, but the larch green won't last out the week. *The third that lies in our embrace* is a great devourer. I insist that one personal thing must be acquired each week, a shirt, a towel, a blanket, before the studio monster is fed with ever-more boards, brushes, paints. Wash the brushes thin. Decide which pictures to paint over, or at least paint on the reverse side. The schoolgirls watch us until all the biscuits are eaten and we have got to know them. Then it is 'Bedtime for Bonzo' for all of us, schoolgirls passed carefully upstairs to lean against studio walls, us to our single bed under the low barred laneway window in the coachman's closet. More paintings tomorrow, schoolgirls fresh daily.

Melbourne, Olympics 1956: The city hardly knows itself. Such excitement. So many changes. News lines buzzing. Traffic pulsing, the air

cheering, the radio informing. The new television awakening us to new experiences – and here to stay.

I am pregnant. Such excitement and changes all over. I hardly know myself. Charles is a short-order cook in the kitchen of the Eastborne Cafe. Tables and extra tables, overcrowded. So many dinners all at once. The French radio and television personnel are eating there. The kitchen hardly knows itself. Plates fly through the air.



I have had my first talking book machine for just a few months, a turntable with heavy 24-rpm discs. Robin Holmes with BBC aplomb reads Lewis Carroll. "All on a summer's day ...", "You're nothing but a pack of cards." Alice, girl-woman, appears on the easel. Curiouser and curiouser. Her body changes size. The flowers are growing, colours changing every board. "Eat me" to the growing babe. "Drink me" to the world, that changing place. The city, the Blackmans, the paintings will never be the same again.

ON MONDAY, MAY 17, 1993 the exhibition opens in Melbourne. So many old friends there, not me. Suppose in fact this exhibition were happening not here but in, say, Helsinki – exhibition of a wholly unknown painter, catalogue without any biographical notes, no mention at all of a blind wife. What magnet, what homer, what keyhole, what catalyst would the viewers see, the critics cite on this first looking? I am at home

at Bellawongarah. My Spanish granddaughter, five years old and speaking no English, sits beside me reading a story-book picture by picture, talking it through to herself.

My blindness is my secret, a locked chamber because nobody has the key. Nobody asks the right questions. They key in their imagination of blindness, the fear, the exotic, the dark into which we all go. But my blindness is luminance. For me they all went into the luminance, as my world grew indiscriminately lighter. Now the schoolgirls, the Alices, the family icons, the beach and park and disco people – they all fade in memory, invaded by light. Remembrance too becomes lighter, takes leave. But the angels are within. "You are all my angels!" cries Dostoevsky down the alleys of the blood, cries it to the convicts, to the child set free to be set upon by wolves, to the dying priest, to the gentle prostitute. For how else is the Divine to be known, if not seen daily in the faces, hands, napes of neck, the flower on its stalk as well as in the "dear little unloved child of tears."

I travelled through a land of men,
A land of men and women too,
And heard and saw such dreadful things
As cold Earth's wanderers never knew.

The schoolgirls are, after all, in transit between the home where they eat and sleep, and the school where they work and play. Transition is perilous. Falls the shadow.

The day of the opening is also the day of the funeral of John Maxwell Nicholson. I speak with Charles in the afternoon. He says, "We, who knew Max and had our lives so marvellously touched by him, were fortunate." Max, in reflective mood some years ago, said to me, "I seem to have had more effect on other people's lives than ever I've had on my own." I write in my diary, "He demonstrated to us the humble, civilised, dignified, illuminated life." My children and some of their friends in teenage years, had the privilege of going to the Melbourne Gallery with Max, standing back with him to give full attention to this work and that, listening to what he spoke out of his wide experience of looking at paintings, knowing life. I loved to walk in the Botanical Gardens with him where he would

behave in the same way to an avenue of trees – the stopping, standing back, giving attention, describing to me form and detail, then stepping forwards, our hands held, carefully reading the arboreal title. To have life, and have it more abundantly; to see paintings and see them more attentively.

In Sydney in May 1977 Max is living with us at 159 Paddington Street. A large man, he is sitting arrayed before his breakfast, an affirming aroma of toast and a panoply of gentleman's relish, jams, marmalade, honey, set out before him, coffee poured. Charles is snatching up his cut lunch, an apple, a clutch of paint rags, about to leap out the door to go to his studio a mile away. "That's bravery," soliloquises Max in theatrical mode, "To go into an empty studio and face a blank canvas ... to stand before it and confront the depths ... to bring up something and put it there. What a heroic task." His morning salutation was always some version of this. This day Charles turns on him. "One more speech like that, Max, and you'll be out on your ear. It's bloody hard enough without you singing a song about it." Then he slams out the door.

Teacher to student on how he paints:
 "First I sits m'self down, then I works m'self up.
 Then I puts down me blacks, then I pulls out me lights."
 The teacher is Fusoli, the student William Blake.

After the first stroke it is work, skill, stamina. But, between the blank space and the image, falls the shadow. It happens again for the painter between the finishing of the work and the public exposure. Between the hanging of the exhibition and its opening, falls the shadow. This is the difference between the Sunday painter and the other, the one who has the itch and must scratch it, the Fisher King who must salve his ever-agonising wound with the fingers that have touched the fish. In the waters of the Unconscious the fish spawns, grows, circles, eludes, is glimpsed, caught. "Whom does the Grail serve?"

I MAKE A THIRD, last visit to the exhibition. Barnaby, the younger son, comes to Mel-

bourne for a day between overnight trains. This is a rite of passage for him to see his father as art. For him also it is a reflection of a life of which he is a part. He seeks his point of entry – the 1962 'Family' paintings done at the time of his gestation, the hard-edge Interiors, when he first trotted about the London mansion flat, a natural part of his world; finds himself in the 1968 drawing of his five-year-old self with hammer: "The hammer," he recalls, "with chocks of wood handed to me in the studio to keep me quiet for a while"; remembers his playmate Lee Ann who stole a grape (a companion drawing), who died soon afterwards in a car accident; then Red Leaf pool and Centennial Park, family outings become paintings on the walls after school not much noticed. It is an inner struggle to extrapolate image on the wall from moment in the heart, aggravated by captions that seem to him to go beyond annotation into interpretation.

John Yule, friend of the Fifties, joins us. We regress to those early Schoolgirl paintings. This is a Blackman lifetime beyond Barnaby's reach, a heritage of parental anecdote. "These paintings speak a language I understand," John says, "whereas those after Alice come to me in translation, so to speak."



Translations and resonances. Reflections on reflections. For me everyone's description repaints the picture. Anyone who has shared the Blackman life out of which the paintings have come, anyone part of the parturition process, will make contact, a live-wire shock of recognition.

Much stirs in this son, seeing in this other place paintings long lived with, familiar, close to his bone, and others that call his attention to a part of his life that had escaped him. Some have grown unbelievably larger or smaller in transplantation. Some that hung on stair or stood behind a door are found as poster, print or postcard in the Gallery bookshop. "East, west, north, south," went the popular pie jingle of the fifties, "they're in everybody's mouth."

For us this is holy ground and we have now to render it to Caesar. These viewers all around us are entitled to this territory. We give it with grace, recognising that what seeds in them may be some essence already intoned in our lives.

"THE MOUNTAIN gives birth to the mouse," is an old proverb of Horace restated by Barthes. "The mountain is not any too big to make a mouse." The father unknown, the father behind the one who came to junior football matches, cooked dinners, got drunk at times, went off to Paris or Surfers, was not a conjurer's hat, but a mountain. An enormous process takes place before the mouse of a painting takes shape, signifies, gives local habitation and a place to persons and things close around him, translating subject into object.

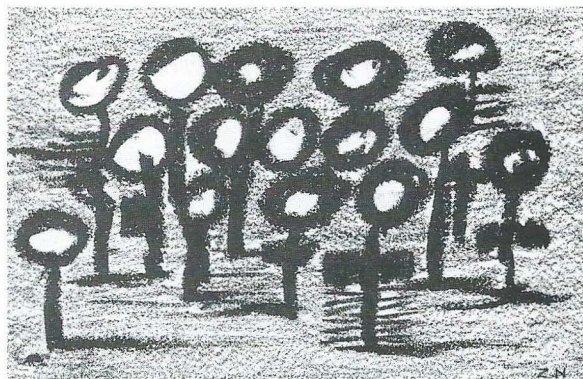
The biography may be subtext, but it is of another order. Family members, we grapple in the green room. The young Parsifal, after all, on first looking on the grail, could not ask the question, "Whom does it serve?": only much later. We sit for a coffee in the cafeteria area and are not ashamed of tears.

"Remember Richard?" – a mate of Barnaby's from Perth who lived for a while at 159, one of the many young people who entered the all-life living room of that not-large house and said, "I didn't know that people could live like this." "Like this" was piano and dresser face to face ("Look at the haloes on the knuckles of the Girl playing Mozart!" just overheard), long marble slab trestle table with church pews, stone archways into kitchen, double-bed size buttoned leather Majestic chesterfield with the triptych Blue Alice above it taking up the whole wall.

Richard now lives back in Perth, works with his good Sicilian family in their bistro and has opened his own gallery upstairs. When the

going gets rough, he takes himself off to the Art Gallery of Western Australia and sits himself down in front of the Blue Alice there in its new home, restored to minted freshness, the years of cigarette and coffee fumes quite absolved.

REMEMBER PARIS, a visit there in May 1968 just before the revolution: in a bistro in Rue de Fosse we chance to sit face en face to a converse couple, he blind, she a painter. Egyptians, Australians, in fractured French we muse upon the mirrored paths. Strangers familiar, sharing a sly joke, we embrace a radiant moment, smile of the dark angel.



A decade later, a Chinese restaurant in Perth, in May 1978. My Blackman life ends here. After the configured torment of Scott and Zelda, Colette and Willy, before the Nightmare, and the incarceration of The Room of Edgar Allen Poe, falls the shadow. We had wrestled long and well with that dark angel and are not ashamed.

The shadow of the dark angel is absolute. "The blind and the not-blind are no longer useful to each other." I write a letter of resignation from marriage to take effect on our twenty-seventh wedding anniversary in mid June. No renewal of copyright. Finito la musica. On with the dance. A painful switching off of the support system. Flames are not quenched. Our paths diverge towards separate bright horizons.

ON THE OTHER SIDE of St Kilda Road, towards the river, the Flame of Remembrance burns forever in the inner shrine.

When we were young we thought that love was proof against that dark angel, and we did not think that in our lifetime these paintings, that were our hearts' treasure, would turn to gold at a collector's touch. Paint rags to paper riches.

And if the Babe is born a Boy,
He's given to a Woman Old
Who nails him down upon a rock,
Catches his shrieks in cups of gold.

Angels, the head of a pin is a hard place to do
battle or to dance.

Schoolgirls and Angels, Alice and White Cat,

Faces and Flowers, and all the images on gallery walls are configured in my personal iconography, with a patina of looking before and after. Again and again, they will be looked at for a first time, looked at and referred to the Blackman chronology. "The map is not the country." This exhibition is my own Rosetta stone.

Barbara Blackman was born in Brisbane in 1929; B.A. Psych. Hons 1950, UQ; member of Barjai Group in Brisbane in the late Forties; married to painter Charles Blackman 1950-1978; first essay collection The Little Lives of Certain Chairs, A Table or Two and Other Inanimates of Our Acquaintance published in 1968 by UQP; poems and essays published in newspapers and magazines; librettos include 'Eliza Fraser Sings' with Peter Sculthorpe and 'Parabola: Story of Icarus' with Andrew Ford; now remarried and living in the bush in southern NSW.



THE CALL

Cooee calls the voice
from the railway cutting
It's my father calling
along the fencelines
with his kelpie dog at his heels
and his old felt hat dinted sideways like a
dandy.

What's he doing out there
in the mist
this isn't his country
it's the dry dust
in the teeth of the gale
the bins trickling wheat in the sidings

but what do I know about it
the true country in a boy's blood
was closer to this he told us
fern and torrential rain
the creeks running a banker
white cockatoos fabled like clouds in the
orchards.

He takes a spade
to dig a soak in the creekbed
looking for sweet water
Cooee calls the voice from the cutting
it will go on all night in my head
calling his daughters, calling us home.

DOROTHY HEWETT

WAR HERO

The palms of my father's hands
are seamed with earth
the white flesh on his chest
is peppered with shrapnel
he tells us stories
Kemal Atatürk The Red Baron
stuttering Messerschmitts
splinter on the line of gums.

Hunched in the rain
he rides behind the sheep
his dark face creased
with Wipers or the Somme
at night when he can't sleep
wrapped in his blankets
blowing *The Moonlight Sonata*
our mother strums
missing the notes
in *Roses of Picardy*.

We play war games on the verandahs
dressed up as The Angel of Mons
or The Man with the Donkey
nobody wants to be a Hun.

When I saw Lew Ayres
in *All Quiet On The Western Front*
stretching his hand out over the sandbags
for the white butterfly
I knew I'd always been there.

DOROTHY HEWETT

LAST TRAIN

for Lee, 1968-85

At five, he loved trains,
pushed them through dust
and three-cornered-Jacks
looped them around
the wash-house floor.

Later, at 17,
wind teased curls
he rounded the curve
on his motorbike
as a distant train
slid through saltbush.

The farmer
on the road ahead
saw the train too
wished for the strength
of an engine like that
as his trailer strained
with the weight of wheat.

Together they stared,
eyes and thoughts
rolling west
as the train cut
the flat horizon.

The farmer felt the impact.
The train whipped away
like a startled snake
and you cousin
went early to the dust
and three-cornered-Jacks.

JUDE AQUILINA

AFTER DEATH, AFTER ORGASM

1

living in australia is like
living after death,
you hear all the outside happenings
totally unrelated to yourself:
cars roaring on distant hills
keep roaring every night
until they are night itself
houses remain so unattached
each an island on its own
swimming in a sea of streets
books are the closest things
cheek to cheek and back outwards
showing square wooden faces
so knowing and unknown
to each other

that you feel once you hide yourself
in a word and get in there
you'll forever live
knowing and unknown

2

after China is after orgasm
you lie down on a plain as plain as Australia
your body emptied of seeds
your root washed clean of its soil
by space between
you can actually touch all the orgasms before
political scientific religious artistic meta-
physical philosophical
national international sur/real intellectual
surgical
without a second of arousal

after china
after orgasms
lie down
forever
on
australia

OUYANG YU

GREGORIO KOHON

At the Arts Festival

From a novel in process.



THE FESTIVAL DO ESCRITOR was, like so many other things in Brazil, an unusual event; nothing like it could have happened then in Argentina. In the paper the next day, the photograph taken at the *Museu de Arte Moderna* on that cool Monday evening made everything seem to be in perfect order, a bit like those family portraits where everybody occupies the 'right place': grandparents sit in the middle, parents stand behind them, children cluster at the front. Power struggles, rivalries between generations, jealousies, insecurities and conflicts are all left out.

Luigi was looking down at the floor, who knows what he might have been thinking. The Argentinian Cultural Attaché smiled broadly, with his attractive wife, Silvia, standing by his side. Iris Pereira, an actress from Buenos Aires now working in Rio, held a copy of the book Luigi and Andrés had put together: an anthology of Modern Argentinian Poetry. Iris looked sensual, bright, generous. Andrés, eyes closed, sported a big, manic, deranged smile. He remembered the moment when the photographer had approached them for the picture, the efforts to find a place for themselves in the crowd, the instant the flash exploded. But from the picture it was impossible to reconstruct the events of the day.

It had started with a round table in the afternoon. A group of intellectuals had been invited to discuss *The Engagement of the Poet in Modern Society*. The meeting took place in a packed auditorium of the University. The first to speak was Imelda Portugués, Professor of Literature, a woman of prepossessing appearance and forceful convictions. A young, approving

audience followed her speech in absorbed silence. Andrés too was captivated at the beginning, but towards the end of her brilliant presentation it became clear that she did not think much of poets, poetry, or even literature in general. She wanted a literature that reflected reality, she said, claiming that poetry needed social justification, it should contribute to destroying the status quo. She had obviously read her Sartre, and finished her speech shouting: "No literature, only praxis!" At the end, the atmosphere of the place was that of a political rally. The audience, mainly university students, was intoxicated. Andrés was fed up, bored by her misplaced acuteness.

Imelda Portugués was followed by Vinicius Rocha, a novelist from the Northeast. A sober and composed, intelligent man, he did a good job of quietly demolishing the previous speaker. He argued that, for all her brilliance, something essential was missing in her theories: humour. Her reasoning had been fascinating, they had all been mesmerised, but literature – as much as life itself – had nothing to do with logic, nor was it governed by reason. Once one took intuition, obsession and madness out of life and out of art, what was left? Death, he claimed. Unfortunately, he never had a chance with the audience: after experiencing all that political fervour, they were not going to listen. They wanted blood.

Finally, in the middle of the confusion, it was the poet's turn. And it was a good one, too: Hildon Medeiros, a married man with two children, who lived in a small apartment in a poor area of Rio and worked as a salesman for a furniture store to support his family. Since he worked long hours he had plenty of reasons to

be very drunk most of the time. When he was called to the podium Medeiros could hardly stand up straight, he was so intoxicated with *cachaça*. He approached the microphone, looked at the audience, and said: "I don't give a damn about all these words; I don't give a shit about the inane, empty, moronic farts your mouths utter. This is the only thing I have to say about poetry ...". And he proceeded to undo his trousers, pull out his dark, long, truly enormous penis, and urinate on the microphone.

The audience was unable to react for a few seconds; then they started cheering and applauding, encouraging him to continue, until finally a couple of guys grabbed him by the arms and took him away, his trousers all wet with urine. An open discussion was meant to follow, but his act of protest put an end to the afternoon. The audience, after celebrating Medeiros' heroic act, just got up and left. Later Luigi and Andrés heard that he had been taken to the police station and charged with indecent exposure.

Though it was a very friendly occasion, the evening session of the festival was quite formal: a minister, who represented the *Presidente da Republica*, opened the proceedings. Andrés felt self-conscious, too aware of the crumpled suit he was wearing, of the shoes he hadn't got around to cleaning.

The Argentinian Ambassador was also there; he had made a special effort to attend: books were not his special area of interest. The Ambassador was a pompous, arrogant man. In meeting him Andrés went completely mute; Luigi did too. He was offered a book by the Cultural Attaché, which he managed to open at the wrong place: page 26, where Juan Gelman's poem, 'fidel', had been included. The Ambassador was taken by surprise. He read loudly, glancing at the Cultural Attaché:

*buenas noches Historia agranda tus portones
entramos con fidel con el caballo*

—good evening History widen your gates/ we are coming in with Fidel with the horse.

The Ambassador went red in the face, sweat poured down his neck, Andrés thought he might

be having a heart attack. Or perhaps seeing the Devil. He threw the book, hitting Delmar—the publisher, who was approaching the stall—on the right knee. He then walked off in a huff. The Cultural Attaché complained to Andrés: "That was stupid, if only you hadn't included the title, he would never have read the actual poem."

"How could we have done something like that?" he argued. "A poem is a poem. If Gelman put a title on it, who are we to take it out?"

Those were still the early days of the revolution in Cuba: Fidel was an ideal, the symbol of the possibility of change. At the time, many Latin Americans wanted to believe that they could do something about the misery and poverty, the hunger and destitution in their countries. Fidel was an inspiration. They wanted to believe that he represented a different revolution, that his revolution had an anarchic, tropical style, with humour, with sexual freedom. But they had included that poem for poetic reasons, not political ones. In any case, how could one differentiate them? Gelman was one of the best poets of their generation, *and* he was political. Delmar was rather upset at the Ambassador's reaction and couldn't stop talking about it, asking questions, wanting to bring him back to the stall. Luigi reassured him: "Don't worry about it, with or without the Ambassador, I'm sure the book will sell well."

Andrés couldn't follow the rest of the conversation. Something had caught his attention: at the end of a line of people, the crowd was parting to make room for a tall black woman, who was striding towards them. She was dressed as Carmen Miranda and was making her way through the stalls behaving in a truly royal fashion, as if she were a queen: everybody cheered and whistled as she passed. She had a basket of lacquered fruits on her head and smoked a cigarette in a long ivory holder. The shiny red heels she wore made her appear very tall. She was wearing a frilled orange dress full of sequins, yellow tights and long yellow satin gloves. The red turban precisely matched her shoes. This fun-fair of colours made the deep blackness of her skin velvety, soft.

She was followed by two more black women, also dressed in bright outrageous clothes. The three of them looked like they belonged to a Car-

nival parade, moving and dancing and weaving as if the drums of the Portela school of samba were just behind, playing for them. There was something scandalous about the way they walked. They passed the Minister and his entourage, and came straight over to the Argentinian stall. Luigi ran to Andrés and whispered in sudden panic and excitement: "It's the boys."

They had completely forgotten they had invited Socrates (their black transvestite landlord) and his friends; neither Andrés nor Luigi ever thought they would come. But Andrés was very pleased to see them, glad that they had found a way of participating in something they clearly felt didn't belong to them. In fact, Socrates had said as much when Luigi had given them the invitation. Living in the flat with the transvestites had been easy; Luigi and Andrés didn't bother them, the 'boys' never caused them any trouble. After a first meal together, they had never talked again, except to exchange polite greetings. The Brazilians kept the place clean (not many cockroaches in that flat), and from time to time they would leave some leftovers from their evening meal in the fridge for the Argentinians to taste.

The three black beauties (even the ugly Amadeo was well disguised) stood facing the stall, smiling. Socrates, without saying a word, came around and grabbed the Cultural Attaché's arm.

"Are you the godmother?" Socrates inquired cheekily.

Every stall in the Festival had *una madrinha* – a godmother, usually a well-known actress who was supposed to attract people to the stall; in this respect, their publisher had been clever in choosing Iris Pereira.

Socrates continued relentlessly: "Because certainly it was you with those big black eyes that drew us this way. You're so handsome, so athletic, so ... how shall I put it? ... Ro-bust!"

The Attaché was taking it well; though obviously embarrassed by Socrates's actions, he was laughing. On the other hand, Silvia – the Attaché's wife – was livid. She ordered Andrés to "Do something!" What was there to be done? Andrés ignored her. Then, still holding on to the Cultural Attaché's arm, Socrates started shouting to the public:

"Come on, all of you, this is a stall selling books, come on, buy this wonderful anthology!" And looking at the Cultural Attaché: "Look who we have as a godmother! Come on, this opportunity is not to be repeated."

At that point, Socrates must have noticed Silvia's expression; she wasn't coping. He turned around to face her, and without giving the poor woman a chance, threw his arms around her and planted a noisy kiss on her cheek.

The book sold well. Delmar and his wife congratulated the young writers on their success; the Cultural Attaché seemed delighted with his new friends. They left the Festival all together: Socrates, Amadeo, Fulvio, Luigi and Andrés. It was a night for drinking.



Bev Aisbett



CLIFF GREEN

David Martin: Our Most Improbable Friend



“DAVID MARTIN is the most improbable Australian writer who has ever existed – if indeed he should now be classified as an Australian writer.” So wrote A.A. Phillips in *Meanjin* in 1961. David is not an Australian in the strictest sense. Born in Hungary in 1915, reared in Germany, he didn’t see this country until 1949. Yet he is perhaps among the most Australian of our post-war authors. And he isn’t really David Martin. Well, not originally. He was born Ludwig Detsinyi, and through his eventful early life adopted the names Louis Adam, Lajos Detsinyi, Louis Destiny and, finally, David Martin.

He is turning eighty in December, 1995, after the most adventurous life imaginable. Truth that is stranger than fiction. Yet he has to be the most unlikely adventurer at large. Afflicted with poor eyesight all his life, squinting through bottle-thick spectacles, he looks as if he shouldn’t be out alone; you doubt his ability to safely cross a road. Yet he has crossed the world many times, worked as a foreign correspondent, as a wharf labourer in Palestine, hitch-hiked across Australia and Malaysia, served at the front in the war in Spain. He arrived in India the day Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, watched Soviet tanks roll into Prague on the night of August 20, 1968 and was one of the first western journalists to interview Ho Chi Minh following the liberation of Hanoi from the French.

David Martin is also dead. Officially, that is. Or at least Ludwig Detsinyi, first-aid man with the International Brigades of the Spanish Republican Army, is dead. He had wrapped his greatcoat around a man dying on a battlefield. His dog-tags were found on the body, his girlfriend

in Palestine informed of his death. Fortunately the sad news had not reached his parents, then refugees in London.

He has crossed frontiers, legally and clandestinely. He was known to the Gestapo, MI5 and ASIO and was expelled from the Australian Communist Party. A true citizen of the world, he has a flair for languages that has saved his life and landed him in trouble. Escaping by foot across the Spanish border in 1938, he was arrested by French frontier guards and detained because his French was so good. They were convinced he was a long-time resident with a political record as long as their carbines; possibly a spy for the Comintern. It was his first visit to France.

DAVID MARTIN did not begin to work in English until he was twenty-one or twenty-two years of age, yet he writes the most beautiful English of anyone writing in Australia. In his autobiography, *My Strange Friend*, he describes sitting in a hall in London, in 1939, at a function held to honour the British international brigaders. The packed audience sang folk songs. Martin was not only moved by the lovely quality of the spontaneous, part-singing massed voices, he was also overwhelmed by the beautiful lyrics, honed and polished across centuries of oral tradition. “I felt like a man drunk,” he wrote, “went home and wrote my first few lines of verse in English.”

It is that simple, limpid, lyrical folk tone, edged with the decorated astringency of his German heritage, touched with the black comic irony of Australian English, that so distinguishes the seemingly artless, freely accessible quality of

his work. English, Scots, Irish, Welsh, Australian: these are the blossoming branches that have been grafted onto sturdy German rootstock. Set to music, Martin's poetry in German has been sung by marching soldiers. His verse in his adopted English has roused crowds at anti-war demonstrations. I'm sure it has done duty as a prelude to lovemaking, by both David and others. Poetic foreplay.

David Martin works hard at his writing. Long working days with each word carefully chosen. He seeks advice and takes it readily. Richenda, his English schoolteacher wife, checks every manuscript – painstakingly, through every draft – hunting out the lapses in language that only a native-born speaker can detect. For several years a long time ago, he looked to me (and, undoubtedly, to other Australian-born colleagues) for guidance and advice on colloquial speech and idiom. I soon gave up, fearful that I might be party to a distortion of his style (though I'm now sure he would never have let that happen).

We plotted each other's stories together, including – most especially – his novel *The Hero Of Too*. I couldn't believe "Pongo" as the name of any nightcart man in any Australian town. But I have come to accept that this is a perfect name for so idiosyncratic a character in this most European of Australian novels. The humour in his children's books rings strangely un-Australian to me, but that is only my Anglo-Irish-Australian bias peeping through. His is probably the first truly multicultural writing on our literary landscape.

I HAVE LONG BEEN the sorcerer's apprentice. "If you seek the feminine side that is in you, if you shamelessly exploit the woman that is in every man, you will write believable female characters," he once told me. Good advice from the author of *The Young Wife* and *The Cabbie's Daughter*. I like to think I have put it to good use. (Writing this tribute has proved to be one of the toughest assignments I have tackled. David Martin has been reading every word over my shoulder, figuratively speaking. Indeed, he has been reading over my shoulder every day of my working writer's life.)

David Martin writes beautiful English and he speaks it well. However, even after all these years his speech is still heavily accented. "Wukoom", he has always said, meaning "vacuum". I remember in my teens, not long after David Martin had arrived in Australia, listening to him broadcasting news commentaries on ABC radio. His words were wise and well-chosen, but his accent made them difficult to understand. Not that you should necessarily believe everything he says. His speech has always been peppered with wild exaggeration and emphatic flights of fancy. Not so his writing. "I don't believe a single word you say," I have teasingly told him many times during the forty years we have known each other, "but I do believe every word you write."

If David Martin isn't strictly an Australian, he is the best imitation of one you are likely to come across, in his own improbable way. Steaming beneath Sydney Harbour Bridge on the ship from India, he had "no sensation of having been here before on some forgotten life, only a care-less happiness as from a shot of freedom into my veins. I still have it, despite everything", he write in *My Strange Friend*. "Australia is mildly intoxicating, even when she is dull. She is young and has a lot of sun." If Australia has long been David Martin's homeland, then Beechworth in Victoria is most certainly his home town. He loves the place, despite its low horizons; and Beechworth loves David Martin, in its own tolerant way, despite his eccentricities and his bluff exterior. The locals were most pleased when he was appointed a member of the Order of Australia. He had done them proud, and as such become one of their favoured sons – or grandfathers.

BUT ONE DAVID Martin has not been enough for this world. Once there were two. At least, there was a Rudi as well as a Ludi Detsinyi, for he was born one of a pair of identical twins. Two David Martins? The very idea that living somewhere else there should have been a counterfeit clone of this big, shambling, sweetly talented bear of a man seems utterly preposterous. (Talking of bears, small children have always delighted in stroking and pulling the

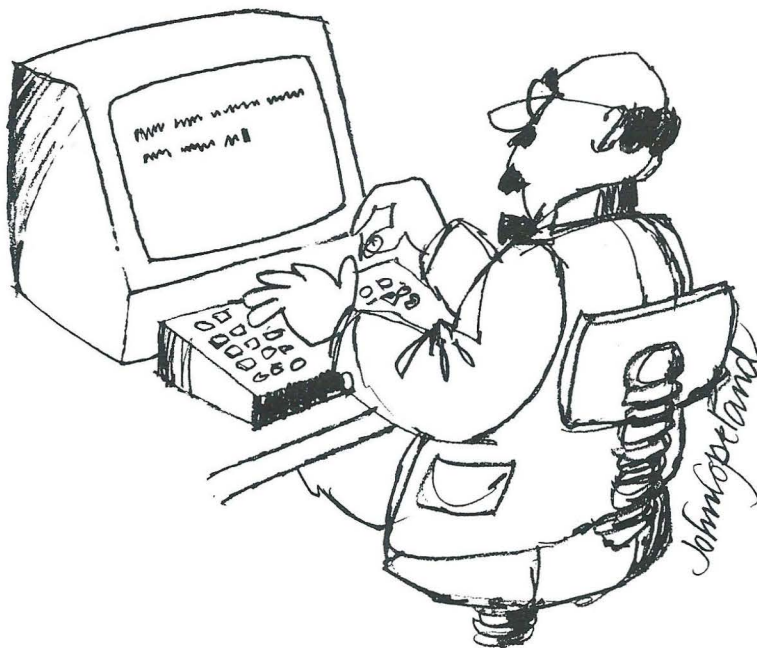
soft, absurdly prolific mat of hair that grows on his chest. "That's my stuffing coming out," he would growl.)

Rudi sat David's maths and science exams during their schooldays in Germany and David did likewise in language and literature. David took over one of Rudi's girlfriends when he had tired of her and the poor girl spent months in ignorant bliss. He used Rudi's photograph to obtain the passport that saved him from being deported from France to Nazi Germany during his escape from Spain to England. But similarity ran only skin deep. Rudi became a successful businessman and prospered. Capitalist and communist; chalk and cheese.

The name David Martin was first a nom-de-plume. He chose it because of its universality.

David Martin is Everyman. David, King of the Jews, marked his birthright, Martin is a surname common in Germany, half the nations of Europe and wherever Europeans have settled. With Ludwig Detsinyi effectively dead, David and Richenda claimed their new name by deed poll at the end of the Second World War. The telephone books of the world are full of David Martins: thousands of them. But for the countless readers, young and old, who have found pleasure and inspiration in his books in this country and beyond, there is only one David Martin. Happy birthday, David!

Cliff Green is best known as a screenwriter. He has also had published a novel, a volume of short stories and several children's books. His ABC-TV series, Mercury, is scheduled for transmission during winter, 1996.



"..... and as I dip my trusty old pen into the murky ink-well of Life....."

A CHRISTMAS LETTER
(for Peter Beilharz)

Dear Peter, I quite often think
Of the odd strands of life that link
Your thinking to my own, although
I've become crusty, gruff and slow,
My wit defending a wary self
With old-style books upon my shelf
Which I still try to read my way,
Not in the Information Highway.
Cyborgs are not a buzz for me,
Nor *virtual reality*
And younger colleagues fail to cure
My lifelong taste for Literature.
Now it is more than just – god knows –
Seduction of your suasive prose
That gives a shock of pleasure when
I read something of yours again.
Good old beliefs like socialism
You twine through many a quirk and schism
(Cats' cradles made with finest cotton)
And weave a pattern that's postmodern;
You shed your light on thought as hard as
The ideas of Castoriadis,
And now, for my nostalgic good
You take me back to Collingwood.
Never have I got off that hook:
I've read his every single book –
Almost – but, despite that plan,
When it came to *The New Leviathan*
Somehow I had lost my zing
And couldn't read the whole damn thing,
Specially the part where he got his thrills
By savaging the Bogomils.
His *Nature, Art and History*
Have surely been as dear to me
As that fierce *Autobiography*
In which he was shaken to the core

By the Spanish Civil War:
Perhaps for him the worst offence
Was England's polite indifference.
Peter, write on. Divert, renew us,
Ignore the indifference of reviewers
And keep your ardent readers thinking
Amid a world that's stale and stinking
At (or so it seems to me)
The arse-end of the century
When Labor's largely sold us out
To what the fiscal markets shout
And what the bankers tell them should
Be medicine for the public good.
Managerial universities
Bring Matthew Arnold to his knees;
A Newman or a Kant would have
To be the RAGS Committee's slave,
Gaining a Large ARC Grant
For some conceptual elephant:
Each critic's just an aneurism
In multinational capitalism.
(Peter, I think I'll eat my hat
If you can find a worse line than that!)

At all events, we battle on
Another year has clumped and gone,
The papers have been put away
So we can have a holiday
With surf and pudding and champagne,
Recharging batteries again
With intellect and natural wit.
No doubt you'll soon get on with it,
Crossing some critical defile
With trenchant prose and lucent style.
Good luck then, Peter. See you soon.
I'm off to the cricket this afternoon.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

JOHN McLAREN

Truths in Fiction



DURING THIS CENTURY, many of Europe's best writers have been anti-Semitic in temperament and fascist in politics. They include Yeats and Pound, whose fascist sympathies nevertheless generated the superb diagnoses of the century's malaise in 'The Second Coming' and 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly'. They also included D.H. Lawrence, with his cult of blood, and T.S. Eliot, who projected his disgust with himself onto the Jew upstairs. Behind them all lies Nietzsche, whose logical weaknesses philosophers forgive for his literary style, while critics pardon his stylistic excesses on account of his profound thought.

The two clearest thinkers among modern writers, George Orwell and Albert Camus, both saw beyond this persiflage by insisting that writers are responsible for the truths they identify and the consequences of what they write. It is now fashionable both to deny any canon of literary values and to insist that writing can be valued for its inherent quality. A materialist view of literature and culture cannot accept either of these positions. Language both communicates and creates reality, including value. It follows that literary works – works which exist only in language – must be valued either by the truth they communicate or the values they create.

By these standards, the works of pre-war fascist sympathisers stand – with the possible exception of Lawrence. Their work identified the problem of civilisation, but did not hasten it towards the Holocaust. The seeds of that were already planted deep in the psyche of European Christendom. Even deeper – the source of their evil nurture is the concept of monotheism, and the consequent constructions of the chosen

people and their enemies. Although Hebrew in its origins, this doctrine reached its shocking culmination in the centuries-long persecutions inflicted on their opponents by Christians and Moslems. Anti-Semitism is both the clearest form of this persecution and its ultimate evil.

It may be that the Holocaust inflicted by the Nazis under Hitler did not kill as many individuals as the persecutions generated by Stalin. Both waves of suffering were monstrous. But the Holocaust added an additional dimension of evil. Anti-Semitism, like any form of racism, condemns people not for what they do but for what by birth they are. The Holocaust went further, further even than the African slave trade which provided the basis for the wealth of Britain and the United States. The institutions of slavery reduced Blacks to chattels, but by law recognised certain elements of human obligation towards them. The Nazis excluded Jews – and some others, such as the Gypsies – from all ties of humanity. They were sentenced to persecution and death not because of anything they might have done or might do, but because of who they were. This takes the Nazi persecution beyond the bounds of previous persecutions of people because of their religion or their politics. These are matters that the individual can change. The crimes comparable to the Holocaust are the Stalinist and Maoist persecutions of people because of their class origins – again, a matter of birth not deeds – and possibly the present 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia. The arbitrariness of these exclusions from compassion denies the possibility of any common humanity between prosecutor and victim.

Jeremy Harding, writing in the *London Review of Books* about the poet Basil Bunting, a contem-

porary of the fascists, has said that "there is no intellectual corruption quite like anti-Semitism", and has quoted Bunting's condemnation of Pound: "It makes me sick ... to see you covering yourself in this filth." The filth is such that many thinkers, taking their lead from George Steiner, have decided that the Holocaust is of such monstrous dimensions that it is beyond comprehension within our normal categories of history, literature and philosophy. Yet to allow it to remain outside history and human explanation is to surrender to its own inhuman premise, that certain matters, certain people, are outside our need or ability to comprehend. This doctrine is also at the heart of the postmodernist rejection of any absolute values or of any essential humanity.

But, as the Holocaust stands as an example of absolute evil, our response to it assumes both a common humanity and a common capacity for evil which demands to be understood both historically and morally. The Holocaust has its origins in pogroms and persecutions that reach to Mediaeval Europe and beyond, and have been repeated in the treatment of native peoples by white invaders. The capacity for violence and evil exists in each of us. If we are to understand what made this capacity manifest in the Holocaust, we must understand both the historical origins of Nazism and anti-Semitism and the nature and circumstances of those who perpetrated its evils.

Helen Demidenko, and the judges who have commended her work to our attention, have done us a favour in forcing us to look again at these issues. Her book must be judged not by some abstract literary quality but by the extent to which she identifies the truth of the situation, both by expressing the subjective experience of those involved and by setting this in its historical context. The obligation of the novelist in this respect differs only in degree, not in kind, from that of the historian. Although history and fiction are not merely different kinds of story telling, they both have obligations to the truth. This obligation is not lessened by our recognition that any truth we may state is always provisional, limited both by the available documentation and by the culture and assumptions of the interpreter.

History which is no more than a record of facts is merely chronology, losing contact with the subjectivity of those who experience the facts. But the historian is nevertheless obliged to ensure that his facts correspond with the external record, and that his story makes sense of the facts. On the other hand, fiction may, like Kafka's or Murnane's, be purely subjective yet identify the objective factors that shape our subjective reality. It must create a self-sufficient world, but to the extent that its world refers to objective events these must have the degree of objective reality required for us to assent to the fiction. Thus it does not matter that Philip McLaren, in *Sweet Water, Stolen Land*, transposes the time of a particular massacre, but it does matter that he convinces us that a massacre of the kind we know follows from the nature and circumstances of the people he describes. His particular fiction furthers our understanding of a more general history.

Both histories and fictions are judged by the extent to which they enable their readers to locate themselves – their subjectivities – within the stories, and thus to extend themselves to new realms of experience. Fashionable 'grunge realism' satisfies the first of these criteria without meeting the second. By presenting a hero who asserts that life holds nothing but music, films and sex, that his epitaph will be "he slept, he ate, he fucked, he pissed, he shat. He ran to escape history", Christos Tsiolkas may, like the Marquis de Sade, be demonstrating the alienating consequences of a society built on greed and materialism. He may also be demolishing the sense of common obligation that alone stands between human society and fascism, with all its attendant evils. Helen Demidenko claims that, on the contrary, she is trying to understand the force that drives people to evil. To the extent that she succeeds, she may help to free her readers from the compulsions of history, but only if the book itself is fully grounded in the history that leads to the events it portrays. This is the point at issue between her critics. Her initial assumption of a false identity merely added confusion and a false sense of authenticity.

John McLaren is editor of Overland.

LUDMILLA FORSYTH
Starved of Humanity



Helen Demidenko: *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (Allen & Unwin, \$13.95).

I HAVE NO IDEA whose hand signed my grandfather's death. He was tried by a Troika. My father now has a paper, signed, which rehabilitates my kulak grandfather. He was shot because someone told stories which were not true.

Whose stories do we trust?

When does anecdotal evidence become truth?

Helen Demidenko's novel, *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, is wreathed with a barbed-wire motif and with quotations which seek to give a wider perspective to the stories told by simple people. Shaping a narrative, choosing the voices, creating the speech of these storytellers, is the writer's prerogative. Demidenko's characters speak from personal experience. They tell their truth. Bigoted, narrow in perspective, saturated with racial prejudices, but honest in their version of the truth. What responsibility does the writer take for the simple equations made by her characters' voices that Bolshevik equals Jew; that Jews were responsible for the Ukrainian famine; that communist cadres were bigoted Jews who saw Ukrainians as uncivilised?

In attempting to make sense of atrocities, of genocide committed by people who, at home with family and friends, appear to be ordinary and loving, Demidenko puts herself in the same position as Dostoevski, as Amos Oz. The use of unspeakable acts in the name of love of family,

one's country, one's culture, has recurred and recurred. And writers repeat the horror, the horror. After finishing Demidenko's novel I felt sick with disgust. Not because I thought it was a 'loathsome' book because it contained voices which were anti-Semitic. But because it contained a truth which has to be confronted. The truth that there are people who are still engorged with hatreds which come from a limited schooling, a limited grasp of history, a limited imagination and personal experiences of brutality. Do unto others as they have done unto you. It is regrettable that this is not presented by Demidenko in a more complex way and with fewer clichés and stereotypes. There is, however, a certain relentless imperative in the storytelling. The judges who gave Demidenko her awards – Australian/Vogel, Miles Franklin and the ALS gold medal, must have been impressed by Demidenko's ability. To hold their interest. They must have been moved imaginatively by the stories told by various characters in the novel.

These stories come from the other side – the side which remains silent until dragged into courtrooms. And the other kind of silence so skillfully articulated by Koestler in *Darkness at Noon*, the *Gulag Archipelago* of Solzhenitsyn, the Reign of Terror which made my aunt whisper in the great square in Kiev. The reign of terror and famine which starved some people of their humanity and made others mute.

It is unfortunate that Demidenko's attempt to release some of these voices has released in her prose galling images of fanaticism and bestiality. And it is equally unfortunate that, as a novel which won the Vogel award, it received favourable reviews but as a book awarded the Miles Franklin Award it released hate, bitterness,

anger and in some cases, latent prejudices similar to the terrifying prejudices of the protagonists in the novel. Demidenko has conveyed these hatreds starkly.

I sat at an ASAL reading in Adelaide and heard a well known poet say something like, "Did you see that arrogant Nazi couple? All he needed was SS on his lapels." The poet was speaking about Helen Demidenko and her companion. The poet had not read the novel, *nor* was going to read it. Is this an anecdote? Does it tell a truth? Whose truth does it favour?

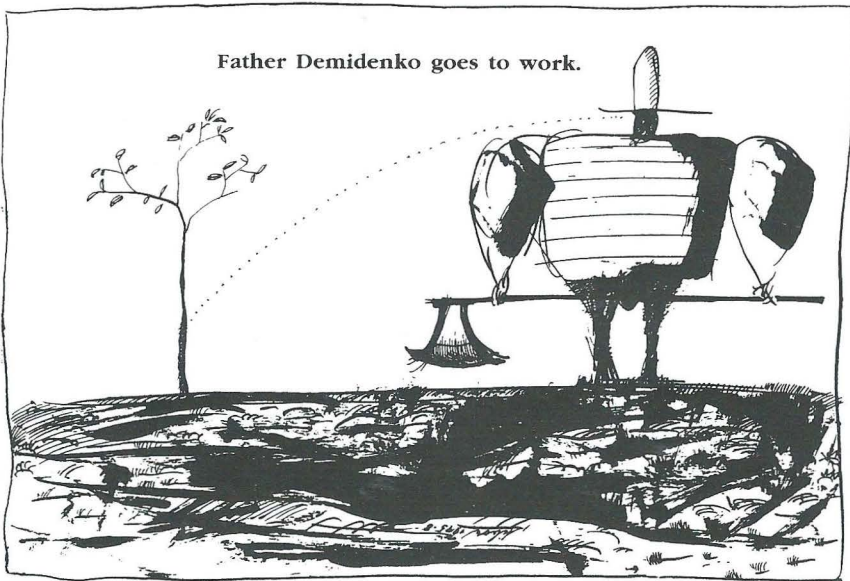
In writing out the stories of 'what did you do during the war', Demidenko has chosen to use the technique, fashionable now in novels and in histories, of the anecdotal account, the history of memory, to bear witness to experience.

By now many people will have borne witness to the controversy spinning around *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. Many people will have made judgements without reading the book. But we all know it's about a character called Vitaly who will soon be on trial "for war crimes and crimes against humanity". And we know that the protagonist Fiona, has to acknowledge that her uncle and her father have raped and killed, viciously and with a self-righteous justification. Does Demidenko sympathise too much with the

Ukrainians of her novel? She writes: "A poor-looking man with a big star around his neck, being chased up the street, by an SS man wielding a rifle with deadly intent. My father. My father." In her choice of Kateryna as the main voice for a Ukrainian perspective, Demidenko is able to move away from a first person account of those who, like Fiona's uncle and father, perpetrated war crimes. This prevents psychological introspection but presents through a naive reportage, a sense of horror.

Demidenko's lack of intervention as the controller of the tales, her decision not to use Fiona as a voice which interrogates or confronts the racism of her characters, perhaps makes her guilty of washing her hands of the whole bloody business. The author as God, giving her creation free will, is a fantasy. The author as God, designs the creation and gives her creatures destiny and morality. What Demidenko's hand assigns to her characters comes also from the imaginative response of the reader, the individual experiences and the saturated cultural soul one carries with one.

Ludmilla Forsyth was born in Ukraine and spent time in a DP camp in Germany. She came to Australia in 1949, and now lectures in literature at Deakin University.



Jiri Tibor

BOB WEIS

Response



WHEN I WAS ELEVEN years old, Barry, a school friend of Anglo-Australian background, told me that he didn't like Jews. "Not you of course," he hastened to point out.

"But that about Paul?" I asked. Paul was his closest friend.

"No, no Paul's my best friend."

"And Elaine?" His next door neighbour and another school mate.

"No of course not."

We went on like this for a little longer. Me naming his friends and him excepting them from the generalised concept of the Jews he didn't like.

"Well who then, who is it that you don't like?"

He thought about this. 'Well ... it isn't anybody that I know.'

The truth was that many of the kids at Caulfield Central School in 1958 were Jewish and indeed, like myself, children of Holocaust survivors. It never occurred to Barry when he was confiding his anti-Semitic views to me that this attitude that he had picked up within his family was terribly at odds with his experience. In fact virtually all of Barry's friends were Jewish and he was a good friend to them as they were to him.

In England in the eleventh century a dead boy was found in a wood. Modern police might guess that he had been raped and murdered. His trousers were around his ankles and there were bruises on his neck. Franciscan monks said that he had been killed by Jews who used the blood of a Christian child to make their Passover matzos (unleavened bread). Thus was born the blood libel. Soon after, the death of another child

in York provoked the massacre of the Jewish population there. Within a century the surviving Jews of England had been expelled. Well before that the blood libel proved a convenient explanation for unexplained murders on the Continent and for further persecution of the local Jewish communities, including seizure of property, refusal to repay loans and physical abuse and murder.

Lauren Bacall, travelling with her mother in upstate New York, in the 1940s, was turned away from a number of hotels because they were restricted.

The Second World War introduced two new significant terms into our language. A holocaust was a sacrifice or a burnt offering but *the Holocaust* came to stand for the attempt by the Nazis and their accomplices to exterminate the Jewish people. Genocide was "the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group" (OED). Now that we have the word we can apply it retroactively to the systematic destruction of the Tasmanian Aboriginal population and other acts of 'ethnic cleansing'.

ABILITY

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad. Once, someone 'recognized' me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard me called by name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

"Can you describe this?"

And I answered: "Yes I can."

Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.

April 1, 1957

Leningrad

*Anna Akhmatova, 'Instead of a Preface'
from Requiem*

Akhmatova spent those seventeen months trying to catch a glimpse of her son, who had been arrested and incarcerated. Her ability to put into words the horror of what she experienced and what she saw during the years of the purges was coupled with a sense of responsibility to give voice to the feelings and thoughts of ordinary Russians unable to give them form. She herself was a non-person to the Stalinist regime. Nevertheless soldiers on the front and prisoners in the gulag could recite her poetry and she was commonly called the Empress of Russia. Of course she could not get her work published until some years after the death of Stalin.

Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and Bruno Bettelheim were Holocaust survivors who were able to examine their experiences and report back to us so that we might try to understand the enormity of what had taken place or at the very least understand the impossibility of understanding in the ordinary sense of the word. They felt, and expressed, the responsibility to write on behalf of the millions who couldn't, who had been silenced, whose hopes and dreams had gone up in smoke. Since their accounts were published there have been a great many books written that have explored different aspects of the Holocaust.

I FIRST HEARD OF Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* when it was entered for the Vogel award and I read the published book before it won the Miles Franklin Award. In the meantime the book had been praised by a number of friends as a significant work from a powerful new Australian voice. The first time I read it my admiration for the cool style and the courage to take on such a personally (for the writer and for me) difficult subject turned to dismay and finally revulsion as I realised that this novel was taking anti-Semitic nationalist

propaganda and passing it off as history and as rationalisation for unspeakable atrocities.

By the time I had read it a second time it had won the Miles Franklin, Pamela Bone had written her strongly critical piece for the *Melbourne Age* and a full blown literary storm was brewing.

The best *now*, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate to the unspeakable. So argues Elie Wiesel, so argued a number of witnesses at the Eichmann trial. The next best is, I believe, to try to understand, to keep faith with what may well be the utopian commitment to reason and historical analysis ...

*George Steiner 'Postscript'
in Language and Silence*

Many critics of the book did choose silence and in fact before the Miles Franklin decision the book languished on bookshop shelves. However the imprimatur of Australia's most prestigious literary award put the reception of the novel in a wholly new light. The most obvious thing I can say is that there have been very different responses to the book and I do not immediately assume that the dividing line between supporters and detractors is that the former have racist attitudes.

In an interview with Andrea Stretton on SBS's 'Bookmark' Ms Demidenko had this to say about the origins of the book. At school and at University her fellow students seemed to think that: "Ukrainians were good for drinking vodka and playing Aussie rules so I wanted to overturn the stereotype. The book was born out of that and born out of my attitudes to the war crimes trials ..." She wanted to find a way to protect her (imagined?) family and community when attention was created in the context of the war crimes trials.

... people who were known in the Ukrainian community were named on these lists. Simon Wiesenthal's lists. And I remember seeing him on the television and having murderous thoughts directed at Simon Wiesenthal. And then catching myself afterwards and saying

that's not very constructive in a democratic society. Let's see if we can do something else about dealing with this issue.

Demidenko takes on the rather unpromising role in the book of being the defence lawyer whose client has been found bending over the body with the still-smoking gun. Her defence is astonishingly bold and is based on her claim to rectify the errors of the way that the history has come to us. She seduces us with the candour of her descriptions of the horrors perpetrated.

Even though I knew this was going to show Ukrainians doing some terrible things, I can't deny that, I do want to show why, put that history in context.

HD on 'Bookmark'

Yes my clients volunteered to do the work of the SS, yes my clients were at Babi Yar and Treblinka, yes my clients killed, tortured and mutilated but there was a damn good reason for all this. Bold strategy when playing from a weak hand; yes my clients did the crime, yes the crimes were horrible, brutal and savage beyond words and description but they were driven to it. And they didn't have the education or sophistication to understand the enormity of what they were doing. The victims were not innocents but savages (evil) who brought the retribution upon themselves by instigating the cycle of violence and brutality. And you the jury cannot sit in judgement on my clients because these were exceptional times and you do not know how you would behave in such circumstances. In fact I can say to you, hand on heart, that "there, but for the grace of God, go I".

She sets out to prove two things. The first is that the collaboration of those Ukrainians who volunteered to do the dirty work of the German SS in the Holocaust was the awful retribution of a people who had been reduced to savagery and a thirst for revenge for the horrors meted out to them by the Jewish Bolsheviks in the Ukrainian famine of 1930-33.

The second and enveloping concept is that war crimes trials are pointless. War is hell and we cannot judge the actions of people caught up in complex and difficult times. This defence

speaks not to the issue of guilt, she freely admits it, but to the issue of mitigation in sentencing. Having admitted guilt she must then challenge the jurisdiction of the court to try her clients.

Much of the literary debate has centred on the question of whether or not there is or even should be an authorial voice. Supporters argue that it is Demidenko's characters who are anti-Semitic but that does not make the author or the book so. In fact (they say) it allows an uncluttered view of the situation without the author editorialising.

... for those who feel the need for ethical signposting, the fictional form I've employed clearly doesn't provide enough in the way of didacticism. I've always maintained that it is not the writer's task to do the reader's thinking for him. I don't provide a neat moral. Apart from being an insult to the reader's intelligence, authorial moralising denies the reader space to draw his own conclusions.

HD in The Age replying to her critics

It is hard to know how to take this statement. Let us begin by taking it at face value, that the author is not being rhetorical and defensive and that she believes and expects us to believe that the book is not a partisan argument.

RESPONSE/ABILITY

Every writer begins with the blank page. Everything included after that, and everything left out, is entirely the choice of the writer albeit within the compass of her knowledge, ability, prejudices and intentions. The moral universe created within a work of fiction, a poem, a photograph, a painting explicitly or implicitly is a reflection of the writer's position whether conscious or not. Nobody can (re)create objective reality. In every construction of words can be seen the fractal whole of the macro and micro cultural forces that contribute to their shape.

Demidenko's Ukrainians are jolly, simple, uneducated, family oriented, fun loving, hard working, hard drinking, hard fucking but basically decent folk who left to themselves would be happy to drink vodka and work their farms. They are oppressed by the Jews who are in turn

brutal, communist, power-seeking, nameless, undifferentiated and foreign. That so many readers have accepted these stereotypes without complaint is one of the astonishing features of the debate.

There were 1.7 million Jews living in the Ukraine before the war. They lived in cities, towns and villages. They were wealthy and they were poor. They were religious and secular. They were tall and short. They were political and apolitical. Some were Communists, most were not. Socialism represented the promise of equality, freedom and an end to official and random discrimination and oppression to those Jews who embraced it.

IN THE END THE NAZIS murdered Jews because they were Jews. For no other reason. And those Ukrainians who volunteered to help did it for the same reason.

The Orthodox Jew would not only deny me the right to speak for him, pointing to my lack of knowledge and communion; he would say, "You are not like us, you are a Jew outwardly, in name only." Exactly. But the Nazis made of the mere name necessary and sufficient cause. They did not ask whether one had ever been to synagogue, whether one's children knew any Hebrew. The anti-Semite is no theologian; but his definition is inclusive. So we would all have gone together, the Orthodox and I. And the gold teeth would have come out of our dead mouths ...

*George Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor'
in Language and Silence*

Demidenko is no historian – for her 'Jews-and-Communists' is an hybrid description that is meant to stand for the whole complex, variegated and numerous Jewish communities that existed in pre-war Ukraine.

By constructing a universe where the behaviour of the Ukrainians is rationalised and 'explained' and the Jews are demonised, Demidenko in fact signposts very clearly her agenda, her background, her socialisation, her need to rationalise her private anger. That the history does not fit, that the Holocaust is not a suitable stage for the catharsis she apparently needs and

seeks to make real is the central problem with the book. There is no mention of the centuries of Ukrainian anti-Semitism, pogroms, official discrimination and race hatred that is as virulent today in the countries of the former Soviet bloc as it was then.

RESPONSIBILITY

Writing within the framework of historical fact, when the events used to frame the literary work are so dark, so nightmarish, so real and still so present there is an obligation to truth and a responsibility to a moral position that illuminates. If we are given to understand better, if we are to be given insight, if we are to hear the testimony of those who saw and suffered and survived then we may honour the memory of those who were destroyed and those who were unable to speak and the great majority of the remnant who survived and could not. I quite explicitly do not say here 'to finally understand'. With all that has been written and all that has been said, such understanding eludes us.

It is the lack of moral complexity that is, though clearly seductive to some, ultimately the root of the problem. Ariel Dorfman in his play, now a film, *Death and the Maiden* explores some of the same moral territory. Faced with the accidental capture of her tormentor in a factionalised Chile, Paulina has the opportunity to exact revenge in the same way that she was raped and tortured. She struggles with the temptation of this but finally what she wants is the truth and she realises that she is not like them. For her and Geraldo, her radical lawyer husband, the difference between the behaviour of the fascists and themselves is their belief in the primacy of due judicial process. As tempting as it is to torture the torturer, to sexually humiliate the rapist, to blow the head off the bastard, they stop short because then there would be no difference and their life could have no meaning beyond the cycle of violence and retribution.

In discussions and interviews with Holocaust survivors I have often asked the question why they did not kill their guards and tormentors when they were liberated. Or even indiscriminately kill Germans. The reply has usually been, "Because we are not like them." Having sur-

vived the unimaginable horrors, they kept alive the possibility of a civilised world.

DEMIDENKO WAS TWENTY-ONE when she wrote the book. It would be astonishing if she had a complex grasp on the issues, a fluent and deep knowledge of the history and the maturity to be able to see beyond her need to protect her (imagined or real) family from her own (dis)ease and discomfort with what they may have done. The whole public debate about the book and the issues that it raises would not have happened if it had not won first the Vogel prize, which led to its publication, and then the Miles Franklin Award – which led to its notoriety and subsequently to its success at the cash register.

THE PRIZE FOR ABILITY

At first I thought it was a result of naivety that the Vogel judges awarded the book their prize. It presents on a larger stage than most contemporary Australian fiction and on the surface it seems to argue a plausible and passionately held view. In many ways it must have seemed a stark relief to the many growing-up-in-the-suburbs-with-pimples manuscripts that have a parochial and narrow focus and that tend to gather sorrowfully in the out-trays of publishers and literary agents. And Ms Demidenko can write. She has an undoubted talent as a wordsmith. If the judges did not know that the history was suspect and that the book represents, in the end, more a polemic and an apologia than a novel, then it is totally understandable that they did what they did.

But then it became a matter of public record that Roger McDonald alerted his co-judges to his view that the book displayed worrying anti-Semitic themes and that the author needed counselling on this aspect of her work. It seems that there was an entirely different kind of naivety at work. That even if the book was anti-Semitic that this was not an issue for judging its worth as literature!

If a book was entered that rationalised the destruction of the Tasmanian Aborigines would it have won a prize? If a book written from the point of view of the Khmer Rouge, championing

Pol Pot, and arguing for the legitimisation of his murderous regime were to present would it have got between covers bearing the proud insignia of the literary establishment's imprimatur? Did the judges act responsibly both to the author and to the greater purpose of awarding the prize? I hope that these will be read as rhetorical questions in no need of an answer.

That the book should be awarded the Vogel was one matter. That it should subsequently be awarded the Miles Franklin is another entirely. The judges remarked that the book displayed "a powerful literary imagination coupled to a strong sense of history". It should have been plain to the judges that the 'history' was as powerfully imagined, as it now appears is Ms Demidenko's biography. It is worrying that the most prestigious literary prize in Australia is adjudicated by people who do not have the cultural or historical depth to interrogate a text with such clearly alarming signs. If they did not know the history they should have consulted on it. If they knew and didn't care they are guilty of the worst kind of cultural delinquency, the bleeding of meaning and significance from our language and our understanding of the history that brought us here. They did not understand their responsibility. Thomas Mann in his open letter to the Dean of the University of Bonn after being stripped of his honorary degree "explained how a man using German to communicate truth or humane values could not remain in Hitler's Reich:

The mystery of language is a great one; the responsibility for a language and its purity is of a symbolic and spiritual kind; this responsibility does not have merely an aesthetic sense. The responsibility for language is, in essence, human responsibility."

Quoted by George Steiner in Language and Silence

This responsibility does not have merely an aesthetic sense!

We have not heard a cogent defence of the book in the light of the criticisms that have now been made of it. The judges of the MF have closed ranks and refuse to discuss their decision or the bases of it. Their very clear responsibility

is to now publish their (re)considered opinions as to the worth of this book.

PRIZE, PUBLICATION, PRESS, MORE PRIZES

The publishers, Allen & Unwin, seem to have taken the least cultural or historical approach. After being told that the manuscript had severe problems by their own editor they responded by appointing a new editor who, to this day, remains anonymous. The responsibility that the publisher saw was, as far as the public record is concerned, to its balance sheet and to its contract with the Vogel award to publish the winning manuscript. There has been talk of the work being vetted for historical accuracy by an anonymous academic expert but apart from the usual public relations from the sales department there has been no public discussion entered into by the publisher. We can read into this the all-encompassing position – We are not responsible.

This is a shocking, brilliantly imagined novel which makes much more complex our usual understanding of Second World War atrocities, and the systems we later designed to convict the 'guilty'. Part fable, part fiction, this story of horror is an eloquent plea for peace and justice.

Media release, Allen & Unwin

What is our usual understanding that is made more complex? How is it a plea for justice? A justice system makes rules for behaviour and then tries those who contravene or are suspected of contravening the rules. The guilty are punished. The book is a plea for not attempting justice because no one (it purports) can judge the actions of those involved in a war.

The PR department carefully did not claim any historical truth for the book. Between fable and fiction they felt on safer ground but the author was not going to be happy stopping there. She went out of her way to tell the media that she had the history right. When faced with criticism of her grasp of the history from Gerard Henderson she went on the attack and showed that in the matter of bringing her undone nobody did it better than she.

Helen Demidenko to Gerard Henderson: "I think it is a little bit worrying when someone who is not Jewish begins to speak for the Jewish community."

Henderson: "I'm just quoting historical fact ..."

Demidenko interrupting: "I'm not sure, you seem (sic) to be ... before speaking on behalf of the Jews".

7:30 Report, ABC TV

Nobody could accuse the author of lacking confidence in her position or her knowledge of the history.

HD: I don't pretend to have got everything right but I did the very best I could. I was also very careful to make my history as accurate as possible. D. M. Thomas got quite a bit wrong. You've got to be wary of that. I'm not saying I've got it one hundred per cent right but I've got it more right than some of those other representations.

To Caroline Baum on 'Bookchat' ABC TV

In reviewing the press file on the book I was struck by the largely uncritical reading that the book received. Indeed many of the feature writers seemed happy enough to reorder the press release and quote the author. Some even sighed along with her that, "there, but for the grace of God, go I". For most of them, one suspects, if they had thought about the glibness of it all for more than one minute, they might have had second thoughts. For Vitaly, the central character, a day at the office consisted of reporting for duty at Treblinka concentration camp. Having proven his worth by volunteering to help the SS massacre tens of thousands of Jews at Babi Yar he now kills his way through the morning shift, takes a well-earned lunch and then on until the midday smoko. After work he manages to find time for a social life, love and the preparations for having a family.

There, but for the grace of God go I?

THE DEMIDENKO/DARVILLE FARCE has become the side show and a distraction to what has always been the main issue. It is the book as

published that is of real concern. Darville is of interest only in as much as her public statements have illuminated her intentions in writing the book. Initial defenders of the book now complain that those who take issue with the book are victimising the writer or arguing for the censorship of 'alternative views' of the Holocaust. Or even victimising those defenders of the book. Free speech and vigorous debate are the casualties. These positions show somewhat too much sensitivity not to mention some economy with the truth. No one I have read or spoken to has, in taking issue with the text, denied the writer to write or even the publisher to publish. It goes to the essence of the concept of free speech that we can agree or disagree and do it robustly.

Neither, as some would have it, is this a Jewish problem.

Perhaps the most chilling thing to come out of this whole sad episode is the source of the name

that Darville chose as her nom de plume. The only name of the perpetrators of the Babi Yar massacre of thirty-three thousand Jews recorded in two accounts, two books that Darville read before she wrote her book, was Demidenko.

As the generations of eyewitnesses of the Holocaust vanish, the truth of what they saw and survived and were able to bear witness to will be challenged by revisionists with many motivations to distort and to misrepresent. For those who died and for those who survived, the greatest libel and the greatest cruelty is to tell them that it didn't happen. The next worst insult is to tell them it was their fault – and to resurrect in their lifetimes the shabby and vile propaganda that seeks to justify the attempt to completely wipe a people off the face of the earth.

Bob Weis is a Melbourne film-maker.

THE BIG ONE

First the riots
where wrongs did not right wrongs.
Then Hades inferno
swept through the movie-star suburbs.

Perhaps Lucifer lives in the City of Angels.

Enough on its plate.

Two plates, actually
rubbing along San Andreas
on which nuclear power stations bubble.

The Big One
could be
a double-banger.

PHIL ILTON



TIM ROBERTSON and JOHN TIMLIN

The Pram Factory: Dramatis Personae



Blundell, Graeme

Actor-writer-director or Director-actor-writer or Writer-director-actor, boxed trifecta of talents, now resident Sydney after Reservoir origin. Married to actress-director Kerry Dwyer in **Pram Factory** days then to Margot Hilton (sep.) with whom he has written a biography of Brett Whiteley. Numerous roles stage, TV, film. Formative ideas man of the **Australian Performing Group (A.P.G.)**, La Mama and, later, the **Pram Factory (P.F.)** from which he resigned after a leadership tussle which made ALP faction fighting seem vaguely amateurish by comparison. Never looked back.

Clifton, Jane

Chanteuse, lead singer for *Stiletto*, actress (long running role in *Prisoner*) and sometime resident of the Pram Factory's Liturgical Centre and hostel, The Tower. Aural historian of its time.

Dickins, Barry

Raconteur, playwright, memorabilist, cartoonist, essayist, actor, artist, wit and comic sentimentalist with innumerable credits to his name including unforgettable productions of his plays *The Foolshoe Hotel*, *Death of Minnie*, *Mag and Bag* and a seamless performance as Old Croft in Barry Oakley's play *The Ship's Whistle* cf. **Oakley, Barry** during which, one night, garrulous beyond the call of script, his teeth fell out and were ground to permanent closure by a huge moving traverse causing, among the audience, much alarum which the play itself did not do.

Drysdale, Denise aka 'Ding Dong'

Comedienne, knock-about actress, personality and Melbourne celebrity who brilliantly exploited top heaviness on TV.

Flannery, Ed. d. 1992

Solicitor and member of the bar at *Stewarts* cf. *Stewarts, Hotel* and later Percy's Bar and Bistro.

Fraser, Malcolm

Grazier and former Prime Minister who has appeared as Max Gillies cf. *Gillies, Max* in sundry television and stage performances. Quite talented though never showed much as a boy. Later revealed more in Memphis and influenced John Kerr who subsequently appeared also as Max Gillies under that and the other influence.

Gallagher, Carl

Itinerant scribbler, painter, street man and one-time habitué of *Stewarts* fringing on **Nightshift**.

Garner, Bill

Brilliant actor, writer and pansophist with mercurial and quixotic tendencies leading him to adopt positions of advocacy derived, often, from the particular institution where, at the time, he lies - Melbourne University, Monash, Pram Factory, ABC, freelance etc.

Garner, Helen

Writer and early functional feminist who wrote

Monkey Grip, featuring some members of this cast, and *The First Stone*. 'Twixt those, many novels, articles and scripts. Collaborator on *Betty Can Jump* at the Pram.

Gillies, Max

Actor/Politician frequently mistaken for somebody else. First elected Chairman of the A.P.G. in post natal shuffling towards worker control cf. *Fraser, Malcolm*. Many major roles and collaborative productions at P.F., MTC, Nimrod, Australian Opera, SATC etc. and in his own shows e.g. *A Night With the Right*, *The Max Gillies Summit*, *A Night of National Reconciliation* etc. from which came the trail-blazing TV satirical series, *The Gillies Report*.

Hannan, Bill and Lorna

Known *en bloc* as 'the Hannans', they have, for years, applied their intelligences to education. Co-wrote *The Compulsory Century* at the P.F. where they introduced pure and applied theory, agility and procedural dexterity in the *coup du Pram* which, eventually, caused the departure of Graeme Blundell cf. *Blundell, Graeme*. Never looked back.

Hawkes, Jon aka 'Jonno'

Swimmer, juggler, accountant, strongman, actor, administrator and calligrapher with Church background. Psychedelic bolshevist who smoked with Ché, out-raved Fidel and performed mouth-to-mouth on Mao. Head: Department of Liturgy, The Tower (**resident**), P.F. and some other joints. Now Director of the **International Theatre Institute** in Sydney.

Hibberd, Jack

Playwright, novelist, doctor, specialising in allergies, and poet who has also turned his hand to directing and criticism; presently Melbourne theatre critic for **The Australian**. Best known, perhaps, for *A Stretch of the Imagination*, *A Toast to Melba*, *One of Nature's Gentlemen* and *Dimboola* but penned many others including, most recently, *Slam Dunk* and *Hotel Paradiso*. Occupied Chair at the P.F. and was member of the

Australia Council's Drama Panel and Theatre Board.

'Horse trough', Harry aka Harry Davis, 1919-1995

Bon viveur till he died this year (aged 76 yrs despite his occupation). Drank professionally in Tasmania before being given an open clearance by his family and an allowance to stay permanently out of their hotels in that State. Hustled pool at Martini's Hotel, Carlton outside of which was a horse trough hence adoptive *nomme du rue*.

Ingleton, Sue

Comedienne, writer and husband-beater as pregnant alter ego of *Bill Rawlins*, a gender performer traversal who she represents on stage and television. Many major roles at P.F. where she was a principal of the theatrically experimental sub-group, **Stasis**.

Kramer, Danny

Street man having proprietary feeling for Carlton benches with bottle of Fosters. Intrepid and versatile conversationalist banned from most Carlton hotels for infelicitous behaviour when gripped by the product they sell.

Krape, Evelyn

Actress; comical, tragical and physical. Spectacular performance in Dario Fo's one actor play *Female Parts* and many others – Astrid in *Dimboola*, Granny astride in *The Hills Family Show*, Melba in *A Toast to Melba* by husband, Jack Hibberd, Ginger in her own show, *Ginger*, at the Playbox and the Nurse in the MTC's *Romeo and Juliet* etc., etc.

Mastare, Stephen

Playwright, poet and street man whose play, *It's Cingalese For Lightning You Know*, celebrating Oz icon, *Phar Lap*, was performed at the P.F. and the Perth Festival.

Milne, Lorraine

Composer and musical director who worked on many Pram Factory shows – *Marvellous Melbourne*, *Dimboola* (Musical Director in the show's band, *Lionel Driftwood and the Piledrivers*), *The Hills Family Show*, *Waltzing Matilda* etc. Earlier worked top band, *The Semblance of Dignity*.

Mitchell, David

Actor and man with several bars on his Cross. Many MTC performances and also played Father O'Shea in *Dimboola* (Chevron Hotel production; director, **Tim Robertson**).

Mokotow, Fay 1948-1984

Actress, director and sometime Chair of the **A.P.G.** at the Pram. First female director of Nimrod, her career was cut tragically short by a brain tumour. Leading figure in Melbourne Jewish Theatre and La Mama group, **Tribe**.

Mooney, Ray

Novelist, playwright and scriptwriter first published by Brian Johns at Penguin. Works closely with The Melbourne Writers' Theatre at the Carlton Courthouse. The film *Every Night, Every Night* derives from his prose fiction.

'Moonface', aka Bert Newton

Popular TV presenter and compere, actor, Fitzroy barracker and long-time comic supporter and straight man on Graham Kennedy's *In Melbourne Tonight*.

Motherwell, Phil

Playwright, novelist and actor, member of the wild-side **Nightshift** sub-Group at the Pram Factory where was produced his play *Dreamers of the Absolute*. Regularly cast as bad guy in film and TV where his work experience allows considerable verisimilitude.

Oakley, Barry

Novelist, playwright and witerary editor of *The Australian* to whose colour magazine he contrib-

utes a weekly column of ironic observation. His plays have, allegedly, presaged the closure of two theatres (**Emerald Hill** – sadly – and the **William Bates Memorial Theatre** – thankfully). With the exception of *The Ship's Whistle* cf. *Dickins, Barry*, they were packed out at the Pram – *Bedfellows*, *The Feet of Daniel Mannix* and *Beware of Imitations*; the last-named creating the box office record: 220 bums on seats!

Porter, Carol

Actress, designer and artist who gravitated towards the **Nightshift** sub-group captained by Lindzee Smith cf. *Smith, Lindzee*, her favoured theatrical clairvoyant at the time of her residency at the Liturgical Centre. Saw active service in the *Women's Theatre Group*.

Romeril, John

Playwright, poet and songwriter of amazing fecundity and imagination – over sixty plays to his name including *The Floating World* which has been translated into Japanese for performance in Japan and here at the Playbox. Central theorist, political analyst and writer of the Left Bent.

Shuv'us

A natural **Nightshifter** who graduated from real life to become the falling star of Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* from which he went forth into the wilderness with *Lindzee Smith*.

Smith, Lindzee

Geelong Collegian and theatrical clairvoyant who acquired guru status after numerous trips. To New York where he acquired local twang and insider deals on Theatrical World Best Practice which eventually enabled the formation of his **Nightshift** sub-group financed, democratically, by the overwhelmingly bourgeois **A.P.G. Collective**.

Smythe, John

Director and actor whose contribution to the Pram in its early days included directing the world premiere of Katharine Susannah Prichard's award-winning play, *Brumby Innes*.

Spears, Steve J.

Writer and actor whose *Africa*, a savage rock musical (dir. **Lindzee Smith**), got a run at the P.F. His play, *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* enabled Gordon Chater a comfortable retirement.

Stewarts, Hotel

Carlton's sometime think and drink tank on Drummond St. corner of Elgin wherein was various piffle and waffle talked. The hotel's management, Alf Morton (.1% at the breakfast barrier; an improver through the day) and wife, Val (*Miss Victoria*, 1952, an award noticed by *Mr Football* cf. **Whitten, Ted**) was complemented by bartender Gino whose wife, Dulcie, became the dinkum Oz elocutionary model for the Canadian production (dir. **Tim Robertson**) of *The Floating World* cf. **Romeril, John**. It was destroyed by owner Grollo's renovation which involved a wall of mirrors in the bar, thus causing the mob to move on to Percy's Bar and Bistro rather than take a good, long, hard look at themselves.

Taylor, Tony

Actor and a parfit gentle soul who was closetly disturbed by the violent verbal delivery of Pram Factory rhetoriticians at Collective meetings. Many brilliant performances and writings – *Back to Bourke Street* and *The Hills Family Show* are wonderful tributes to his imagination and energy.

Timlin, John

Welder and mechanic responsible for seat construction at the Pram and, later, getting bums on them. Prefers Grange to Grunge but Left to Right. Diversely reviewed by the Collective in the range Bully to Yuletide Eve Celebrant, the latter on account of letting the keys to the safe fall into the hands of the **Nightshift** sub-group whose membership was on the light side in the finger department.

Tisdall, Billy

Little known but flitted in the shadows of **Nightshift** acting in some productions at La Mama and elsewhere.

Whitten, Ted aka 'Mr Football' aka 'E.J.'

Footscray's Founding Father of football federalism and State games evangelist. Champion footballer in any position, any era who died on 17th August 1995 and was accorded a State Funeral after an heroic losing game against cancer. Some of the last quarter was played at the MCG; an unforgettable performance. Reviewed by P.M. Paul Keating as "a working class hero". Regular at *Stewarts* cf. *Stewarts, Hotel* and consultant to Val.

Williamson, David

Australia's tallest and most popular playwright whose *Don's Party* was premiered at the Pram wherein there were small cells of malcontents unmoved by his work. These cells were later divided and multiplied by the playwright in memorabilia which established the contagion as a Maoist plague on his plays, forcing him from the A.P.G. to distant Diamanté Creek, then to pleasant exile in Sydney.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig

Aeronautical engineer and gardener about whom little is known. His early decease brought speculation that this Austrian philosopher may have been denied entry to **Nightshift** and chose, instead, Death whereof he cannot speak, so has remained silent.

John Timlin is a son of Footscray and sometime Administrator of the Pram Factory after a conspicuous career in weighbridge design and manufacture. Collaborated with Jack Hibberd and John Romeril on the entertainments, respectively, Goodbye Ted and The Dudders. Sundry contributions, short stories, articles etc. and now works with Fran Bryson running the literary agency, The Almost Managing Co. Pty. Ltd.

TIM ROBERTSON

Making Up, Breaking Down

From a work in progress on a pataphysical purview into, through and out of the Australian Performing Group and the Pram Factory 1968-78.



RAVE VI

A Group Mugshot with a Partial Anatomy of the Group Head

THE EARLY SEVENTIES was the time of the travellers' return to the Pram. People were coming back from Grand Tours of the places they had dreamed of going to in the sixties. New York. California. Ireland. South America. Israel. The Orient. Smith and Hawkes were wearing tea cosies on their heads like black dudes from Harlem. Hair was worn guerrilla campanero, Christ and the apostles length, or else very short like Lou Reed, who was pretending to be a coloured girl in a bar in Berlin. David Bowie was allsorts, androgynous in space. Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes was on the air. Marriages were showing signs of wear and tear as, for ideologically sound reasons, we hopped into the lineaments of gratified desire. They ripened, opened and split almost organically. We heeded the insistence of guid Dr Laing that madness be allowed its vision and ecstasy its due. "The family, the family's to blame!" We went along with that.

RISE ANGRY MAN WOMAN

exhorted the writing on the wall, on the corner of the highrise on Station and Elgin streets.

Around the shared households of North Fitzroy, just as Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* recounts, there was always somebody on a dope run, or waiting to score, a dealer neverendingly imminent. Prodigious amounts of time and money (proportional to income) were outlaid in securing drug recreation. Borrowing defective

vehicles to fetch buddha on a stick, from some place in Templestowe, through a connection of someone in Indelible Murtceps, or chasing microdots in Sunshine and ending up in Johnny's Green Room snookered by Motherwell, speedrabbiting on the peripetias of the pursuit of pleasure, slowly strangled by dawn's greasy fingers.

Despite nearly losing the text roistering through Ireland in 1969, with *Dimboola*, the Wedding Reception Play, Jack Hibberd had contrived a sentimental burlesque of repudiated rituals, an ultimately reassuring send-up of what had become a disaster area. Dramaturgically, it provided a simple solution to the performer/audience relationship that had also become problematic. He slashed the gordian knot of how to get the audience to participate in the action by casting them as wedding guests and ensuring they all got a drink. Everyone knew the decorums, how to join in and how to misbehave. Hibberd deserved a guernsey in the Tulane. Drama. Review. What he received was the disparagement of the hip, born-again Americans of the Tower for whom the boozy bucolic romp was an embarrassment. Not that Jack needed reassurance. No one did in those dead set, cocky days. And he had the last laugh when *Dimboola* went commercial with a long run at the Chevron Hotel. Even the hip jumped at the chance of their first pro. season. Even Carol Porter, who played the bride when Denise Drysdale had to go off and spin the wheel with Moonface and Jane Clifton who took on Shirl the burling bridesmaid and put up with Steve Spears as Dangles, the best man. Both avant-gardistes fattened their accounts along with their derrieres. During the extensive mute intervals that fall to their char-

acters in the second half, they would unhook each other's gowns and wade into the pav.

Lindzee Smith was built like a brick shit-house, as if designed to be the bouncer of the Mudd Club N.Y. he at one stage would become. He and Jon Hawkes were old mates, an XOX, psychedelic/bolshevist David and Jonathan. They had surfed together at 13th Beach, past Torquay when Lindzee was an Eltham ingenue. After getting into yoga and the APG, they would still come down with other Towerchildren and, after blowing a few numbers do headstands in the sand. Among their naked, inverted compeers, they would focus through the third eye, feet rooted in the sky, scrota aflop. In younger, roaring days, after a big Geelong victory, they would lair back to Lindzee's original home turf on the wrong side of the highway, with Hawkes taking up a dare to ride clinging to the rim of the windscreen. These brothers were out to outrad the most rad. Had he come of age in the fifties, ponytailed Jonno, Clydesdale of a lad, son of an Anglican minister, might have become a Catholic. In the sixties he was bound to become a Maoist. Lindzee and Jonno discovered America together, on and off. Lindzee (Dentist) Smith with that frenzied grin that said yes to the weirdest shit possible, was ineluctably drawn to California, Ultima Thule of the Weird.

Doc Hibberd looked a little pale and scrawny up against these renegade apaches but they were wary of his proverbial fang when deriding his Euro-Celtic cultural bag. They could all laugh, boys together, somewhat forcefully and Hibberd would bogart the joint in a sub-textual culture clash between peers of rural backgrounds. The earring meaning I don't belong in Geelong, the tattoo signifying AUM on the fist of El Smith, these raised Jack's hackles. Suffering a Hypostasis of the Vernacular himself, he would wince at the nasal newyorkasing of the vowels, the rolling of the final 'r's': "Hey, man, this here is Hunterr. He used to be an action painterr. Now he's gotten minimal. Orr minimallerr."

FAVOURED FORMS of greeting between Pram Factory persons were an ironic 'chief', 'captain', 'squire' or 'boss' ("Godda joint, Captain?" was a catchcry of the house). This was part of the levelling urge in a ruck of egos out

to equalise, yet we all remained dandies of different kinds: yankee-doodle, baudelairean, third world, all of us were out trying to cut a figure. A prominent element of display was only to be expected from a performing group in a perpetual season of rut. Very few of the males wore the bag of fruit. 'Suits' were becoming the contemptuous synechdoche now used in reference to members of the executive/managerial elite. John Timlin, socialist/capitalist adventurer of Irish convict stemming, whose managerial sangfroid helped balance the group on the brink of financial dissolution for ten years, wore a suit. The group bought it for him. He claimed it as a costume, respectable beggar's weeds in which to petition funding bodies.

Strangely there are no Timlins to be found in the Melbourne phone book. They hail exclusively from Ballina near Sligo, and are genetically disposed to keep their heads down and stick to their home patch. They found ways and means to eat their way through the potato famine. If the name is not in the book there are no doubt dark and sufficient reasons; non-existence should not be inferred. Timlins are biologically driven to do their hailing by phone. John Stephen has phone numbers encoded in his DNA and certainly exists in Melbourne because someone is always there asking where he is and someone else always knows he has moved into Fraser's room St Vincent's (Private) to have his kidney sliced (for no good reason as it turns out) and then you run into him at Percy's, on the wagon, denouncing his surgeon as a brain-dead loser and being called to the phone.

Only the blocking of access to Telecom seems life-threatening to Timlin, so surnamed by intimate and alienate alike. He will not come at mobiles, sneers at them that do as he clings to the old style of doing things. The inventor of a new, improved weighbridge, he prides himself on his judgement and balance as he operates in the virtual reality of the arts of finance and the finance of the arts, trying, in this bad world, to live a decent life. From the time the group acquired its Pram Factory venue, until the honorable wind-up of the new Ensemble, Timlin was always there, in person or the subject of conversation about his health, his rat acts, his bodgie demeanour – administrator, facilitator,

fixer, fulcrum. He did duck out in '77 for nine months or so to go, disastrously, into pictures.

While he was out he also teamed up with Hibberd and slipped a Footy Testimonial show into the Chevron Theatre Restaurant in the wake of my production of *Dimboola*. Entitled *Goodbye Ted* (after Ted Whitten, the Footscray legend, who stands next to Ludwig Wittgenstein in the Timlin pantheon), it proved a tidy little earner and he invested the royalties in a house in Falconer St. This purchase demonstrated the tension in the balance mechanism between our Collective and our Capitalist Steward. The house had been a Tribe house, a group household for years. It was Nora's house in *Monkey Grip* and now here comes Timlin, like bloody Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*, buying it up, hollowing it out with slate and glass, uprooting the happy, hippy ethos. Timlin, regarding Karl Marx as a comic novelist, never buying the half-baked critique of *Kapital* attributed to Karl round the Pram, remained defiantly unrepentant. The renovated house was not to be a happy one, becoming the site of yet another nuclear implosion. Timlin pretended a hide too thick to feel the satirical barbs of the evicted; whipping-boy was ever part of his job description.

Hibberd was prone to wear jackets and waistcoats after the manner of a wine bar *exquisite*, the leftover persona of the *poete maudit* he had paraded as a student. He favoured dark, morbid colours and would have blended into the jungles of Le Douanier Rousseau – trousers tangerine, mauve or maroon, socks that flashed like para-keets. Timlin's suits came more from the palette of Brack's Collins St five o'clock, in financial fawns and gubernatorial grey, contrasting the plumredness of his cheek and jowl. Jon Hawkes sometimes appeared in tropical creams and a panama, with shades and no socks, a look that smacked of Colombian drug baronetcy. Lindzee never wore suits, or not as himself, the brigandish character of the demimonde he was building up anyway, only in performance as ugly and/or derelict Australians. His look was loose, crumpled and unbuttoned, a boxing trainer with a touch of the saddhu and the opium eater. Subfusc with afroamerican exclamations about the head and neck, red and black and traces of silver and gold. Over the top and edgy.

THERE WAS, after a fashion, a Pram Factory look: op shop radical chic, proletarian plain or fancy. Both sexes were committed to boilersuits and overalls. Patches were flaunted like badges of honour, rainbow covenants with more handiwork to them than the garments to which they were sewn. A deal of patching and knitting went on during collective meetings and rehearsal. The skills were much admired in those men who could publicly exhibit them. Possibly for reasons of psychological hygiene, Tony Taylor knitted Fairisle complexes, a vibrant glow at the tips of his needles, lightning rods channelling rage and energies repressed into warm, socially acceptable abstract expressionism. Woollen fabric issued from Evelyn Krape, organically it seemed. One of the original great balls of fire, Ms Krape converted huge quantities of high anxiety and frustration into so many woollen golems for the legs, the feet, the necks and backs of friends and relations and their babies, for herself and sometimes even for the backs of the patriarchy.

The Mme LaFarge of the company, crowned with a brazen head of fleecy curls, an henna'd periwig ("O toison!", groaned Hibberd), she knitted, con furia, golden spex aglint, spiky and cuddly. Scorning, scoffing, scimitar-schnozzed, sweater girl, turning out a ten-metre rainbow serpent of a scarf and embodying in her pint-sized person the trinity of gamine, siren and clown. In attack, like the skua, diving into the jokers, the cronies, the conniving misogynists of the pub push, she would take them on and take them off. She gave the definitive female Mousey in a touring production of *One of Nature's Gentlemen*, a crazy mirror image of Blundell's which shared the same sort of buzzing, driven energy, Evvy and the little goy from Reservoir, both rampant manifestations of the short-person-in-showbusiness syndrome.

Female parts were hard to come by. Talent alone could not shine through the bushell of group and sexual politics. A touch of Philby in the night was required. To score, persons of whatever sex needed to be either clear-eyed networking macchiavels, or desperate enough to do anything and preferably both. Women had to shift for themselves and by 1973 they had done so, setting up the Women's Theatre Group on

the loan of a smell of an oil rag in what Sue Ingleton regarded as her old room in the Tower. To get in the Front Theatre shows female talent was obliged to be versatile and forbearing. In *Waltzing Matilda*, a polymorphous, nationalist pantomime, Evelyn played a jumbuck born of the Virgin Mary. The same show gave Jane Clifton a chance to go straight in a funded situation: the role of Cupid, a koala. She was also the Stage Manager, something most shows previously had not had and which most performers did not wish to be. Ingleton back from England and ready for anything smacking of bent gender, played the Swagman who loved the bosomy jumbuck.

Women looked swell in tails and fracs and smokings. Sometimes they looked like armed mimes. Female appearance, offstage, often had a paramilitary edge to it, like the warriors or campfollowers of irregular armies, guerrillieres. Snappy, feral androgynes stepped out and about the traps. The beret was back. And sandals and sensible shoes, although dressing up high fantastically with Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, was still popular. There was abundant silk, velvet, cheesecloth and patchwork. Curtains were worn, tablecloths and coverlets from ransacked trousseaux by marauding muskrat rambles cruising the Reefer Cabaret or Much More Ballroom. Part of the look was the touch and a touch of the orient predominated.

The blokes on the other hand, tended not to touch. In the pub, where they kept abreast of events, embracing, fondling and caressing were frowned upon. Thumping was possible, jabbing and kicking, the odd cuff, OK. Women only entered the pubs with cheques to sign, inamorata to meet, or ultimata to deliver. Few actually sat down. Fay Mokotow did, with her legs tucked neatly beneath her in a pub asana, as befitted a Tribe survivor, to work over the Grant Strategy, say, with Timlin. Fay's liquid brown eyes surveyed the smokehazed shambles of many a long and liquid lunch. She could maintain the focus on the crisis of the hour at Stewarts when the afternoon sun strained through the apricot curtain to fall in a heap on the unspeakable carpet next to Dickins and Timlin's aimless whistle filled the pauses around four, or

when the bar was roaring and ribald after six, sometimes even when it got venomous, forgetful and irrevocable in the fatal hour before closing.

LET US CLOSE IN on Dickins as he lies there, next to bald legal eagle Ed Flannery, who having approached the bar has now fallen from his stool. Barry had large chunks of Christopher Brennan by heart and had been overcome by bardic bends deep in the first stanza of the Wanderer. Nobody could tell if he was making it up. Dickins made himself up, although by no means self-composed, for when not comatose, he was always in a state of agitation, or whipping himself towards one. I mean he invented personae to play in Carltonia, a Bohemia he botched up for himself. Barry arrived from Reservoir the way glory-struck heroes of French romance came to Paris from their provinces. Having invested the dump with mystique and allure, he came to conquer it. A small pen and wash drawing he sold my mother in the persona of the derelict genius all-rounder, illustrates a scene from this bodgy vie boheme. (It was done after he had been shaken up, well we all were, by the raw brutality of Ray Mooney's *Every Night, Every Night* at the Pram.) A Self-portrait with Jacks in Little Gore St: Dickins centre, holding false teeth and manuscript is caught in the torchlight of one of two fell sergeants of police, the one with the warty penile nose and tacks for false teeth. Dickins bows, as if reflexively, a gummy, hunchbacked pierrot. There is something of Guernica in the play of light, though the lovers caught embracing in the garbage can are French and the graffiti on the dirty brick wall:

the fountain
leaps & flowers
in many roses
the crystal petals
breaking, breaking
forever
are changed to
falling tears

is signed Charles Baudelaire. He first haunted the streets as Benny Lettuce. Perhaps Italian,

some orphic orphan, starveling poet, who dropped his battered little spirex in my letter-box, a supplicant. Benny enlarged into K.G. Fish, who was more your rag and bone man of letters on the mean streets of Brunswick, his tremendous tin ear cocked to the music of the spheres, the people's tribune and surrealistic confidante. K.G. Fish blurred into Dickins. He attempted to pass himself off as a descendant of the great Charles, despite being a vowel astray. Few but the dyslexic continue to believe him. There are some resemblances it may be argued: the persistent prodigality of output, a wild veering between sentiment and grotesquerie in the work, a performance compulsion, the need for attention, the taste for actresses. Dickins swears there was a clerical error at a registrar's office. A sensitive soul, he will offer violence if gainsaid too far. He has the stocky, all-of-a-piece physique of the stockfish. The head/neck alignment is quite fused, the neck, astonishingly, pulled in.

Truth is Barry Dickins made up all the denizens of Carltonia, the boys in the pub, like a dinkum Damon Runyon. Danny Kramer soliciting at the door of the Albion, Magog and his grog; his protege Steve Mastare, potpoetaster, obsessively spiralling his hair; Harry Horse-trough, emphysematic but dapper in a tifter, paid to keep out of Tasmania, Ed, out to it on the floor beside him, the lot of us. Gab is his gift and he has the voice of a butcher at the Vic Markets to pass it on. The bars, restaurants and parties of Carltonia are his stage and spiels extemporised on his favorite themes – Yass, neckchops, teeth, David Mitchell, the ghosts of showbusiness past and their relationship to the Old Postal Exchange, whatever, the raves of Dickins, performance-playwright, are among the funniest I ever pissed myself at. On a good night. In conventional spaces he was less accomplished, cavalier with cues, loath to repeat himself; word that Dickins was in the house was dreaded by actors. He seemed unable to maintain the passive/receptive posture expected of an audience. Between dozes, invention would rise in him, reddening his neck, engorging his head, to burst out of him, slumped or crouched there aggressively, in honks. Fay, arbiter of propriety, poured a jug of cold water over him and

he came to his senses, to hop into their *dereglement systematique* once more.

FOR VARIOUS REASONS there were those who kept clear of the pub or maintained a position superior to it. The group was divided along drug lines: depressant v narcotic, Alcohol v Dope. Timlin and Smith were terms in this polarity. The Celtic, Catholic, wobbily married rump parked itself in the pub, as it had since time immemorial. The single, separated, or fluctuating cohabitants of the Tower had a low tolerance of alcohol abuse but would condone, indeed abuse, everything else. Of course there were many like myself, who enjoyed a catholicity of ingestion, ecumenical in abuse. Lindzee was to be seen in the pub but usually to work out as an antibody, bearding the lion luses, he wasn't quite at home there. He came to pick up on the latest with an entourage of likely lags, Shuv'us, Gallagher, Billy Tisdall say, mahogany-faced, like harpooners off the Pequod, out on a dismal spree, looking to score.

All the Johns smoked. Hawkes, Timlin, Romeril, Smith, even John Smythe before he disappeared, they were as one in this. Timlin avoided narcotic admixture. Prudentially concentrating his mind on the demon drink he counselled wrestling with a maximum of two drugs at a time. The women smoked, rollies mainly, very thin. Douwe Egbert's light and dark, sometimes with a suspicion of cannabis. The weak kif of Carlton was especially rife in kitchens. A joint and a bit of a rave had succeeded the Bex and a nice lie down as accompaniment to a cup of tea. The nice lie down was now more frequently enjoyed *a deus*. The tea was fashionably a tisane of camomile, rosehip, jasmine – another sign of an oriental drift to incense, unguents, tantrics, macrobiotics, to Eastern aesthetics and mysticism. Naturally the Catholic literary ascendancy poopoo'd these foreign influences and paraphernalia. Oakley, for example, would have no truck with that scene. With the air of a prelate unfrocked but still unbuttoned, he surveyed it, straight as a ramrod, pent, occasionally releasing high staccato guffaws, sucking on anally constrictive, low-tar cigarettes. Barry never went

a-dope-hunting, in Tigerland or anywhere.

Oakley came to the group (in 1971) "because one Saturday morning Graeme Blundell and Timlin arrived and asked me to write a play about the Catholic Church. I had written three plays for La Mama, one of which Graeme had directed (*A Lesson in English*). So we had some approximate value of each other's talents. They saw the piece as a review style treatment, a satirical/critical treatment. Then they went away for me to think about it. I did and thought I'd base the play on Mannix. I suggested this to them (not to any committee at that stage, thank heaven), and they gave me the go-ahead. So I wrote the script, Romeril and Williamson wrote some lyrics and Lorraine Milne wrote the music. There were fortuitous aspects. Spence was perfect for Mannix and Gillies' genius for mimicry hadn't been fully realised till he did Santamaria."

The success of *The Feet of Daniel Mannix* kept the place going at a crucial time and it built up a good working relationship between Bruce and Max which was exploited a year later in *Beware of Imitations*. "There were some group or sub-group discussions about what should go in a Menzies play", Oakley remembers of the genesis of that show, somewhat shrewdly: "It was here I learned the art of the group-developed show. What you do, if you're the writer – a title not

always acknowledged by some in the group, this being regarded as worthy but no more than a journeyman, a tradesman, don't get too many big ideas about yourself, thanks just because you work with your head and not with your hands, thankyou Chairman Mao. The art consists of nodding your head at almost every collective suggestion except the most asinine, then quietly going away and dropping what you didn't like. Out of this overtness (the play-group) and covertness (me writing it after) came a basic script from me, which, in rehearsals, combusted into highly creative scenes. In this Max and Bruce got on as if in a dream, as if they were having an affair, as if they could do no wrong – and their little improvisational romance was creatively directed and assisted by Bill Hannan. It was the most creative and exciting improvising I've ever been involved in, and made all the Pram Factory's tenets seem to be right – but the reason was not so much the tenets as the talent."

Tim Robertson was educated in Perth and later taught drama at Flinders University till migrating to the Pram Factory where he acted, directed and wrote. Among his plays are Tristram Shandy – Gent, A Night In Rio and Other Bummers, Mary Shelley And The Monsters and Waltzing Matilda – a National Pantomime With Tomato Sauce. Currently writing a play around the life of Kepler. Many acting credits on stage, film and TV.

SEASCAPE

Low tides drain peninsulas of rock,
wavering green islands. You walk past
depths you swam in last summer,
stir pools of kelp, inlaid with marble:
you cull a baby's tooth, a crocodile tear.
Mounds of seaweed give out the morning's
stored heat – sweet salty breath.

Sculptured by water, stone plateaus unnerve
bare feet, the cliff you climb blown
slowly towards, lapsing away from, this
jewelled ocean. A view of sunken continents,
sky flecked with foam, a midday moon.

DIANE FAHEY

OVERLAND READERS will be deeply saddened to learn of the death of former editor Barrett Reid. Barrett, who had been suffering from cancer for years, and had had a particularly grim battle over the last two years, died peacefully at home on August 6. Before his retirement, Barrett was Deputy State Librarian of Victoria, and had been chiefly responsible for developing the comprehensive system of public regional libraries in that state. From his days as a student at South Brisbane State High School he had had an active interest in poetry and the arts, and with Lawrence Collinson and Edward Segmund established the journal *Barjai* in 1943 while they were still students. After seeing the journal develop from a duplicated school magazine to a professionally produced national arts magazine for Australian youth, they abandoned their editorship when, on turning twenty-one, they felt they had left youth behind them. Barrett moved to Melbourne and commenced a long association with the art patrons, John and Sunday Reed, through whom he became involved with many leading artists of the time. He was also associated with Max Harris and his journals, *Angry Penguins* and, later, *Ern Malley's Journal*, and became a major theorist and critic of modern Australian poetry. His first appearance in the pages of *Overland* was through

a discussion he shared with John Reed and Ian Turner on the exhibition of 'Two Decades of American Art'. This discussion was published in *Overland* 37, 1967. He became a member of the editorial board in 1968 and contributed his knowledge and insight to the selection of poetry and the encouragement of new poets. In 1978 he assisted, through the National Book Council, in establishing the new series of the *Australian Book Review*. On their death the Reeds left him responsibility for their personal collection, their papers and their house, Heide, where he lived until his own death. In his last years, as well as editing *Overland*, he prepared a selection of his own poems, which was published by Angus and Robertson last September, and worked on the preparation of selections from the Reed papers for publication and a catalogue for future reference. In the next issue of *Overland* we hope to publish full tribute to his work, and some of his last work.

AS WE GO TO PRESS, the Literature Board, soon, inexplicably, to be renamed the Liberature Fund, is deliberating over the future form its program of support for literary magazines should take. The public debate over this issue has been marked by recriminations from former recipients of Board funds, complaints from

sponsors of new journals who have been unable to obtain any funds for their endeavours, demands from writers that they should receive professional payment for their work, and the usual cries of the economic rationalists that all journals should have to stand on their own feet in a competitive market.

Amid this debate, *Overland* supports three clear principles. First, we firmly believe that if Australia is to remain independent within the global economy we must provide public support for local literary and artistic production. The growth of international electronic networks, which magnify the distinctions between the rich and the poor, both as producers and as receivers, makes this support even more important.

Second, we believe that a substantial part of this support should go to the maintenance of diverse editorial voices within the print media – that is, we must continue to support at least the present diversity of literary and cultural journals. At present, the total support for the magazine program is \$300,000 a year – just about sufficient to produce three CD-Roms. This amount needs to be increased rather than diminished or concentrated. A proportion should be used to support new ventures, but not at the expense of established journals.

Third, we believe that the jour-

nals should be able to pay authors rates that would enable them to live by their writing. However, just as the AFL knows that by raising rates to players it will reduce the number of clubs, so the Board, if it merely raises the rates to contributors, will kill off a number of magazines. Such a policy, instead of providing greater support for authors, would merely provide more money to fewer writers. If the Board instead diverted some of its money from the support program for individual writers to enable journals to commission work directly at professional rates of pay, it would both take some of the heat out of the – unjustified – criticism of its own administration of patronage and increase the diversity of support available to Australian writers.

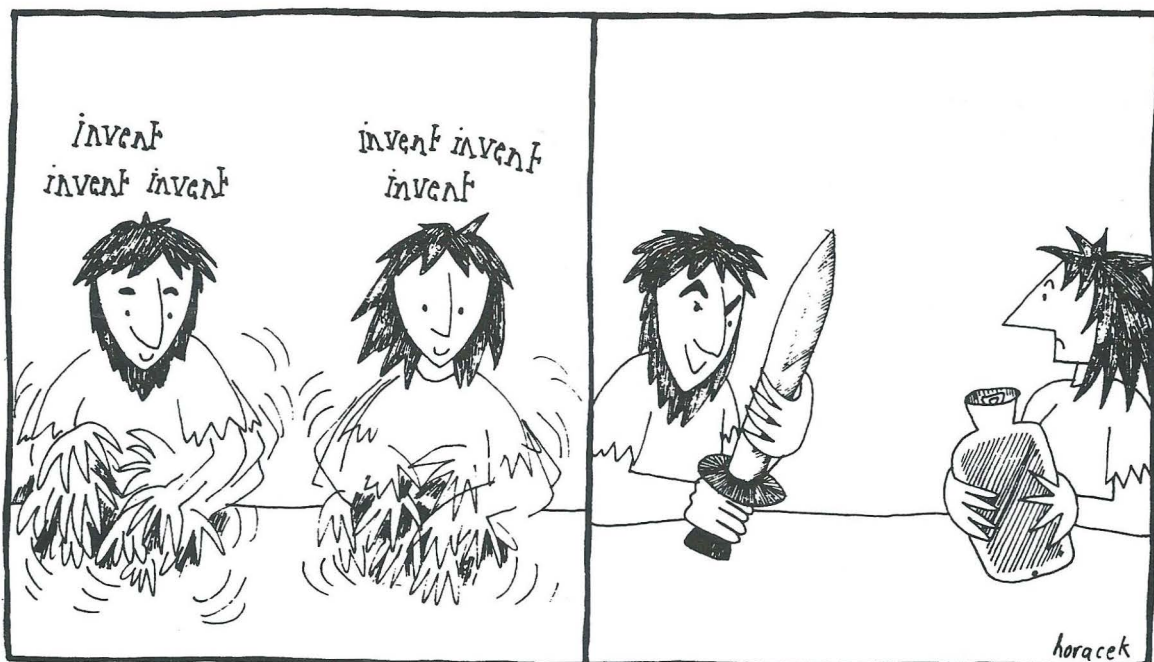
In the meantime, *Overland* continues to survive because of the

generosity of our supporters, both those who contribute regularly to our Floating Fund and those who give of their time in volunteer labour. Subscribers who want to do more to secure our future might consider giving gift subscriptions – if we could double our subscriptions we could both balance our books and pay contributors well.

IN DECEMBER this year the writer David Martin turns eighty. Born Ludwig Desinyi in Hungary, in a long career he has contributed to the literatures of Germany, England, and Australia. In his autobiography, *My Strange Friend* (1991), he chronicles an eventful life that led him from education in Germany to the Civil War in Spain, wartime in England, an interval in Palestine and a time in India, before becoming permanently settled in Australia, where

he was one of the group who founded *Overland* in 1954. His writing includes poetry, fiction, children's fiction, reportage and trenchant social criticism. He has been one of the most regular and distinguished contributors to this journal, and for many years provided the editor with a critical analysis of each issue as it appeared. In this issue we publish an essay on the man and his work by his friend and fellow-writer Cliff Green. But Martin himself has always said that it is the work that counts, not the person – an opinion I cannot altogether agree with. We have also commissioned a number of critical assessments of his writing which will appear during the next year. In the meantime, our best wishes go to David and Richenda in Beechworth, where they are now living.

John McLaren



horacek

from 'Life on the Edge'

A REVERENCE FOR SPIN

Spinning toward the sun,
Earth seems to pause in that still place,
... not yet day, not still night,
neither space nor sun,
but a mingling;

darkness ebbing
light gathering,
a seam of light thickens at the horizon
a pale crack in the dark shell of night.

Sky becomes uncertain,
pales with indecision,
but the birds are sure
begin their heady songs of celebration,

and wavering country dams
discharge their small mists
so that even water is confused
rises threadily beneath the paling sky,
waiting on a firmer light
to settle, smooth as glass.

But cows are not poetical,
drink from airy pools, unperturbed,
and beneath their stolid feet,
the ground is firm.
No thought of spin or space.

We are closer now.
The sky foretells the flame.

Birds quieten as we tilt
toward the blazing tip of sun,
at first a flicker burning on a hill
then blossoming like flame,
a fiery, blazing disc,
rising, clean as moon.

Heedless of such daily miracles,
the Earth spins on.

CAROLYN MORWOOD

THE MAYOR

after Frank Hardy

When his missus had shot through
just before the Duke of Gloucester's visit
he needed a Lady Mayoress for the reception,
so hired a prostitute. She passed OK except
when she hitched up her skirt
and had a snake's in the hand basin.
After all, the Duke wouldn't have known
one working class colonial from another
and the Duchess kept her gloves on,
didn't need to wash her hands.

Then there was the time he drove
the Council's steamroller into the Yarra,
got a three hundred quid commission
on the sale of a new one. Fair enough
for a chuckle over a few gins years later.
He even steamrolled Wren's machine
and Keon's and the left to make
a building site for independence
in the inner suburbs. Local government
today is corporate, slick as soapy water,
plays Pilate to the old rorts.

But what the municipal incinerator burned
besides the waste from backyard abortions
and pre-selection ballot boxes
from unreliable wards, we'll never know.
"*Non corpus delicti*" Squizzy used to say –
"No corpse, no bloody inquest".
What do we wash our hands in when
we avoid judgement or before
we clap them or slap our thighs
for the larrikin battler and his heirs?
Are we sure it's sweeter than a whore's piss?

TIM THORNE

TO TEACH YOU

If I had the words
to paint your pain
to the earth disturbers,
to the parasitic powers
that decide your state

I would pluck them
from my brimming brain
like oysters and stuff you with them
like a carpet-bag
until you were fat with fearlessness.

I would thrill
to hear your voice cut,
to hear your voice thrust
the love of justice
under their noses;

I would cheer
to hear you strip
away the conceit
that clings to their
hated hollow hearts.

But I would also
stuff you with
the grammar of living
so that when the levellers hover
you could flee,

to build your brave brain anew
into sweating, living beef
into a screwing, belching bull
or cautious, kindly cow,
with pearls of wisdom in the wild.

GEOFF PRINCE

TRUE LOVE

A man fell in love with a great bird
It was sailing high above him.
The span of its wings caught the sunlight.

He left his family and wife
And went crazy to capture that bird
He almost killed himself in the attempt

He climbed as high as he could
Sweating to reach
The level she had arrived at gracefully, through
flight.

And when they were eyeball to eyeball
With a quick sleight of hand
He grabbed her by the talons and reined her in

Holding her under his arm
He carried her down the cold slopes, sweating
He felt her heart pounding near his ribs
She struggled to free her wings
But he wouldn't let go
He would rather kill
A climb like that he could manage only once in
a lifetime

When he had brought her down to his level
He painted a mountain-top in the back room.
"Don't pine", he told her, locking the door.
"There is your mountain-top. And if that isn't
enough
Remember, you always have me."

He was a typical man.

TONY INGRAM

A Word-Quiz, sort of.

by Lofa

ONLY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING WORDS IS USED CORRECTLY. CAN YOU SPOT IT?

GREGORINA



PECADILLO



PURULENCE



SPHENOID



TANTALUM



A TRUE WRITER KNOWS TWO PLEASURES: TO HAVE A MANUSCRIPT ACCEPTED AND TO SEE WORDS WRONGLY USED BY OTHERS. SORRY WE CANT ACCEPT YOUR MANUSCRIPT. THE OTHER PLEASURE IS ON US.

The Geography of Culture

McKENZIE WARK

Chris Berry: *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire* (EmPress, \$17.95).

THERE'S SOMETHING VAGUE and terribly mushy at the heart of this 'Australia in Asia' rhetoric that occupies so much public bandwidth these days. There's a strong desire to forget about the complex cultural and colonial histories involved and just get on with some kind of feel-good blather.

And yet for all that the sudden seeming nearness of Asia has effects right throughout Australian public culture. Being part of an imaginary Asia means being a different kind of country to being part of an imaginary Europe. While trade, migration and tourism flows might have rewired us into an Asian commercial geography, it hasn't yet forced a real reflection on the geography of culture. The embarrassing media feud between Prime Ministers Keating and Mahathir over the latter's 'recalcitrance' about APEC is a symptom of this.

Clearly, there's a job here for intellectual reflection, but it's an open question as to what kind of intellectual might be equipped to deal with emergent international cultural issues in the age of global media and cultural flows. On the evidence of his book *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire*, and some polemical

essays he's written lately in *Arena Magazine* and *Overland*, Chris Berry is exactly the kind of reflective thinker we need now. Widely respected in the more specialised scholarly field of Chinese cinema studies, Berry has turned his attention to the wider context of contemporary Asian cultural studies.

Berry tackles the geography of culture in an interesting way. He asks after the kinds of desire that might be implicated in the fantasies we have about our place in the world and that of others. What kinds of desire are at work when politicians and other talking heads bang on about 'Australia in Asia'? One's desires can often be a bit more unseemly and messy compared to one's stated goals or ambitions.

The main part of his short book is a critical essay on one of the most challenging and controversial works of art to explore the nature of Australian desire in Asia, Denis O'Rourke's film *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (distributed by Ronan Films). Filmmaker O'Rourke went to Thailand and hired a Thai prostitute, who tells her story in the film. By way of recompense the filmmaker buys the prostitute a rice farm for her troubles, but a coda at the end says she had returned to the city and resumed her life as a prostitute.

O'Rourke's film was highly controversial, touching as it does on the raw nerve of Australian desire in Asia in the most literal and carnal sense. Berry includes all of the critical reactions within his study. This is not just some textual analysis in a vacuum. Berry goes beyond that to

a full consideration of the film and the responses as a cultural event from which one can read symptoms of both the problem of Australia in Asia and the problem of intellectuals trying to deal with it.

Berry finds the cases both for and against the film to involve a very restricted view of what goes on in it. His hunch is that what intellectuals do is focus narrowly on an element in the film that allows them either to accept it or distance themselves from it. For example, supporters view O'Rourke purely as a skilled filmmaker and ignore his obvious personal involvement. Detractors forget that he is making a movie and see him as just an example of the 'bad Ozzie bloke' on Patpong road that the film pretends to expose. Likewise the prostitute is seen either as a brilliant narrator and negotiator of her own life or as a passive victim of white male power. Berry rightly restores a perception of both the brilliance and the ambivalence of O'Rourke's achievement by putting all of the partial reactions side by side. They make a map of the kinds of desires to appropriate or to distance themselves from the film and its issues that beset the intellectuals who's job it is to talk about such things.

What a lover makes of the object of their desire, what intellectuals make of a film, what a film director makes of his actor, what a prostitute makes of her john, what a country makes of its trading 'partner' are all messy situations, full of ambivalent desires, and indeed each of these relationships could stand as a great metaphor for any of the others.

So the first thing Berry teaches us is to be wary of how our own desires are implicated in the things we criticise. It's all very well to praise or damn O'Rourke for exposing his own sexual fascinations in Asia on the screen. But are we not also desiring beings, subject to the same joys and follies as the apparently very exposed characters in this film? Understanding this might also help us grasp what it is that even our friends in places like Malaysia and Indonesia are saying to us about our big Asia crush. Their reaction is often something like: "But what are you *really* after?" Or: "Do you really want us as we are or as you fantasise us to be?"

BERRY DOESN'T let himself off the hook in this book. A short, supplementary essay details a cross cultural sexual encounter of his own. The ethic he seems to suggest is not that we should try to curb and police our more bizarre colonial fantasies about Asia, but that we should find ways to talk about them that have the troubling complication of honesty about them.

Berry sees the limitations of the present talk about Australia in Asia against the background of a somewhat utopian image of a new post-colonial space of thinking and speaking across Asia. One that doesn't run through the monolithic pride and prejudice of state-to-state relations, but grows out of everyday encounters between individuals and cultural producers. I think that this kind of bottom-up, organic fabric of cultural connectedness is the sort of thing that slowly pushes the larger architecture of state-to-state relations into a new alignment rather than as something that might ever replace it. The state is here to stay, the nation is the kind of fantasy notion of itself that states like to fabricate, and states will always deal with each other through the fancy dress of national pride and image. The state's role in culture is more ambivalent than Berry allows. It can both limit and sustain a space in which plural desires and identities flourish.

People reach out across the borders and make connections that expose many more differences and similarities than official culture acknowledges. Old fashioned, repressive nationalism has to adapt or lose its ability to manage conflicting desires within the space of the nation. The case in point for Berry is the subject of the third piece in this book, which looks at the rise of organised gay culture in Asian countries and the attempt of states like Singapore to brand it as a 'western' import, foreign to some restrictive and repressive notion of national culture.

I can't think of a better way to teach a self-critical awareness of the difficulties of a notion like 'Australia in Asia' than with this elegantly written little book and a video of O'Rourke's brilliant, difficult, masterpiece of essay cinema. The now classical art of cinema and the deliberate, contemplative pace of the critical essay may seem like anachronisms in a world domi-

nated by instant global media flows. But this book and film are excellent examples of how traditional forms, and the intellectual practice of making them, can renew and reinvent themselves in the light of pressing contemporary agendas.

McKenzie Wark's book *Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events* is published by Indiana University Press.

Scattergun Satires

MICHAEL GEORGE SMITH

Jon Rose & Rainer Linz: *The Pink Violin* and *Violin Music In The Age Of Shopping* (NMA Publications, \$25 each).

"IN THE EARLY 80s I got disgusted with Musica Viva forever bringing out third-rate string quartets, so I printed a poster for a non-existent tour by Johannes Rosenberg." (Violinist Jon Rose interviewed by Keith Gallasch, *Real Time* #1, February 1994, p. 21.)

Reading, or if I must be entirely truthful, slowly heaving my way through, the two 'satirical' collections created by experimental violinist and composer, Jon Rose and colleague, Rainer Linz, ostensibly the collected "memoirs, critical essays and other writings" describing the life and times of the aforementioned experimental violinist and composer (and of course, like Rose himself, theorist), Johannes Rosenberg, it seems pretty obvious Rose is "disgusted" by a lot more besides the conservatism of Musica Viva. Pretty much any musical or cultural icon who might have exhibited the temerity to hoist a violin to their chin, and a few others besides, cops a serve somewhere along the line within these very clever but all-too-often turgid parodies and pastiches of every conceivable form of popular, academic, analytical or pseudo-biographical essay presented in these two books. Some targets are obvious – the ridiculous 'pop/punk' violinist Nigel Kennedy, the disintegrating Yehudi Menuhin – but others seem to be lampooned

more out of sheer spite than any attempt at satiric 'debunking' – "We therefore decided to replace the conductor with an old poodle named Von K" (Karajan, one presumes). Frank Sinatra, the Kronos Quartet, John Cage, and that "jerky minimalist composer" who wrote a full-length opera about the visit to China of "Po Face Nixon" (*Violin Music In The Age Of Shopping*), and Don Burrows in *The Pink Violin*, are among the ranks of the derided.

All jolly good fun I suppose, if you like that sort of thing, and of course a lot of people do. Thankfully, Rose and Rainer don't confine themselves merely to 'personalities' in their scattergun satires. Every kind of 'ism' perpetrated against the poor, unsuspecting creative artist is also assiduously parodied and lampooned, and when the 'isms' have been dealt with, the current 'pop' theories are also utilised to add exotic accretions to these volumes subtitled *A portrait of an Australian musical dynasty*. So Chaos Theory is explored as it pertains to the violin and the innovations imposed upon it by the fictional Rosenberg, as are computer viruses, the insidious nature of "muzak" on the "unsuspecting" shopper, and the "untold story of the violin as expounded by Chairman Mao".

There are some very funny passages buried within many of these cleverly diverse and disparate essays, each a marvel of satirical parody but taken together surprisingly similar so that, after a half dozen or so, the joke, certainly for me, begins to wear very thin. Which is a pity, because as well as the odd quite witty passage, there are some very pertinent and pithy insights. I like the comment, for instance, about the nature of much contemporary visual art in the essay, 'Cafe Central – a Working Violinist's Monologue' in *The Age Of Shopping*: "These young artists, they've learnt how to write the 'meaningful' rave but then you look at the work itself to discover there is no content, no original vision, and absolutely no blood running in the veins." Let's see the likes of *Art & Text* reply to that!

THE PROBLEM, for me at least, with these two books is that, for all the obvious cleverness that has gone into their creation, they ultimately

suffer from the same lack of real 'content' as the various icons and ideologies they lampoon.

Ian MacDonald, in his recent book, *Revolution In The Mind: The Beatles' Records & The Sixties* (4th Estate, 1994), suggests a context for the problem I have with these books: "Overtaken by the 'artistic discourse' of postmodernisms, art became as literary as post-Weberian classical music was visual, producing the arid paradox of paintings to listen to and music to look at. Shorn of their content, art, music and literature degenerated by increasingly inconsequential stages from art about art, to jokes about art about arts, and finally to jokes about jokes about art about art." Or as the fictional 'excerpt' from *Newspeak* magazine Jan. 1990, 'Rosenberg's Historic Meeting with Edelman', in *The Age Of Shopping*, concludes: "Hey, we are intelligent beings - who demand to be stupid."

Michael George Smith is Associate Editor of The Drum Media, a Sydney-based youth arts and entertainment weekly newspaper, who must admit to being something of an unreconstructed old modernist.

A Rich Mine of Material

WENDY LOWENSTEIN

Sally Henderson and Edgar Waters, eds; John Endean, illustrator: *A Quiet Century: 100 songs and poems by Don Henderson* (Queensland Folk Federation. By mail from Sally Henderson, PO Box 5253, Manly, Qld 4179, \$25.)

DON HENDERSON, songwriter, poet and guitar maker, was a major figure in the Australian folk revival. Apprenticed as a turner and fitter in his family's engineering works he dropped out and, influenced by Australian country singer Tex Morton, embraced big guitars and even bigger motor bikes.

Like Pete Seeger he left home to travel, earn his living and get an education. On building jobs he came to understand casual workers and their need to be staunch, to stand by each other. In the folk movement he discovered differences between folk song and country and western. Influenced by the job and communists met in the

building trade and Bush Music Club he embraced trade unionism.

Like that of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, his work retains the values of the folk. In country music, there was a recurrent, sentimental theme of the hero dying while doing his job. In folk song the tragic death, the protest against exploitation was central. "I could hear this sort of thing being sung about in American records and thought I could get some of that experience into Australian songs ... that I could write and sing songs about building dams and union struggles. And be part of this movement."

"We'd talk about Russia. I liked the idea of equality but Communism was something I couldn't embrace. I supported what I called the Barcaldine Line." He envisaged a free enterprise society with a strong labour force, a sufficient wage to allow dignity, and respect for the worker's place in production of wealth. Trade unions, by demanding and enforcing respect, would allow the system to work.

This handsome book has one hundred songs with words and music and many introductions by the writer. His was a highly individual talent, hard to categorise, his output large, but uneven. A significant number of his songs, those that appealed to the folk movement of the sixties and seventies are widely sung and recorded. *Put a Light in Every Country Window*, a song about the Snowy hydro-electric project written in 1960, was the first of his songs to become widely known. Others like *Rake and Rambling Man*, *Funny Old Life*, *Basic Wage Dream* have passed into the folk repertoire. There is a rich mine of little-known material here for people to sing, refine, update and pass on. Henderson saw himself as a part of the folk song movement and hoped more of his songs would pass into oral tradition as 'anon'.

He was still writing, trying to portray the reality of what he saw about him and extend human understanding when he died prematurely. He often succeeds. His *Tobacco Sale Blues* makes even me, a dedicated anti-tobacco person, feel as one with the tobacco farmer who can't sell his crop in the land he was born in.

Wendy Lowenstein was a pioneer of the Australian folk revival and founder-editor of Australian Tradition.

Gold Diggers Just Wanna Be Rich

ROBERT L. ROSS

David Goodman: *Gold Seeking, Victoria and California in the 1850s* (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95).

IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Gold Seeking*, David Goodman promises "to re-problematise the single-minded pursuit of wealth which lay at the heart of the gold rushes" in Australia and California. Because the meaning of 'problematise', let alone 're-problematise', remains puzzling, the exact purpose of this book never altogether emerges.

Is it not to belabor the obvious to conclude that those who sought gold did so for wealth? As this study points out again and again, the diggers led miserable lives for the most part, in spite of the way latter day writers such as Bret Harte and Henry Lawson romanticised all that free expression of masculinity laced with sentimentality and virtue.

Goodman admits in the 'Acknowledgements' that a PhD thesis served as the work's basis. Unfortunately, the book has not shed its origins. The dates given for research trips suggest that the evolution from thesis to publication took place quickly. Had the writer let the material settle for a while, then taken fresh stock of his findings, *Gold Seeking* might have lived up to its promise as an original, comparative examination of the two great nineteenth-century rushes. As it stands, the study fails to synthesise the rich material the author has gathered on two continents.

Each chapter presents an abundance of examples, too much quoted material, statistics, case studies, and so on, with the first part of the chapter focusing on Australia, the second on California. At the end of each chapter some conclusions are drawn, often awkward and obvious. Take for example the final line of the chapter titled 'Agrarianism and Pastoral': "Agrarian and

pastoral thought were modes of extending a response to the natural environment into an alternate and oppositional vision of the possibilities of the new societies."

The lengthy introduction summarises the argument of each chapter and comments on comparative history, noting that "The aim of comparison should be a more cosmopolitan and sophisticated parochialism". Titled 'Understanding the Gold Rushes', Chapter 1 stresses that conservative contemporaries, especially in Australia, viewed askance this frantic quest for wealth. On the other hand, the enthusiasts tended to be radicals who believed that gold would solve social problems, make all men equal, and initiate a 'golden age', so to speak. This idea is developed more fully in the second chapter, 'Wealth and Republicanism'.

Chapter 3 addresses 'Order', and points out that Australians believed their goldminers behaved better than those in California, simply because Australians owed allegiance to the British crown and thus adhered to a social pattern "still based upon the 'idea of a gentleman' ". American behaviour, in contrast, "reinforced to some extent the growing dominance of liberal individualism as the dominant American ideology".

As a frequent visitor to Australia, I found this differentiation intriguing in modern terms because it may explain one of the major differences I have observed between Australian and American society: that Australia does appear more ordered, that Australians follow the rules more willingly than Americans – from wearing seat belts and cyclists' helmets to waiting at traffic lights – in short, that there are more rules in Australia to govern everyday life. Goodman also mentions that Australians during this period feared "Americanisation", especially the Americans' "supposed addiction to violence". Nothing much changes after all.

The title of Chapter 4, 'Agrarianism and Pastoral', offers an answer to the reformation and salvation of degenerate gold-rush society. 'Domesticity' is addressed in the next chapter, one of the most interesting in the book. In particular, the angry letter from a deserted Scot-

tish woman to her gold-seeking husband in Victoria tells the whole story of masculine independence and the hazards to domesticity when this questionable male characteristic goes amok as it did in the gold-rush days.

In the final chapter, following the advice of "cultural historians" who stress "(the) importance of studying key words in a cultural lexicon", Goodman explores "some of the nuances of the repeated use of one particular word ... excitement". Goodman's research reveals that this 'excitement' often led to madness, brought on not only from the initial gold fever but from the warm climate, alcohol, drugs, and excessive freedom.

A brief 'Conclusion' theorises on such matters as the "sites of differences and conflict", "homogeneous national traditions", "dislocations of modernity", "the happy pluralism of post-modernism", and the "need to contextualise". Following are forty-four pages of 'Endnotes', some documentary, many explanatory. One wonders why the latter could not have been integrated into the text. No one can fault Goodman for lack of research, and the extensive bibliography would certainly be helpful to those seeking more information on any aspect of the gold rushes.

The book's premise is indeed promising: comparing a similar historical event in two countries, alike and unlike, then drawing conclusions about each society. The materials gathered speak so eloquently, often poignantly, about the past and carry lessons for the present. Yet the scholarly paraphernalia, the sometimes turgid prose and frequent dependence on tired theoretical vocabulary, and the laborious conclusion-drawing (or insistence on 're-problematising') tend to blur the human qualities so much a part of the gold-seeking days.

Maybe in ten years or so Goodman should bring out a revised edition that tells this ever-so-human story in a down-to-earth way, in a manner that allows the diggers, along with their wives and their supporters and critics, to speak for themselves.

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Daring This World

CATHERINE BATESON

Pamela Brown: *This Place/This World* (UQP, \$14.95).

Aileen Kelly: *Coming up for Light* (Pariah Press, \$12).

Bruce Roberts: *In the Church of Latter Day Consumers* (Cornford Press, \$14.95).

Nicolette Stasko: *Black Night With Windows* (Angus & Robertson, \$16.95).

Jena Woodhouse: *Passenger on a Ferry* (UQP, \$16.95).

PAMELA BROWN'S *This Place/This World* is full of quirky, iconoclastic investigations into contemporary life, art and morality. These poems are simultaneously intelligently irreverent and personal. They swagger, mock and scrutinise, challenging authority in both their form and content.

Testing the conventions of poetic form, Brown blurs the borderline of poetry and prose. 'Colonial' for example sets up a poetic rhythm and repetition in prose form:

In England, somewhere, a young man leaves home and in England in Jamaica an obeah man falls into a rum vat full of scalding hot water and drowns drunk for the English.

When she works in a stricter form, Brown's poetry continues in the tradition of Frank O'Hara with references to friends, books and places creating an immediate intimacy juxtaposed with a surreal edge. Equally important is her impeccable comic timing. The observations in *This Place/This World* are razor-sharp and perfectly reflect a contemporary sensibility: "modernist novels/ have become/ monuments// What do we do/ with/ monuments?/ visit them/ on sundays?"

Brown confesses her dream: "would be to

become/ the kind of poet/ who is an ant/ in society's armpit" but concludes reluctantly "I go unread". I hope this is not true. We need more poets like Brown, flaunting the rules and venturing into the unexpected with invincible humour.

In contrast to Pamela Brown's jive through contemporary mores, Aileen Kelly's first collection, *Coming up for Light*, moves with processional dignity. Nonetheless her work is also deeply concerned with challenging authority.

Kelly does not shirk at bearing witness to the world's grim tragedies played and replayed on the front lines of domestic, spiritual and actual war zones. Some of her most powerful poems: 'Any Room', 'Passage', 'Then you danced' and 'Mirror' bring to these subjects both a rigorous sense of art and craft and a compassionate, clear-headed intellect.

Despite this being a first collection (which was Highly Commended in the FAW Anne Elder Award, 1994 and won the Mary Gilmore Award), her voice moves confidently across a range of preoccupations and styles. She is at ease with a wryly humorous reflection, 'Certainty': "He knows he is George./ A crusader maybe or/ maybe a myth but he/ knows he's Saint George./ She? Vacillates:/ one day the maiden,/ another the dragon."

Humour sparks through the more ambitious and poignant poem, 'My brother's piano' which imagines Freud changing places with his sister, a concert pianist who was forced to practise on a silenced piano:

If I were to write in real day
the book I assemble nightly
in the darkened library
his drive would be described as piano
envy.

Smug concepts of modern life are dissected by both Pamela Brown and Aileen Kelly; they do not come to easy conclusions or confirm popular opinions.

I wish I could say the same for the work of Bruce Roberts. The very title of his collection, *In the Church of Latter Day Consumers* signals political commitment and a critique of contemporary society. The poetry is disappointing.

Roberts piles images on top of images with little regard for the poem's formal arrangement or inherent logic. His political messages have to fight their way through a series of dense, intractable impressions. If you like that kind of thing, this could be the book for you. Personally the effort of translating stanzas such as: "backpacking DNA from the genetic hole/ with the burden of tedious icons/ for an argument of gods/ hammering away the solitude of mountain" is equalled only by the boredom of such poetically predictable poems as 'Nuclear Autumn Song'. I can imagine the booming title poem carrying an audience along in its sweeping wake at a reading, but on the page it is another grab-bag of clichés masquerading as radical statements.

It was a relief to turn to *Black Night With Windows* by Nicolette Stasko and Jena Woodhouse's *Passenger on a Ferry*. Both these collections brim with thoughtful, crafted poems. No barricades are stormed but the poetry is intense and considered. Both Stasko and Woodhouse have worked hard to create a personal, distinctive voice.

I found Stasko's the more engaging. Her elegant, open-ended poems blaze with precise, illuminating descriptions. These can reveal complex relationships, as in 'Oysters':

I decorate the dish
with ribbons of seaweed
and lemon thinking it clever
not knowing whether
you feel the same about
these oysters this
ritual tasting
the sweet creamy flesh
one among others smudged
by a finger of weed
slightly bitter
forgive me

Woodhouse's collection also speaks of relationships; between lovers and friends but most importantly, with a country – its landscape, myths and history. *Passenger on a Ferry* reads convincingly but there are too few of those shocks of real pleasure as poetry leaps into the imaginative abyss only to discover flight.

The diversity of voices and narratives represented in these five volumes should reassure us that not only a broad range of poetry is being published in Australia but that there is no officially sanctioned style or content. With these poems, as Frank O'Hara would have it, "everything continues to be possible".

Catherine Bateson is a Melbourne writer.

Observation and a Tickling Discomfort

DORIS LEADBETTER

Gary Catalano: *Selected Poems* (UQP, \$19.95).
Robert Adamson: *Waving to Hart Crane* (Angus & Robertson, \$16.95).

CATALANO'S BOOK contains the pick of twenty years of writing poems, some sentimental, some astringent, many edging towards the mature skill which the book celebrates. Reading the poems, five or six at a time – randomly chosen over several days – there's a wish that we knew when they were written, and sometimes why.

One is aware that Catalano keeps a wary eye on what's going on around him, seen or unseen. He writes a poem about air, several about cameras, and asks a great many questions. And that is as it should be; observation and a tickling discomfort with appearances can make for good poetry.

This reader soon started taking sides in an interior discussion about the poetry; why do some seem unsatisfactory, even trivial or tiresome, when others march across the page with splendid vigour and gifted language? Maybe it's chronology, the development of a keen sensibility and a winnowing of words. Maybe, like some other poets, Catalano occasionally gets stuck in a kind of poetic rut where his work goes nowhere. Then, suddenly, an idea lifts the writer's mind back onto track and he goes haring away in a new direction.

There are many more poems to enjoy than otherwise in this collection. Some of Catalano's prose poems have the brevity, an elegance and

strength that makes them great reading. But I must admit that I liked best of all a few of his poems about his life in North Queensland. 'Learning to write' is a tender poem about his grandfather; 'Remembering the rural life' is a wonderful evocation by a child of Italian migrants growing up as an Australian. The differences are written about simply:

Perhaps I would be happier
if I were a Catholic
but the Christ is lachrymose;
a soft Murillo sop
ringed by medallioned saints
in the kitchen – he just isn't
the kind of God I'd
like to follow.

And there's a description of his father's disappointment in having an artistic son: 'Tired, he left me alone', which in a few words – and mention of a gift of heavy literature for the poet's sixteenth birthday – tells us much about the estrangement from their children migrants from Europe can experience.

The section of new poems brings us to the mature Catalano. Still that eclectic mixture of styles; some prose poems, some poems as spare as a stripped twig, and a 'Poem to the muses', railing at them for ignoring him for a year. Here Catalano writes:

Tell me honestly:
do you distrust
my delicate touch
with the syllable
and wish I'd write
a couple of things
whose volume is such
that even a critic
would be moved to
pronounce:
"This is both weighty
and impressive"? ...

Well, this critic won't say it. The book is not in the weighty and impressive category. But it contains some good poems, many interesting poems, and it provides a fascinating glimpse into a twenty-year odyssey.

TUCKED AWAY on the back of the last page of Adamson's latest collection, is a comment attributed to Piet Mondrian: "The light is coming." His work is on the cover of the book.

Mondrian's paintings of and by patterns are always comfortably satisfying, experimental and edgy though they were when he painted them. Adamson uses patterns on the page for some of the poems in this collection, one indeed is called 'Lozenge for Mondrian', but the experimental poems in the collection seem less edgy than argumentative. Moreover, if the light is coming, Adamson doesn't care for what he expects to see.

His preoccupation in this book is the failure of poetry to satisfy his demands. There is a large cast of poets and friends, but unlike other epics the reader has to know all about them without help from the author. Other poets, influential and sometimes discernibly so in Adamson's work, flitter by in dedications: for Douglas Barbour; for Barrett Reid; for Kevin Hart, or in the context of a poem: "Michael Palmer dances/ as he writes in America"; "it's/hard not to like Hopkins". If the reader doesn't know Adamson's models, mentors, influences, friends, then there is a gap in the ability to share the experience of the poems, a gap which seems a great pity as the dialogue about poetry itself is one in which we could all engage.

Hart Crane, the American poet, dropped off a ship into death. Stevie Smith wrote the lines: "I was much too far out all my life/ and not waving but drowning." We cannot know whether it is poetry itself which Adamson postulates as jumping overboard, or if the poet is expressing feelings as bleak as those in his poem which gives the book its title: "... thin fibre funnelling/ poetry out/ of existence./ No sonnet will survive/ the fax on fire ...".

In other sections of the book, Adamson is exploring again, and with his singular felicity, the Hawkesbury River, the birds, the fish, the companionship which it brings him. Some of these poems have a darker side; drink and despair, failure and false hopes are not far away. Others fly high and free, the words spare and singular, the ideas strung like taut wires across his landscape.

One poem, 'The Australian Crawl', reminds the reader just how good Adamson can be.

I watched your body fluttering across
the pool, your hands little buckets
chucking water on the flames. The bushfire
was background music as the kids
splashed about in the wading area.

The poet who can write that has no need to worry about the state of the art.

Doris Leadbetter is a Victorian poet and reviewer.

Early Australian Nationalism – Masculinist and Racist?

CHRIS McCONVILLE

Luke Trainor: *British Imperialism and Australian Nationalism: manipulation, conflict and compromise in the late nineteenth century* (CUP, \$29.95 pb, \$90 hb).

THIS IS A WELL-TIMED contribution to the historiography of Australian nationalism. And in the face of a rising republican tide, it asserts the importance of the imperial connection at the end of the nineteenth century and the extent to which Australian nationalism was shaped within the umbrella of imperialism.

Trainor wants us to see British imperialism as significant in later-nineteenth-century Australia and argues that the imperial connection was crucial in shaping the emergent Australian state. Because the new Commonwealth was created within a broader global imperial framework, the significance of that identity was critically weakened. He has explored this connection through a number of links.

First by looking at the imperial federation movement, then at imperial defence, Australian sub-imperialism in the Pacific, commercial ties, the place of racial identity in nationalism, gender

and and, nationalism at the 1890s depression and the great strikes. Towards the end of the book he moves on to the intellectual climate of the colonies, reviewing the changing character of history-writing.

All of these themes are explored in sensitively-ordered chapters, which, unusually for such surveys of historical issues of long-standing, are structured around a clear and neatly dissected chronology. Each chapter begins with a few sharp and focused introductory paragraphs. Each brief sub-era arrives at a clearly-demarcated conclusion. Moreover, at each of the chapter and section breaks, readers get clear and solid footnotes. A legibly-signposted bibliography backs up the text. All signs that, despite the hefty hardback pricetag (much less in paperback), this book will serve effectively as a basic reference for students interested in imperialism and nationalism.

By and large, Trainor accepts the prevailing historical orthodoxy that Australian nationalism was essentially masculinist and that racism lay at the heart of the new sense of Australian identity (as evidenced by the writing-out of Aborigines and the attacks on the Chinese at the time of the 1888 centenary). The essential sexism of the nationalist identity is illustrated by a review of the infamous Mount Rennie rape and debates about divorce legislation. In these issues he makes interesting comments on the differences in legal penalties for rape in New South Wales and in Britain. As has become a commonplace, the purity of an Australian national ideal can be further undermined by reference to Australia's sub-imperial agency work in the Pacific, by discussion of the role of Australians in the Sudan and later imperial conflicts, and by looking again at the commercial advantages which Australia gained through imperial ties to Britain.

Even in reviewing the darker side of nascent nationalism, Trainor hints that issues might be more complex than some historians have assumed. He comments in passing that not all Irish-Australians supported imperial campaigns in Africa. He might have further explored the response to the Home Rule issue in the later 1880s, since the challenge of Irish nationalism must surely be seen as one of the most disrupt-

ive forces in imperial relations at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Melbourne and Sydney waterfront strikes and the London dock strike resulted in some curious alliances both within Australia and in Britain. Women like Louisa Lawson were nationalists and republicans. Imperial Federation remained an influence to be reckoned with, even within any nationalist movement. Even the exclusion of Aborigines from nationalist history-writing came about more slowly and less completely than might be otherwise expected.

Yet such is the structure of the book that Trainor is unable to explore these complexities in any great detail. His fifteen extremely tight chapters leave him often reliant on broad-sweeping summaries of complex events. And given the brevity necessary in such a structure, it is a relief to find that he largely eschews the now-standard language by which historical tensions are resolved, a style in which contexts intersect, where there are multiple readings of events and where 'the other' takes up centre stage. More typically Trainor is able to see that the evidence does not really support simplistic readings of complex events and reminds us of instances which run counter to his general interpretation.

Perhaps the most interesting sections of the book are those which stand most distant from the paradigmatic historical view, in which the late-nineteenth-century nationalists are simply white, racist, toadying bad guys. The ubiquitous histories in which white Australia is found guilty yet again. Trainor's recounting of commercial ties for example and of the Imperial Federation movement are lively, thorough and bring fresh insight to old debates. He is able to remind us of the British interest in Imperial Federation and of the subsequent dependence of Australian nationalism on the imperial connection. His return to J.A. Hobson provides a welcome starting point for reviewing the economics of empire.

But all of this has to be carried out within what appears a very strict word limit. The book has maps, beginning with a four-nation map of Britain, on which Dublin appears but not Belfast, Edinburgh but not Glasgow and Oxford and Cambridge but not Birmingham, and photo-

graphs. It will surely serve as a valuable summary and incisive comment on the nationalist debate, presuming there will be such a thing as we near the new century.

Chris McConville is a Melbourne historian and freelance writer. He is the author of several histories and of surveys of historic buildings.

Pleasure Some Great, Some Small?

TERESA SAVAGE

Moya Costello: *Small Ecstasies* (UQP, \$14.95).
Erika Kimpton: *Tansie* (Spinifex Press, \$16.95).
Julian Davies: *Moments of Pleasure* (Penguin, \$16.95).

THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE can be an obsession. And like all obsessions, it can have a persistent influence, impossible to escape. Much recent Australian writing acknowledges pleasure, addressing it both in the physical body, and in the body of the text.

Moya Costello's *Small Ecstasies* is a sweet, witty and idiosyncratic collection of short prose pieces ranging over a whole landscape of subjects, from bathing to home maintenance to robots. She demonstrates great strength in her ability to utilise a variety of strategies designed to elicit strong sensual response. 'Robots' is a short, clipped, even metallic interior monologue of a robot, or at least a person becoming a robot. 'Yep! Something's happening around here' speaks with a hysterical unbroken second-person voice.

For me 'Cardies' is the strongest piece in the collection. In its opening section the warm properties of the 'm' sound are piled up to create the wrap-around fuzzy feeling of the cardigan. Irreverence about the cardie-wearing habits of Virginia and Vita, even Gertrude, adds a layer of comfort and familiarity.

But unfortunately her exploration is incomplete – commitment to a gentle treatment results in a serendipitous approach, rather than a more thorough one. Where, for instance, is the potentially rich discussion of the idea that a cardigan is something you wear when your mother feels cold, or the exposé of the Cardigan Welsh

corgi? In this sense the collection is insubstantial, a little too much like notes from the writers' notebook, a touch too much showcasing.

It was in 'Covering Letters (A found story)' that I discovered the main source of my discomfort. Here the writer suggests that her work may well be enhanced if it were read aloud. This opens up some interesting issues around the relationship between performance pieces and literary works. It also establishes that the two are not interchangeable, for the impact of the physical body of the performer needs to be replaced with something else on the page. Humour, though plentiful here, is not enough. Nor even is the occasionally electric irony, nor wry cynicism. Dare I suggest that the imposition of a unifying theme or motif may well have lifted this collection into quite another league?

Tansie, by Erika Kimpton, deals with pleasures of the lesbian kind. A beautifully presented book, with a stunning sepia cover, it presents an extremely high level of production from a small press. Unfortunately this standard is not maintained in the text, which is resplendent with cliché – rain splashes loudly, jackets are casually draped, attire is casual, elegance is cool and eyes are smouldering, and this all in the opening paragraph!

Here is the life of the sophisticated high-society lesbian, which perhaps should be welcomed as counterpoint to the debauched feral variety so much celebrated in recent queer writing. Disappointingly, what emerges is bloated and clumsy. An overly explanatory style, heavy dialogue, and an omniscient narrator who insists on wading through the horribly shallow inner depths of each character creates an encumbered text, floundering and out of control.

Despite Spinifex Press' credentials as an ethical and innovative feminist publisher, I had the feeling that this writer has suffered from the contemporary obsession of popular culture – 'if it's lesbian it must be good' – which is not good enough in my book. Lesbian writing, particularly at the moment, ought to command a much closer editing process.

JULIAN DAVIES' *Moments of Pleasure* is the most successful of these works. Indeed it offers many pleasures, both in its confidence of deliv-

ery and in its complexity of subject. On the surface it is the story of a woman in her eighties who has conducted an affair with a (twice) married man over a period of fifty years, and the efforts of her young great-niece to impose contemporary meaning and judgement on the affair.

Davies manipulates the narrative to explore complexities of age and ageing, contemporary images of Australian culture, consumerism, American cultural imperialism, and most particularly generational differences in attitudes to sexuality, pleasure and fulfilment.

Skilful technical management of the text is always impressive, and is pleasing in its own right. A writer who can manage time, who can deal with it in a fluid yet comfortable way, deserves admiration. Julian Davies achieves this and more, trailing back and forth over half a century with an exemplary sureness, using flashback, summary and foreshadowing to stimulate interest in exactly how things have come to be. In a novel which is essentially questioning the validity of a timeless judgemental morality, it is a mark of intelligence.

Lively, cut-up dialogue reflects a courageous approach to reporting speech, which is finely balanced with descriptive passages. It was only the practice of beginning the first sentence of each chapter with the full name of a character which irked. Though I understand this reaching for clarity, the result was a little artless.

Moments of pleasure are also found in literary explorations. We are offered an integrated, fond and often intimate view of reading and writing – the characters frequent bookshops, discuss books, keep notebooks and diaries, even begin writing novels. One ongoing pleasure lies in the humour of found book titles, an obsession which connects this novel with the work of Moya Costello. Through this device Davies forces the reader to confront the text itself – to consider the meaning of stories which interweave to enlighten or obfuscate relationships, of words masquerading as historical records, of narrative as commodity to be owned and fought over. It is with great deliberation that Julian Davies begins several sections of dialogue with the question: "So what have you been reading?" The pleasure in reading is obvious here.

Teresa Savage is a Sydney writer currently enrolled in the Masters program at Victoria University of Technology. She is working on a collection of prose pieces about contemporary lesbian experience.

Now That We Are All Marxists ...

ROBERT PASCOE

Stuart Macintyre: *A History for a Nation: Ernest Scott and the making of Australian History* (MUP, \$19.95).

HISTORIANS HAVE DOMINATED Australian intellectual life to an extent which demands explanation. From the 1920s to the 1970s, historians were over-represented among the country's vice-chancellors, history books were popular with the Australian reading public, and a certain style of historical thinking prevailed in all intellectual debate.

Stuart Macintyre has produced a fine account of Ernest Scott, a key figure among these Australian historians. A chart in this book (p. 116) sets out diagrammatically the genealogy of professors of history around Australia. Scott was an important link in a long chain of middle-class Protestant men who enunciated a view of Australian life which provided a framework for many other intellectuals.

Although two of these men died by their own hand, these two dozen male historians had a very comfortable worldview which explained Australia as a prosperous and progressive British community. Australia's settlement was a triumph of the British, its settlers were heroic figures, and the dispossession of the indigenes remained unquestioned.

Yet these historians also understood the relevance of the Asia-Pacific region to Australian interests, were critical observers of their society, and also professed the value of historical thinking in a liberal education.

Macintyre's account should be read alongside the biographies of Frederic Eggleston, Manning Clark and Brian Fitzpatrick for a sense of how these intersecting lives reflected the larger discursive formation.

This book's clever Epilogue offers a set of insightful comments on the historical profession in Australia over the past seven decades. Macintyre argues that a postmodern approach to Scott reveals and recognises some subtleties of the life of an Australian historian which were not amenable through older methods of historiographical criticism.

More than a decade ago, Macintyre, Greg Denning, Tim Rowse, Don Watson and I were roundly criticised for wanting to understand debates about the Australian past as connected to the material circumstances of professors like Scott.

Now that we are all Marxists, in the sense that Scott's personal lifestyle is at last legitimately open to scrutiny, the interrogation of his texts becomes more interesting, more revealing, and more rewarding.

Professor Robert Pascoe is the Dean of Arts at Victoria University of Technology in Melbourne's west.

Cultures of the In Between

GRAEME TURNER

Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy, and Chris McAuliffe (eds): *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs* (MUP, \$24.95).

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, Chris Healy promises the essays which follow will "take the complexity and diversity of suburbs and suburbia as their resources":

Suburbia has been described as a middle landscape, as a 'place' that is forever in between. In their calculations, critiques and appreciations of suburbia as a site of culture these essays begin to imagine the 'in between' as a fascinating place.

Sounds like an interesting project, the next step in a rich tradition of cultural criticism of Australian suburbia. For so long the location for the expression of Australian intellectuals' cultural

self-loathing, then renovated through the still ambivalent analyses of Horne and McGregor in the sixties, and more recently the object of populist Australian cultural studies, the Australian suburb could usefully be approached as a less fixed, categoric and homogeneous location than it has been. Since there is no longer a question that life does go on in the suburbs, we need to consider the variant ways in which it happens, how it validates itself, how it intersects with the grids of class, gender, nationality and so on.

Few of the essays collected in *Beasts of Suburbia* actually do this. Indeed, probably only two of the chapters categorically suggest that their authors have found "the 'in between' ... a fascinating place": Chris McAuliffe's interesting account of the function of suburban discourses in the artistic tradition exemplified by Ian Burn and Dale Hickey, and Jean Duruz's gendering of the suburban garden. Despite the collection's up-beat title, implying an underlying critique binding the chapters together, many of the contributions are disappointingly anodyne and descriptive. While the contributors come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, urban history is the dominant mode – competently performed, but driven by the particular conjunctures it is examining rather than by any broader questions about suburbia as a "site of culture".

Tony Birch's account of the "battle for spatial control" in Fitzroy, for example, has little to say about what constitutes 'the suburban' as a site of culture. His express focus is on the way "people create a form of spatial order for themselves, by negotiating with those with whom they interact" and he articulates this interest through a history of Fitzroy during the 1950s and 1960s. Birch's objective is to demonstrate that "there existed multiple Fitzroys within the City of Fitzroy, divided in a more complex way than along the line between north and south". Compared to the objectives Healy suggests are those of the collection as a whole, this is excessively modest.

Similarly, Fiona Allon's discussion of Lucas Heights is only partially concerned with suburbia; its real interest is revealed by the rather engaging choice of the installation of the Lucas Heights research station in Sydney's suburbia as

the provocation for a discussion of the relationship between modernity, technology, urban planning and the suburb. The discussion is weakened, however, by assumptions about the recent modernity of the suburb and the importance of home ownership which even a rudimentary knowledge of Australian history could have complicated. Further, to connect the development of the Australian suburb only with twentieth century fashions for modernity/technology – or for the “modern military/industrial state’s conquest of social space” as she puts it – is to push simplicity too far.

Too often, the contributions seem driven by their empirical data: this is particularly true of the urban and oral histories of the suburbs of Daceyville and Fitzroy. These, the opening two chapters, bear the marks of the postgraduate thesis in their failure to explain to the reader why we should find them interesting. This is not the case with Louise C. Johnson’s strong analysis of the Lynch’s Bridge housing project in Melbourne but even here the focus is not on “reinterpreting Australian suburban cultures”. Rather, and similarly to the more predictably Foucauldian piece by Margot Huxley, its primary focus is on the positioning and processes of power with urban renewal developments.

THE ONE CHAPTER which seems to me to directly grapple with the meaning of the suburb is McAuliffe’s. The function of suburbia for the artists dealt with is both complex and precise:

The suburb allowed artists to introduce discourses of national identity, colonial status and cultural value into their work. Furthermore, it allowed artists to engage critically with regional and international culture at a time when the interaction of the two was a central debate within the art scene. Suburbia allowed artists to take positions within the provincial/metropolitan debate without this being reduced to mere stylistic affectation.

The attitude taken towards this opportunity by individual artists was ambivalent, of course, but McAuliffe points out that, through the use of

representations of suburbia, artists could “reconfigure white Australian consciousness at precisely that site where the lowest common denominator of such consciousness had previously been located”. For these artists, “identity was to be found in the demographic and discursive present of their culture, rather than in its mythic pasts and futures”. This is a good analysis of a foundational discourse at work.

Few of the other contributors seem interested in this kind of analysis. Consequently, *Beasts of Suburbia* is a rather pedestrian book which tends to use suburbia as the pretext, rather than the site, for its activity. The heterogeneity of the subject matter, if not of the approaches, probably doesn’t help much. In addition to the urban histories of particular suburbs, there is a chapter on the shifting fashions in interior and exterior colours for suburban housing, a discussion of the development of a black ‘suburb’ in Alice Springs, and accounts of the treatment of the suburb in fine art and film. There is one moment, for me, of dizzying *deja vu*: Kim Dovey’s chapter on display homes eerily recalling the analyses developed in *Myths of Oz* way back in 1987. But while it contains much solid research and sensible writing, *Beasts of Suburbia* bears few signs of any complex interest in the genuine ambivalences – both for the suburbanite and for the cultural theorist (if one wants to maintain such a distinction) – so clearly foreshadowed in Healy’s introduction.

Graeme Turner is Professor of Cultural Studies in the Department of English at the University of Queensland; his most recent book, Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture, was published by Allen & Unwin in October, 1994.

Life and Death in the Wilderness

TIM THORNE

Richard Flanagan: *Death of a River Guide* (McPhee Gribble, \$14.95).

RICHARD FLANAGAN’S novel, *Death of a River Guide*, evokes the Australia in which it is set, and through a compelling

engagement of the imagination, forces the reader to live vicariously in that Australia.

The life story of Aljaz Cosini, from his birth, still immersed in the sac of amniotic fluid, to his watery death, is so variously enriched and complicated by the social and physical environments in which it takes place, and by his attempts to extract from (or impose upon) those environments a modicum of meaning, that the reader is absorbed into the world Flanagan has created.

Even more important than Aljaz's own life is the history of his forebears, a history which is gradually pieced together as the novel develops. With an ethnic heritage that includes Trieste, the Anglo-Celtic convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land and the original Pallawah inhabitants, and with a football career (Aussie Rules) behind him, he could be said to be a contemporary Australian Everyman.

His occupation, as a guide for tourists rafting down the Franklin, perhaps the most celebrated of Australia's wild rivers, endows him with a status beyond that of Everyman, making him a metaphorical guide to the reality that his "punters", mostly urban professionals, have excluded from their lives, showing them its beauties while protecting them from its potentially lethal dangers.

Flanagan makes use of the conventional myth that a drowning person's life flashes before their eyes in their final moments of consciousness in order to provide a narrative framework for the novel. In Aljaz's case the flashbacks extend past his own experience to 'visions' of earlier generations. This mechanism seems a little creaky and unnecessary, almost a token nod in the direction of fashionable literary technique which, in turn, is paying its respects to postmodern theory, but it doesn't intrude to the point of spoiling the narrative flow.

Flanagan might also be gesturing occasionally towards another literary fashion, magical realism, or it might be just the more indigenous comic hyperbole that is part of the bush yarn tradition, when he tosses in such sentences as this, referring to Aljaz's footy skills: "The newspaper dubbed him Fellini Cosini because of his cinematic marks, and opposing teams' fans took to chanting, 'Eight and a half, eight and a half.' "

The wealth of observed detail, the variety of vividly drawn minor characters, the sweep and pace of *Death of a River Guide*, however, are such that a minor irritation of this kind is unlikely to affect most readers.

The actual mechanics and logistics of travel on the Franklin are rendered in a way that is realistic and credible without either interrupting or overshadowing the psychological tensions which are crucial to the suspense, the sense of adventure and the awareness of the power of the wilderness's natural forces.

Death of a River Guide is peopled with a large cast of mostly eccentric but entirely believable characters, from the old piners of the rainforest to the post-hippy ferals encountered on the river bank; from Aljaz's boss, Pig's Breath, to his lover, Couta Ho, and the unfortunate tourist, Derek, who is the indirect cause of Aljaz's death. These people do not just add 'colour' to the narrative (although they certainly do that) but they contribute to the shaping of the central character's life as do the wonderfully bizarre midwife, Maria Magdalena Sverevo, the aboriginal guitarist, Shag, and Aljaz's multifarious and multicultural ancestors.

Flanagan, whose background is in history, has written an unusually assured and mature work, as fast moving as the river of its title but without sacrificing depth.

Tim Thorne is a Tasmanian poet.

The Ground is Not Given

PAUL CARTER

Vivien Johnson: *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri* (Gordon & Breach Arts International Ltd, \$80).

INTRODUCTIONS ARE OFTEN the most difficult part of a book to write: usually written last, although masquerading as a prelude to what is to come, they often contain the author's afterthoughts. Instead of glossing what lies ahead, they can sometimes confess or attempt to correct what, in retrospect, the author detects as a weakness in his or her presentation. This is certainly

the impression Vivien Johnson gives. Anticipating the criticism that her monograph might be seen as misleadingly assimilating an Aboriginal artist's life and work to the conventions of "modernist biography", she insists that her own starting point will be different – "the Western Desert sense of history with which Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri operates as an initiated Anmatyerre tribesman and custodian of important Dreamings and sites."

To the extent that Upambara's oeuvre is described in terms of what it represents – the scholarly heart of the book are the annotations to the plates appended to the biographical narrative, which identify in some detail those dreamings and sites – Johnson's claim is well-justified. But to acknowledge that her subject has a different philosophy of history, therefore a different conception of art, is not to remove him from the framing paradigm of the western-style artist's biography; unless the critic is prepared to engage with the linearism of her own biographical paradigm, to imagine a biography that, in terms of its structure and 'time-consciousness', looks something like one of Tjapaltjarri's magnificent designs, then one may be forgiven for supposing that her introductory disclaimers are really afterthoughts.

In fact Johnson's book is not merely conventionally biographical in tracing Clifford Possum's career from its earliest days – in the manner of Vasari, she interprets the early encounter between Namatjira and Tjapaltjarri as pivotal to the artist's self-discovery – to its most recent phase of local and international fame: it is conventionally 'modernist' in its interpretation of the work almost entirely in terms of its internal stylistic development – with little reference, except in a somewhat ad hoc way, to the social, historical and, presumably, political context in which Clifford Possum has always worked. It is true that Johnson usually links stylistic changes in Tjapaltjarri's art to changes in his life situation, but the connections remain purely external and adventitious.

In Johnson's account the influence on the artist of Bardon's painting school at Papunya is minimal: Bardon's advice to the artists to expunge European images was, in her view,

supererogatory as Clifford Possum and his brother Tim Leura were already fully in control of their subject-matter. The "cartographer of the dreaming" who emerges in the 1970s uses the new media made available to him at Papunya in a different way, taking advantage of the way white maps and indigenous sand-designs conceived the country in similar ways: by combining in a single canvas Dreaming sites previously represented separately, he was able to create large-scale 'maps' of land areas whose political implication is clear: "they are Western Desert graphic equivalents of European deeds of title."

Johnson takes us on a "journey" through the five great map paintings, arriving in 1978 at Yuutjutiyungu, which she sees, not without reason, as the culmination of his mapping phase: "the expression of the archetype – as if everything else had been a preparation for the painting which would map his patrilineal descent country around Mt. Allan." Johnson connects the work with the artist's return to Mbunghara, east of Papunya, a place deeply implicated in the Dreaming stories it depicts. And I suppose this explanation of a master work in terms of a physical return to the source of his spiritual being is reasonable enough. Only it seems inadequate to account for Clifford Possum's fertility of formal and thematic invention; talk of archetypes perhaps unintentionally implies a dubious, and eurocentric, conception of the native artist as the passive medium of traditional knowledges.

And, of course, this explanation of art-works in terms of the artist's relationship with a place is a movable feast: "the complex multi-layered and interlocking surfaces" of the works Tjapaltjarri produced at the beginning of the 1990s – 'Carpet Snake Dreaming', 'Napperby Lakes' – owe their intensity, according to Johnson, to the artist's living away from his country. They exhibit his "emotional life as an Anmatyerre tribesman in exile." Missing from this account is any sense of the paintings as meditational spaces, capable of consecrating the ground where they are produced. One would like to know what breath patterns are associated with their making, what daily rhythms are focused and commanded in their meticulous and

musical arrangements. One senses that a European vocabulary of 'home' and 'exile' flattens out their 'journey'.

The concept of "multi-layering" which Johnson invokes so persuasively in unfolding the meaning of the great map paintings (and which, as she shows, well describes the painting process) may not carry, as it does for us, an idea of cloudy nostalgia, of once intimately present objects receding into the distance. It may have the opposite implication, representing those successive 'masks', that consciously cultivated obscurity which, Strehlow tells us, is an essential aspect of the acquisition of sacred knowledge in Central Australian society – and whose ambiguity, as Catherine Ellis has pointed out most recently, may be constitutional. These later paintings in particular may not represent Dreamings *qua* land in the rather literal way the author seems to imagine: they may be expressions of the difficulty of knowledge and its transmission in the changed conditions of contemporary life. They are not works that suggest an opposition between inside and outside. The horizon placed round them to give the reader a historical framework, a forward-looking narrative, is not there.

Johnson would probably be rather cross about this interpretation. After all she goes out of her way to treat Yuutjutiyungu biographically, as part of the artist's journey of self-discovery. Why, she asks, when so much country remained to be mapped, did Upambara abandon this subject-matter? The answer, she suggests, may lie "within the paintings themselves", in a growing imbalance between the "design elements" and the dotted in-fill. The corollary becomes predictable: the great artist will seek to rectify this strain, to reassert the primacy of the iconographically-telling elements, those motifs that directly carry the burden of the Dreamings. Except that this stylistic dialectic scarcely accounts for what must be regarded as one of the great love poems produced here, the 1980 'Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming', commissioned by Geoff Bardon, the first painting in which Tjapaltjarri, having seen his work reproduced in Bardon's 'Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert', not only quotes himself, but cites his friend.

JOHNSON'S TENDENCY to rationalise Clifford Possum's "journey" in terms of a modernist paradigm of artist as self-discoverer produces a kind of reductionism, an indifference to intent, comparable to that which often characterises the ethnographic myth of the non-western artist as repository of sacred wisdom. In either case the effect is to de-historicise the subject, to cocoon him solitarily in the realm of the aesthetic-primitive. This is not a remark directed particularly at the author, who is evidently highly conscious of these difficulties. It could be a remark addressed to modernism which, as we know, established its reputation by lending the primitive an aesthetic veneer. But it does point to the inadequacy of her art-historical methodology.

One can't help feeling that her scrupulousness in not positioning her subject as an 'Aboriginal' artist has led her to overlook a significant social and cultural context for his work. As recent publications like *The Heritage of Namatjira* remind us, Central Australian art has been an in-between phenomenon, a product of uneasy and tortuous bi-culturalism (not simply of a one-off culture clash). Tjapaltjarri's relationship with his painter-daughters, his repeated insistence that he paints for "all the young ones" ("Because they gotta go on.") obviously reiterates the traditional role of the artist-elder in Central Australian society: but what does it mean when his children live in Sydney or Melbourne? It means among other things that the transactional nature of Clifford Possum's work (which Johnson ignores in favour of her image of the artist-loner) remains critical to the motivation of his art; only in the dispersed environment he now inhabits the partners to the transaction have changed. The whites have to learn to see because they cannot hear; but they have to see that their ways of seeing (and telling) are a kind of blindness. This, among other things, is the turbulent ambiguity and appeal of his genius.

It may be true that the new manager of Papunya Tula Artists, Andrew Crocker, played down the meaning of the Papunya-Tula designs, emphasising instead their purely aesthetic qualities, but this hardly accounts for Clifford Possum's "decisive departure from the 'native palette' of the '70s", and his entry into "a phase of radical experimentation with tone and

colour". Is this even the way to characterise the newly stylised and geometrically precise works of this 'period'? Except for the consistently enigmatic replies that Tjapaltjarri makes to Johnson's questions, and which are dotted through her own text, there is no sense that the 'artist' might be actively opposed to constructing the meaning of his own life as a 'biography', that at best his object might be not to journey on but to continue to improvise techniques of remaining, taut exercises in conserving a common ground.

When Johnson draws attention to the artist's self-quotation as a result of seeing reproductions of his work, she draws no conclusion from it, and we are left with the uneasy feeling that post-modernist solipsism may have set in. What emerges from Johnson's biographical data is that the interesting difference between Namatjira and Upambara might be this: that whereas, at least in Strehlow's version, Namatjira's "tragedy" was to be a "nomad in no-man's-land", our artist, belonging to the next generation, has made that in-between position the basis of his art: Tjapaltjarri is uncannily the kind of charismatic leader and seer that Strehlow prophesied, a man who, having wandered outside his traditional land, has become a new, Homeric kind of 'singer', a rhapsode combining synthetically many Dreamings into a new, longer, almost national story.

WHETHER AS A stockman in the 1930s – "Working from one's boyhood away from relatives and countrymen for long periods could create the kind of personal independence" – whether as a senior elder and world-renowned artist in the 1990s, living an itinerant lifestyle – in stark contrast to the "purposeful movement across their own territories along routes laid down in the Dreaming in which his ancestors' lives had consisted" (sic), it is clear that the sense in which Clifford Possum 'operates' as a custodian of his people's history is a highly complex one: to be both outside one's land and inside it might be the motivation of his self-quotation. In the same way, Tjapaltjarri's distinctive veiling of different layers of his designs, his mirage effects, his cloud trails, suggest shifting grounds as well as perspectives directly expressive of his historical and personal situation. Not exploring this

process of self-remaking (and marking), Johnson offers no motivation for the extraordinary drama of Clifford Possum's designs, the struggle they stage for order.

In the other direction there is equally the danger of sentimentalising the knowledge that Tjapaltjarri's paintings contain: take seriously the claim that these paintings represent Dreamings and, granting their extraordinary mastery of design and colour, and their inexhaustible inventiveness, we must also acknowledge the flexible potency of those creation narratives, their continuing capacity to incorporate changing historical circumstances. And why not: not only Rover Thomas has dreamed into being another story for his country; despite its preoccupation with authenticity, the Australian anthropological literature is replete with instances of ceremonies travelling and changing the meaning. It is this lightness of touch, an ability to improvise on a changed ground, to remake it, to weave into its already folded surface the rents and frayings that mark its recent history that distinguishes Clifford Possum's work; to characterise his work in terms of an ever completer record of his and his kin's traditional land underplays the actively re-creative dimension of his art – which is also its political function. The ground is not given.

Vivien Johnson's monograph, as must be evident from these remarks, is greatly to be welcomed: if her text provokes engagement, and constructive discussion, it is because she has attempted to tackle head-on some of the thorniest problems in art historiography. What remains indisputable is that the scholarly apparatus of her work, together with the massive enterprise of recovery so superbly documented in the illustrations to this book, ensures that her research will form a sound basis for the wider dissemination of knowledge about Clifford Possum's work. Johnson may "have difficulties" with words like 'genius'; very well, let's put it another way: Tjapaltjarri's collective oeuvre (and the example of his life) may be the greatest gift-object created in the post-invasion phase of Australian history. The challenge is not to receive it, but to return its invitation with interest.

Paul Carter's most recent book is Living in a New Country, MUP, 1992.

Understanding the Essential Australia

DORIS LEADBETTER

Les Murray: *Collected poems* (William Heinemann, \$19.95).

Chris Wallace-Crabbe: *Selected poems 1956-1994* (OUP, \$19.95).

IT WAS A FELICITOUS fancy to put Murray's 'portrait' on the cover of the book. According to an encyclopaedia near at hand, Pieter Bruegel (who painted the 'portrait' in the sixteenth century), "portrayed in vibrant colours the living world of field and forest in which lively, robust peasants work and play. [He] also painted religious histories, parables and rhythmic landscapes based on diagonal lines unfolding into the distance."

I'm not entirely sure about the peasants, but it seems apposite enough.

Murray's "rhythmic landscapes" established him very quickly as an important poet. 'The Ilex Tree', published in 1965 when Murray was twenty-seven, dropped like manna on a readership hungry for more good poetry, having acquired a taste for it with earlier Australian poets who saw the same landscapes.

Reviewing this book is about as complex a task as reviewing a biography of someone everybody knows personally, and as easy. It's a huge collection and there isn't a page without some thought, some line, some conjunction of words, that makes it impossible to turn the page quickly. Murray's poems are indeed that good; they all reveal the potter's mark, even those which appeal less to the reader.

There is much more, of course, to Murray than the countryman. With the same perspicacity with which he watches seasons and crops and animals, he watches the human condition. Oddly placed in this book, it seems, between a poem with the title 'Rainwater tank' and another called 'Cowyard gates', is a splendid poem about 'The future'. This is the first verse:

There is nothing about it. Much science fiction
is set there
but is not about it. Prophecy is not about it.

It sways no yarrow stalks. And crystal is a
mirror.

Even the man we nailed on a tree for a
lookout

said little about it; he told us evil would come.
We see, by convention, a small living distance
into it

but even that's a projection. And all our
projections

fail to curve where it curves.

It's a fascinating, meditative kind of poem; one to think about long into the evening.

Spending a few hours fossicking in the book (and I found much gold) made me appreciate again just how well Murray perceives the landscape of Australia, the creatures which inhabit it and the shape and rhythms of the countryside. There's an extraordinary rotundity in his imagery sometimes, a fullness, a fecundity which seems a little at odds with the harsher realities of Australia and yet it seems to me that Les Murray knows the place a great deal better than those of us stunned into near-silence by Australia's sunburnt country image, its aridity, seasonal death, timelessness. Les Murray gets his hands dirty, he digs into the soil, he knows what crops will grow and where and why.

On page 2 of the book, 'Tableau in January', which was first published in 1965, ends with this stanza:

January, noon. The unreal, idle street.
There is more light than world. The poet,
smiling,
Takes his soft lines and bends them till they
meet.

The long last poem, 'Crankshaft', was first published in 1992, twenty-seven years later. In it are these words:

Keenly as I read detective fiction
I've never cared who done it.
I read it for the ambiances:
David Small reasoning rabbinically,
Jim Chee playing tapes in his tribal
patrol car to learn the Blessing Way,
or the tweed antiquaries of London,
fog from the midriff down,
discoursing with lanthorn and laudanum.

I read it, then, for the stretches
of presence. And to watch analysis
and see how far author and sleuth
can transcend that, submitting
to the denied whole mind, and admit it,
since the culprit's always the same:
the poetry. Someone's poem did it.

Murray has been bending his words as poet,
commentator, and occasional scourge of the
unwise, for a long time. This book provides
many stretches of his sharp-eyed, clue-dropping
presence and if someone's poem did it, we can
be glad it did it here.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE'S book covers almost
forty years of his work, starting with some
published in 1956. In his 'acknowledgements',
he says that his decision as to which poems to
include in the book was to some extent guided
by others, but also he chose poems which he
judged still to work: "to dance off the page". He
looked, too, for poems which "most clearly bear
witness to past selves".

This reviewer's first encounter with Wallace-
Crabbe's poetry came not long after arriving in
the country as a migrant from England. It was
much like the discovery of the Rosetta Stone; at
last I had a way in to understanding something
of the essential Australia. An entree through lan-
guage. Wallace-Crabbe uses vernacular Austra-
lian, the demotic Aussie language, with the
verve and wit which make his poetry both acces-
sible and literary.

He uses language like a good conductor
schools an orchestra. There is a depth, a profun-
dity, to Wallace-Crabbe's work which is founded
on a passion for the English language, and a tre-
mendous skill in its use as an interpreter of life;
and death. Wallace-Crabbe is all too aware that
death is never far away.

Behind the good humour, behind the play-
fulness and the way he seems to tackle many
topics simultaneously, there is a sense of pro-
gression, not just circularity, in this book. Poems
were chosen to "bear witness to past selves" and
they do it well. The images of the poet, and of
the way Australians think and work and play,
reflect the changes over the years.

Wallace-Crabbe's considerable lyrical gift is
shown in this extract from 'In light and dark-
ness', from 1963:

Nothing is quite so rococo
As dawnlight caught on a fishscale formation
of cirrus,
Nor quite so romantic as one gilded westering
biplane.
We just don't live in a hard intellectual glare.

There are four new poems at the end of the
book. To my mind, the last few lines of 'Ode to
Morpheus' typify the reason for the delight I get
from reading Wallace-Crabbe's erudite, titillat-
ing, tipsy poems. If there were room here, I
would copy out the whole poem:

It's a hard god, a crook umpy, a two of
spades,
that figured our fortune out this way.
Instead of ranging the night, we snooze in
your lap,
the years ticking away like clockwork ducks
or hurdling the fence like sheep.
Fiddling the hints ...
sheedling the woollen flump ...
then, zzzz ...

The book ends with the new poem: 'Why do we
exist?' It starts like this:

The child sits, quiet as a moth,
under murmuring trees in the garden,
a blackbird warbling grandly,
wrens and wattlebirds
doing their various things
overhead and around,

– and this reviewer is grateful that Wallace-
Crabbe answers so well the question.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe's poetry is not the sort
to read in bed. There is nothing rhythmically gent-
ling about it. The ideas are sharp, the words
sharpened; the pleasure from reading more
adrenalin than soporific. They do indeed "dance
off the page".

Doris Leadbetter is a Victorian poet.

Writer's Passage

BRUCE ANDERSON

John A. McKenzie: *Challenging Faith: an autobiography* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$16.95).

JOHN MCKENZIE WRITES in an easy, direct style, recalling his deprived childhood in the West Australian bush during the depression, but his alienation from his mother and his family largely remains a mystery. He had a complex relationship with his aunt which was the major influence on his intellectual development. He says he matured into indifference to hostility arising from prejudice and arrogance arising from wealth or social power.

Like many of the brightest and best of his generation, he saw the harm of an unrestrained free-market system, watched with disgust as the western democracies colluded with fascism and was convinced there had to be a better way. For a while he turned to Marxism.

His association with leading figures in education, politics and writing, such as Walter Murdoch, Kim Beazley, and Katharine Susannah Prichard, together with his accounts of wartime, the postwar anti-Communist hysteria, and his part in other key issues of our time is a valuable record, especially for local historians.

A minor slip: Cole was Coles.

Bruce Anderson studied History and Politics at Melbourne University 1944-7, then tried to direct a business which was ruined by an association with a multinational.

Essays of Manne

CATRIONA JACKSON

Robert Manne: *The Shadow of 1917* (The Text Publishing Company, \$16.95).

BEFORE I ENROLLED in political science at La Trobe University, lefty student politicians warned me about Robert Manne. He and John Carroll were the most prominent right-wing academics on campus, and came in for

nearly as much pillorying as the Vice-Chancellor.

It surprised me, then, to find Manne's International Communism class populated by students of many political colours. My seminar group had an ex-army man, a self-confessed Trotskyite, a tall conservative who was also an engaging swot, a member of the International Socialists, and a bunch of less decided in-betweens like myself. I'd never been in a class where people were so political and argued so vigorously while remaining civil. But the other reason why the classes worked was because Manne so obviously had a genuine and deep personal involvement in the history he was teaching, and he had considerable skills as a storyteller.

Both these qualities are apparent in his collection of essays, *The Shadow of 1917*. Here Manne is not talking directly about the events of the Cold War, but about their ramifications in Australian academia, politics and the press. All but the first chapter have been published before, either in *Quadrant*, the conservative magazine Manne now edits, or in his 1987 book, *The Petrov Affair*. And all, except for chapter one, were written while the Cold War raged or spluttered. Manne explains that he has left the essays unrevised in order to retain the sense of "urgency and anger" with which they were written.

But – one has to ask – why republish? The Cold War has a formidable legacy, but it is over and the new context demands fresh analysis. Instead, what Manne does is offer this work in the hope that readers will re-examine the "shadow" he believes 1917 has cast across Australian intellectual and political life. In doing so he focuses, with some vehemence, on the behaviour of the Australian left, or, more precisely, the defenders of communism – "anti-anti-communists" as he calls them.

He hopes to "persuade young Australians there is something at stake in [the] history worth caring about." I hope, as I'm sure Manne does, that young readers don't take *The Shadow of 1917* as the last word, but as a spur to further reading.

In class Manne often recommended texts by the most unreconstructed Cold War warriors from both sides. He said the authors' commit-

ment often led to their giving a vivid and detailed, if skewed, account of events; but, more importantly, their works conveyed the feel of the Cold War. Primary source documents as it were. In one sense *The Shadow of 1917* is useful for related reasons. It furnishes us with important data, and gives an insider's view of a world divided into two camps. The passion is infectious but the views are so often partial. So much of the history of the Australian left doesn't get a look in. Such dismissive and polarised thinking is, I think, troublesome for my generation, a generation too suspicious of absolutes and monolithic categories to be consumed or convinced by them. It is particularly interesting that Manne reserves his harshest criticism not for communists, but for their sometime defenders, the "anti-anti-communists", the people who, he claims, would not take a firm side. There is another history to be written here.

CURIOSITY ABOUT the gaps and about the psychology of Cold War mindsets may lead readers back to what I think is the most interesting and instructive part of the book, the introductory chapter.

In a frank and surprisingly unguarded way, Manne writes about the stages of his political development – a religious order would call it formation – at Melbourne University, and the key influences that led him to adopt his at-that-time unfashionable anti-communism: "Why, then, did I become, in 1969, an anti-communist? I think as a consequence of three things: who I was, who I met at the university, and what I began to read." At Melbourne University he met Vincent Buckley and Frank Knopfelmacher.

Hannah Arendt was one of the writers who helped shape his thinking: "... for better or worse, one passage in the *Origins [Of Totalitarianism]* was for me a kind of call to arms." But if Hannah Arendt helped Manne to specify the enemy, readers of my generation might wonder which writers will lead him now to understand who the allies might be.

B. A. Santamaria, delivering tribute to his long-time friend, Frank Knopfelmacher, at his funeral in May, said that Knopfelmacher was overjoyed when Soviet communism collapsed,

but that this huge historical turnabout left him also with a sense of loss. After his retirement from Melbourne University, Knopfelmacher "lost his contact with the young students whose ideas he had shaped so effectively ... at the very moment when there was no enemy on whom he could focus his intellectual energies. This simultaneous deprivation of the two things which had given meaning to his life had an enormous impact on the purely personal world in which he now lived. ... gradually the isolation into which he was plunged culminated in a cataclysmic loneliness."

The oration was published by Robert Manne in *Quadrant*.

Catriona Jackson is a freelance journalist.

Light and Dark Perfections: Australian Poetry at its Best

ADRIAN RAWLINS

Maurice Strandgard: *The Nailing of the Right Hand* (Penguin, \$16.95).

Peter Bakowski: *In the Human Night* (Hale & Iremonger, \$12.95).

Robert Hughes: *Highgate Hill* (Hale & Iremonger, \$12.95).

Patrick Alexander: *Images, Reflections, Gathering Tributes* (Earthdance, \$18).

Jim Mitchell: *The Moon Seems Upside Down; Letters of Love and War* (Allen & Unwin, \$24.95).

IN 1960, WHEN SHE WAS ninety-two and I twenty, I visited Dame Mary Gilmore in her first-floor flat in Kings Cross, Sydney. She seemed pleased with what transpired and invited me to come again. In all I made six visits over a three-week period, and on the penultimate occasion I showed her a recently written poem.

Her eyes lit up. "Aha!" she exclaimed. "Fresh bread from the baking!" After reading it twice she declared it a work of beauty, sharing features with the work of William Blake. (Unfortunately the poem was never published and is now lost.)

For thirty-five years I have waited for someone to whom I could transfer this accolade and now in *Nailing the Right Hand* by Maurice Strandgard I have found him. Strandgard's poems, like those of Milton and Blake, proceed from that place which Igor Stravinsky was wont to call "the plane of True Morality": whilst one is reading them no other aesthetic possibility can be countenanced: they are – in Michael Keon's immortal phrase – horizon-filling. Utterly.

Nor are they merely songs of Innocence and Experience. As Judith Rodriguez says, "(they) treat (human) kind stripped to the condition of Lear on the waste heath, they confront the existence of hypocrisy, cruelty and carelessness ... (they) are among the most naked utterances of heart and conscience that I know." Some are sardonically funny, some adroitly macabre, but all are perfect works of art: more perfect and more perfectly crafted than anything by Mary Gilmore, or Henry Lawson, for that matter. So perfect that it would be wrong to cite fragments. But it is my belief that in this collection Strandgard places himself alongside Patterson, Shaw-Neilson, Slessor, Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood and as-yet-unrecognised Pamela Bell in the pantheon of Australian immortals. This book will give rewarding reading from now to Eternity. Truly.

Bakowski's poems seem equally perfect but occur in a different 'place' – the eternal light of conscience is darkened by the everlasting contrarities of the human condition – as the poem admits in 'Self-Portrait in Richmond Studio, 25 October 1994': "Yes I am trying to paint/ the giant dream:/ a canvas filled with/ comets and snails,/ waterfalls and misers,/ oil-rigs and angels,/ all the lure and disguise/ that shadow and light/ lend to love .../ I will not finish it/ in my lifetime/ but will remain/ its chained hunter."

For this reviewer the poems that have the deepest resonance – 'The dictionary is just a beautiful menu' (for Frank O'Hara), 'One for Charles Bukowski' and 'Billie and the awkward angel ...' – are inspired by and in tribute to other artists, other poets, for Billie Holiday singing – like Piaf or Dylan – is purest poetry, and have obviously moved Bakowski most

deeply. But in every poem he produces a scintillating metaphor for life in the twentieth century: "We believe that/ the naming of horrors/ is as important as/ the naming of flowers." ('Eastern European Song'); "Each ankle, a snail,/ each toe, a worm,/ we hold time to ransom," ('Cliffhaven Mental Hospital, 1949'); "Father never told us/ that this living and dying/ would be so hard;" ('Conversation in the gentlemen's club').

Many of these poems have been published overseas and it is true to say that this poet represents Australian poetry at its best.

Robert Hughes's poems are so disarmingly simple, so luminously clear, one wants to pinch them to see if they are real. In a few words we are offered a whole life – a life whose verisimilitude we cannot possibly doubt. These spare, shining poems, like Strandgard's express perfectly the spirit of place of the down-market working-class suburb which is their locus. But, like Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town', that locus is also a suburb of my – and your – heart, and I guarantee you will be totally at home in these exquisitely-crafted cameos of people and life in Robert's street.

Each 'portrait' presents its own 'truth', not forgetting its relationship to neighbours, so that Gerry Wall, a builder, "full beard, tats, footy shorts" who "enjoys a drink" but is also an aging biker getting too old for "the Harley", plays music so loud that "Robin and John/ can't get the little boy to sleep." In another poem we meet Robin, a "neat private woman/ in her forties who just managed/ motherhood ..." and John who is "perpetually amazed to have found himself/ at 55, father of an 18-month-old boy" and so we know how precious that boy is to them. These vignettes place us inside the lives of their characters without burdening us with unnecessary detail: our imaginations provide the features. I have returned again and again to these heart-warming portraits and believe this book deserves to become an Australian Classic.

PATRICK ALEXANDER'S book is filled with poems which are exactly as he describes them: images, reflections, musings upon art and artists, often written in response to a film, a play

or a poet's oeuvre. One feels he is imagining himself as the artist in question and presumes to speak in his/her stead, but the voice he uses is always his own.

Often there are brilliant lines, for example: "No person commits treason like life's/ against herself" (after seeing 'Kiss of the Spiderwoman') and many modes of poetic address are utilised which engross, provoke thought and beguile, but after one has finished reading nothing definite remains with one. However in works such as 'Nero's Niece' and 'Piaf' (inspired by and dedicated to Jeannie Lewis), there is something approaching the true grit of enduring poesy.

In *The Moon Seems Upside Down*, Jim Mitchell presents an edited collection of the letters of his father, Alan. It has more documentary force and flavour and more sense of place and time and much more biographical detail than any Australian biography – including those of Louisa Lawson, Eve Langley and 'Weary' Dunlop – that I have read over the last two years. As edited, the letters read beautifully, the personalities are graphically manifested and the events of World War II are brought to life with dignity and restraint, the editor filling in Alan's story in the third person until the letters he wrote after his release take up the narrative.

Adrian Rawlins has published 'Festivals in Australia: an Intimate History' and 'Two Poems', is anthologised quite widely and is expecting the publication of 'Dylan Through the Looking Glass' – a miscellany – towards the end of the year. He is Artistic Director of the 1995 Montsalvat National Poets' Festival.

Between Italy and Australia

ROBERT PASCOE

Desmond O'Grady: *Correggio Jones and the Runaways: The Italo-Australian Connection* (CIS-Cardigan Street Publishers, \$19.95).

Laurie Hergenhan and Irmtraud Petersson (eds): *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe* (UQP, \$19.95).

Charles D'Aprano: *From Goldrush to Federation: Italian Pioneers in Victoria, 1850-1900* (INT Press, \$29.95).

DESMOND O'GRADY is an Australian journalist who has lived in Rome exactly half the years of his life. Born in Melbourne in 1929, he went to Italy as a 33-year-old in 1962, becoming a key figure within the postwar colony of Australian intellectuals who reside in and around Rome. Despite the dramatic improvements in communication technologies between Italy and Australia which have taken place during the thirty-three years O'Grady has lived in Rome, however, the cultural gaps which separate the two countries are as strong as ever.

The title of this collection of essays is a wry summary of this cultural divide, since the 'Runaways' are Italians who flee to Australia and 'Correggio Jones' stands for people like O'Grady himself. Examples of this mutual misunderstanding are a consistent motif of this collection. Quinto Ercole's daughter wrote a novel about her socialist father, but did not really understand his politics. The socialist Francesco Scusa's vigorous declaration that "Australia's worth ten Belgiums" at Zurich in 1893 was a nationalist gesture somewhat compromised by Scusa's unmistakable Italian ethnicity. And so on.

Ironically, O'Grady's work itself gives a good example of the difficulty in working at such a distance from his country of birth. His account of Velia Ercole, for instance, does not benefit from the remarkable detective work by Roslyn Pesman Cooper in an article published right here, in this very journal *Overland*, a couple of years ago [No. 128, 1992, pp. 68-72]. Pesman Cooper very cleverly solved several of the puzzles about the Ercole story, including the identity of the woman whose suicide is a feature of Ercole's novel *No Escape*. The point is that (despite internet) it is still very difficult to keep up with events occurring on the other side of the world. The reporting in Italy of the recent death of Luigi Grollo in Melbourne is a good case in point: there were numerous factual errors in his Treviso newspaper obituary precisely because the lines of communication were stretched to breaking point. Despite the massive flows of population between the two countries, serious gaps in misunderstanding occur all the time. One reason is the school curriculum: Italian students are rarely taught anything about what

happened to the families from their township who went abroad; Australian schoolchildren learn a lot about the Italy the families of their classmates left forty or fifty years ago without being taught much about what happened to Italy subsequently. The Italy of popular memory in Australia no longer exists!

Desmond O'Grady is one of several dozen writers featured in an excellent anthology of Australian writers travelling through Europe. The anthology reads well because the editors have edited the texts in a very disciplined manner and have arranged the excerpts in a natural chronological and geographical progression. The journey to London in the 1950s, for instance, is a central motif in the social construction of Australians abroad in the postwar period. Australian travellers to Europe achieved what were in the 1950s and 1960s wholly new insights, such as the sacramental role of food, an intuition which was absent from Anglo-Australian culture. These travellers learned the importance of urban design and ritual in continental Europe. They also learned that Britain and Ireland might be perceived quite differently from the way these countries had been presented to them in school texts and family conversations. (Of course, these insights became part of the nation's common culture once postwar European migration to Australia had had its effect.) These literate travellers also discovered new things about Australia as a result of being away from it. They recognised its beauty, the benefits of its geographical isolation from the rest of the world, and the powerful socialising effect of its landscape. These were all things they might not have appreciated had they not travelled away from Australia.

Charles D'Aprano is a Melbourne academic who emigrated from Italy in 1937 and was prominent in the Italo-Australian Left. This volume is a prosopography (collective biography) of the dozens of adventurous Italians who lived and worked in and around Melbourne during the colonial period. D'Aprano himself bears an uncanny resemblance to Raffaello Carboni (see p. 72) and writes with gusto and enthusiasm about these heroic men and women. The book itself is an elegant mix of different typefaces, maps and charts, photographs and

line drawings. Students will enjoy its casual style.

Robert Pascoe is the Foundation Dean of Arts at Victoria University in Melbourne's west. His most recent Italian book is The Seasons of Treviso.

Hear the Voices, See the Faces

ULDIS OZOLINS

Anne Applebaum: *Between East and West: Across the Borderlands of Europe* (Papermac, \$24.95).

ANNE APPLEBAUM'S BOOK describes her personal journey through perhaps the most historically significant borderland region in the world in recent times: the swathe of flat, undefendable plains from Kaliningrad (old Königsberg) and Lithuania in the north through eastern Poland, Belarus and the Ukraine to Moldova to the Crimea in the south. It is a region of immense complexity of nationalities, minorities, religions and above all, historical memories. It has long been a flashpoint for various conflicts between and within empires, but its defining features and centuries-old complex developments were irrevocably traumatised by one specific historical event: the Soviet-Nazi agreement to divide up this space between them, symbolised by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939. While little understood in the west, this event has become the absolute touchstone of local historical understanding. Consigning the Baltic states and Moldova to the Soviet sphere, allowing the fourth partitioning of Poland, it lay the foundation for a sustained war on local identities by Hitler and Stalin, imposing artificial fiats of place and identity for the next half-century.

The author's family was Jewish and her grandparents came precisely from the Polish/Lithuanian/Belarus borderland. Applebaum was raised in America but returned to Poland, en route becoming Deputy Editor of the *Spectator*. She speaks Polish and Russian, which enables her to communicate with almost all groups in this area, and has clearly devoted herself to understanding her own history and pre-history. Yet her journey is not one more

journey back to rediscover 'roots'; rather, aware of the huge historical complexity and turmoil over identity in this region, she wants to understand it all. Not one part, not one group, but the whole region. It is a mind-boggling undertaking, but she takes the view that it is possible – by talking to the people. Her journey is to see at the personal level how people identify themselves, how they identify others, how contests over identity, ownership and belonging indelibly affect all political and social relations in this region.

Applebaum's wrenching opening account of Kaliningrad almost stops the reader from going any further. This was the region where the Soviets in 1944 could directly and almost unwatched exact their revenge on a local German population, turning the city of Kant into a soulless, ruined pig-sty of military entrenchments and oil dumps, burying old architecture under a sea of concrete, killing or deporting almost all locals. But not quite unwatched – Applebaum's research is excellent, and she reproduces the early poems of a young Soviet soldier, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, on the sacking of Königsberg.

Local identity issues resolve around unsolved and insoluble questions of who is the primary group in any area; which is the charter group of a state, whether old or new; how groups have been betrayed or lied about or ignored by any number of oppressors. Was Vilnius always/ever/mainly/significantly a Lithuanian or Polish city? What is Belarus? Was western Ukraine polonised, was eastern Poland Ukrainian or Russian; now, how does Ukraine see itself with its eastern half adamantly western-oriented and its eastern half russified? Can Moldovans be Romanians? Who can, could and should lay claim to the Crimea? Evidence from linguistics, ethnography, religion and history, history, is quoted by the quite extraordinary figures that Applebaum seeks out or by accident runs into. She lets her informants talk. This is exceptional writing.

Applebaum's own Jewish background is neither ignored nor highlighted in the book. At moments it flashes as she meets particularly knuckle-headed or pathetic examples of anti-Semitism, but for the most part it is treated as

only one of the many identity and historical factors that demand understanding. An almost nightmarish example is her hair-raising drive with two local lads seeking adventure in Moldova and Ukraine: she just listens, as the two express their unbridled views of their history, politics, economy, nations, ethnic relations, problems and solutions. For anyone who has recently travelled with strangers in Eastern Europe, or wisely declined, Applebaum's daring is quite astonishing, yet she is in search of the heart of this region to get beyond official stereotypes. Whatever other states decide or try to impose, it will be these local attitudes that have determined and will continue to determine regional thinking and political formation. The author is acutely aware of this human dimension, not passing judgement on these expressions, trying to hear them fully and clearly. Applebaum mentions her own reactions (particularly the unexpected ones) but never uses these to judge her subject. Her own reactions skilfully and without manipulation place us in her shoes, from the blood-chilling opening to her concluding sentences on the end of her journey, which alone are worth the price of the book.

THIS REGION, while often obscured from the west, is not without its wider historical significance, and it would be difficult to understand post war history – particularly the Cold War – without some appreciation of this area. Applebaum relates this back to western readers by mentioning at many points the figures who came there to the west, an astonishing galaxy of the exceptional and the desperate. Equally, she also beautifully conveys the muted presence of those who disappeared to the east, lost but never forgotten by those who stayed.

Her personal account thus always reflects larger historical and political issues. It would be easy to say that conflict will not end unless Lithuanians and Poles; Belarussians, Ukrainians, Poles and Russians; Moldovans and Romanians and Ukrainians; the many different groups in the Crimea; can feel security in their own identity and place. We do not need Applebaum's book to tell us this, and hypocritical and irrelevant homilies by western politicians on the need for tolerance in this region abound. But Apple-

baum's account also allows us to understand what is seldom mentioned: this area is actually not one of overt conflict of an irrevocable kind. Apart from the actions of the Soviet or now Russian army, this whole region has in fact not seen revenge or bloodshed in any measure in the last decade; the fact that formerly Soviet or now Russian military still seek to determine relations is the clearest indication of the enduring nature of the Hitler-Stalin settlement and subsequent Soviet expansion; these small nations are a nuisance to empires, and one empire at least still does not want to die. For the locals, they are rebuilding, with astonishing tenacity, cultures and nations that were consigned more than once to oblivion, and rebuilding rather than destroying or wishing to destroy their neighbours. This is not Yugoslavia.

Applebaum's is a work of enduring importance for understanding this region. For those with a familiarity with these issues her portraits and accounts are immediately recognisable; you can hear the voices and see the faces of her many informants. For those with little familiarity with this region, Applebaum's account covers huge swathes of history, cartography, culture, literature and social processes, but her insights are cogent and immediately engaging, and will make the reader want to know more. If her effect is to spread some measure of tolerance – not in this region, but among observers of the region whether in the west or the east – this will have been a most valuable book.

Uldis Ozolins is Senior Lecturer in Interpreting/Translating at Deakin University. He has published on political issues in the Baltic States and recently taught in universities and conducted research in Latvia.

Play With the Problem of Evil

JENNIFER MAIDEN

Beverly Farmer: *The House in the Light* (UQP, \$16.95).

Alex Miller: *The Sitters* (Viking, \$16.95).

Rod Wayman: *Still Life* (Scorpio Media, \$35).

Kate Grenville: *Dark Places* (Picador, \$14.95).

Rod Jones: *Billy Sunday* (Picador, \$14.95).

THE PROBLEM IS that there are answers out there, in here, and that we don't already have them, and that we could be finding them. Because they are all by adequate artists, these five books are predictably efficient in describing moral crises and immoral tendencies. But my aphoristic compulsion urges me to suggest that each of them stops where it should start.

Morality has something to do with time and colours that I don't quite understand yet. That is why it is inextricable from aesthetics, and why all these moralistic novels concentrate in various ways on the immediate moment (the present tense is common), timelessness and the physical details of being-in-the-world and its decay. Three are actually about artists – four, if you include the one about a historian.

Indeed, *Billy Sunday*, the one about a historian, is sometimes impassioned and ungainly with ethical, artistic and erotic desperation. The hero is Frederick Jackson Turner, who devised the late nineteenth century theory that US culture was defined by the concept of frontiers. With brash literalness, Jones anthropomorphises this thesis into Turner having had an adolescent affair-in-the-woods (very dark, pubic, faecal and Hawthorne) with an Indian beauty who he abandons and who suicides in strychnine agony after bearing his child. Naturally, she haunts him (ghosts seem to have the same bad taste as children and cats in their attachments), and, naturally, he experiences an at-first unaware proximity to his natural son (Billy Sunday) years later. All the central characters are named after historical celebrities who were remarkably unconnected in real life. Unlike the American Gothic literature it is based on, the novel has no clear cathartic supernatural conclusion. There is, however, one scene in which the hero locates the decomposed corpse of his inescapable lover embedded under a tree-trunk and tries frenziedly to fuck her back to life. The rest of the novel has only intermittent power, too many details, too much rationalisation and explanation and not enough metaphysical consummation (except in several forms of fundamentalist spiritualism) but that scene's intensity overpowers any quibbling, and will distress me into profound, restless pity every time I recall it.

So: Is art about the timeless moment when consummation and the lack of it unite and we are morally defined? Certainly, the real accuracy in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* seems not in the Categorical Imperative but in those shopping lists of theses and antitheses, framed parallel and simultaneous on his page ...

FARMER'S BEAUTIFUL NOVEL concludes with such a moment, when "Everyone has stopped breathing" at a scene of awkward, apologetic estrangement/intimacy between the female photographer hero and her ex-mother-in-law. Reviewing a Gillian Mears novel, I once remarked that the characters showed a concentration on immediate physical details which was typical of those "in grief". Thanks to the metaphysics of sub-editing, however, this was typoed in *The Australian* as "in Greece" (which must have bewildered the author, who had set the entire novel in Australia). Since Farmer's photographer is both in grief and in Greece, however, the concept seems worth another wear. Greece continues to be a fruitful metaphysical battlefield for Australian authors. The permeation of hot and cold seawater in the food and on the skin seems redolent with female displeasure or benediction, with a peculiar teasing that real philosophical conclusions may be available if one can only concentrate the senses sufficiently. Farmer is particularly succinct about the artist's ethical positioning:

She saw into the truth of him at that moment ... as fast as a camera shot, indelible, one flash and ... That truth is caught and fixed. We have been judged and we have judged ... How true is it really? The camera lies all the time ... some other factor unknown to us might be involved. No, suddenly we *know*. Beyond reason we trust in our moment of insight – even if at the same time we are convinced that there are no depths, that the soul and all experiences are one flow of surface like shallow water ... which may, must be why I choose film. I must think about this. The false significance of the moment out of time.

This metaphysical conclusion seems both rein-

forced and denied by the book's physical one, but I think is developed no further there.

IN WAYMAN'S NOVEL, the hero is a painter from a bigoted and cruel family, which drives his sister to dementia (R.D. Laing might never have recanted as far as most modern Australian novels are concerned) and him to art. Society proves just as narrow and judgemental, but with a fortuitous prurience. He paints increasingly provocative nudes with the intention of achieving lucrative notoriety, and does. But he embarks on a ship for England after painting less erotic subjects and being deserted by his patrons. I agreed with *them*. More manipulative sex would have made this a stronger book. It can be that art is at its best when propaganda or utilitarian aesthetics give it an excuse to be manipulative. This could be because manipulation usually involves powerful sensual details, and that these summon metaphysical dimensions and decisions. The Wayman is a clearcut, sympathetic piece (with one especially endearing erotic scene in which the hero fucks his rogue aunt) but is remarkable in its lack of exploration of its painter's colours and techniques.

The Sitters is clear on these matters. The hero has a passion to resurrect his art in monochrome and minimalise his subject. The general aesthetic speculations and physical observations are modestly styled but very fine. My favourite was the idea of believing that one is lying about one's current plans and then realising that one has been describing the future. The hero's rejuvenating muse is a female historian who has succeeded in Britain after leaving the lyrically tangible village of Araluen near Canberra. He paints her in her childhood bedroom – at first her absence, just the room, and then with her back turned, looking out the window. This is the image she has suggested of herself. A parallel may be made between his passion for the monochrome and his minimalisation of the heroine herself. She is vital only as his Muse, not his lover, an increasingly absent and wistful figure. The traditional theory of art as mutual or partial vampirisation is not underlined, but is hinted enough to require more complexity, even if the

last paragraph, like Farmer's, is poetic in its sudden elegiac ambivalence.

Grenville's novel is the first-person memoir of Albion Gidley Singer, a serious Victorian father who is also a serious mysogynist, misanthropist, whoremonger, child-beater and child-molestor. The style is consistent and well-disciplined, but I wasn't for a second unaware that this book was written by Grenville, or that she found Albion a horrible specimen. So, quickly, do all his women. So the sexuality is pretty straightforward. Any manipulativeness or erotic supplication (except that of simple prostitution) is merely projected onto them by Albion. If one thinks sexuality straightforward, and needs one's feminism reinforced, this novel is useful fuel – and, anyway, an achievement. But I was left with a slight impression that if Albion wrote female first person, it would much resemble Grenville's tone for him.

All these books are workmanlike, worthwhile. But somewhere out here in the aesthetic, moral woods, I feel sometimes downwind of the existence of real answers. And the smell of those excites me and frustrates me to the core.

Jennifer Maiden is a NSW writer and freelance tutor.

Reading the Country

JOE HILL

George Seddon: *Searching for the Snowy* (Allen & Unwin, \$34.95).

I CAME TO *Searching for the Snowy* as a bushwalker, with an interest in wild places. Untamed ridges and cold skies, snow and cliffs, a rushing river – these were the stuff of daydreams, and memorable holidays. The Snowy of my imagination, remote and empty, offered them in abundance. I wondered about walking down it from the alps, up its valleys towards the Cobberas, along its meandering banks near Marlo and the sea. I wanted to see it and understand it – to know it all at once. I wanted a neat bundle of words and images that I could unwrap and pack up again without too much fuss. *National Geographic* is good at making places like this. George Seddon does much more.

Searching for the Snowy writes of the interaction between people and their land. Seddon asks – how have we shaped the country of the Snowy River? – and how has it shaped us, what does it mean to us today, and how should we read it? He begins at the most approachable end of the river's history – examining the grand myth of the hydroelectric scheme that most of us know so well. He shows us the stories behind it – the politics and science that made it happen – and the river it has created – now a slender trickle in a wide dry bed for many kilometres of its length. But the scale and the mystery are not lost – in spite of a tragic and deplorable environmental disaster. Seddon shows us this in his hunt for the Snowy Gorge. With him we trace clues from conversations with locals – through land that is barely mapped and rarely visited, and revel in the thrill of really living and experiencing a landscape.

Like the river, Seddon's book must travel through many places. And they are not empty. My imaginings of a 'wilderness' quickly became limiting and irrelevant. With the places there are people, and both have stories. Seddon tells many of them. The Snowy River scheme, the Monaro and its cattlemen, the early settlers of the Orbost flats, men of science and white exploration – Howitt and Baldwin Spencer, and Aborigines – the Niagro of the Snowy Gorge and the high country and the Krauatungalung of the south – all find their place in an intricate fabric of observation and experience, past and present.

Interpretations build in layers – the histories of white settlement, natural science – geological and biological, and Aboriginal occupation and displacement, expand and intertwine as we journey downstream. Sometimes they seem to emerge all at once – like in the chapter entitled 'Travellers Tales' – where experiences of early European interaction with the land are discussed in terms of anthropology, botany and sociology and figure against a landscape of moth hunting, cattle grazing and mining.

Land use is the book's reference point for discussion, however Seddon himself emerges as the most constant theme. For me Seddon's travelling – driving, walking, paddling – is the highlight of the book. The people of the Snowy are real because he has chatted with them over

cups of tea on their verandas, strolled with them through their paddocks and ridden in the back seat of their four-wheel drives down their trails and roads. I found myself wanting to meet the Crisps and the Mitchells and the Wroes, to visit Spoin Kop and Kalimna, Black Jack Mountain and Burnt Hut Crossing – to be able to read the country and find all that Seddon does. Seddon has immersed himself in the country and given its myths and legends something to hang on. Travelling through the Bydabo and around the Snowy bend he draws threads of local history up out of the valley he is standing in, over the ridgeline he has just climbed – sharing the stories of its people and properties with generous passion and detail. The Snowy comes to feel like his country. He earns “true possession ... possession by the imagination” – opening the land up to the minds of his fellow travellers.

‘Reading’ the country is what *Searching for the Snowy* is really about. Seddon seeks to know and understand the land. However he is not conclusive. He writes about not one river, but many – each a different interpretation and experience – a different reading, and then carries on:

We have followed the river from source to mouth, but the mouth is dumb. It has tongues, but the tongues are of sand.

Seddon does not try to grasp “tongues of sand”. He lets the river run free – searching for the Snowy but never really finding it. Seddon’s enthusiasm, the scope of his imagination and his depth as a scholar, carry the reader into a landscape that is alive and changing, on an open-ended journey that shows us what a ‘sense of place’ is all about.

Joe Hill is a student and outdoors enthusiast.

Economies of the Pacific Rim

MARC ASKEW

Eric Jones, Lionel Frost and Colin White: *Coming Full Circle: An Economic History of the Pacific Rim* (OUP, \$24.95).

THE ‘PACIFIC RIM’ of now-popular usage, is a policy-driven geo-economic label referring to a new focal space in the global political-economic order. Encompassing a variety of countries between the great land masses of America and Asia, over the past decade it has become identified as the world’s pre-eminent growth region, a new space for trade and policy formation. In academic discourse, this labelled space is now largely accepted as a unit for discussion, prediction, and, with volumes such as this, history writing. *Coming Full Circle* is a product of some of the prolific academics of Latrobe University’s Department of Economic History. In style and content it is clearly aiming to meet the need for texts for the expanding number of undergraduate courses on the economy of the Asia-Pacific; while the blurb cajoles the “general reader”, the conceptual focus is rather too narrowly sub-disciplinary to be attractive to the readers of Asia-Pacific commentators such as Robert Elegant.

The book sets out to achieve two things, it seems: first, to establish the viability of the ‘long-term’ perspective of change (more specifically, growth) in economic history and thus to vindicate the usefulness of economic historians and their writings in helping us understand the present state of things; and second, to do this through studying the ‘Pacific Rim’. The ‘Full Circle’ part of the title refers to the long-term historical view that this region was once – during the period of Sung China of the tenth to thirteenth centuries – the economic growth centre of the world, and in recent times, with Japan and the NICs in tow, it has reached this state again. Yet an explanation (or theorisation) of this implied ‘cycle’ is not the key objective of the book – as one might hope – so much as to describe and account for economic growth, while also redressing the eurocentric view of pre-colonial Asian backwardness with a wealth of ‘... it is often forgotten that ...’ factual references to early Asian inventions or achievements.

Eight core chapters deal with what turn out to be disappointingly conventional economic history topics focusing largely on national economies of the Asia-Pacific, spanning China, Japan, Russia, Canada, the USA, Australia, New

Zealand and Latin America from the tenth through to the twentieth centuries. Unlike some other recent works on the area inspired either by the world-system approach of Immanuel Wallerstein, or the economic-social-geographic history of Fernand Braudel, Jones, Frost and White do not re-conceptualise processes or geographic space: nor do they incorporate views outside their own sub-disciplinary sphere of practitioners, which is a pity – for example they could have drawn on more of the archaeological evidence for trade networks in the Asian region. The Pacific Rim, discussed briefly as a construct in the first chapter, is not problematised adequately, because it emerges fully reified in later discussion. At least two of the chapters (Ch.3 ‘Early East Asia’, by Jones and Ch.9 ‘The Cities’, by Frost) have been the subjects of full-length monographs. This adds to a certain tendency to inverted argument in each chapter.

With few exceptions, the chapters reinforce the economic equivalent of the ‘great man’ theory of history, focusing on production trends in the major economies and the gradual removal of obstacles to economic integration – ironically due to western intervention – thus making any historical periodisation of the Rim economy dependent on western historical phases (‘Age of Discovery’ and so on). Chapter-by-chapter, much of this argument is unremarkable as economic history or indeed as information. The only novelty is that the seemingly separate histories are juxtaposed within the new spatial unit of the Rim.

How is it all tied together? The final chapter argues that economic historians can help to understand the past and present through detecting ‘trends’ – long, short, continuous, interrupted, reversed or truncated. Surprisingly, this doesn’t really help us understand the Pacific Rim’s emergence, since the crucial stimuli to growth and innovation are admitted to be political (state-led economic reforms) and cultural (Confucianism in Japan and China), having less to do with market forces as a key factor. As for the virtues of the long-run economic view: the authors spend more time on short-term trends in their explanations of recent change: the post World War II economic growth of Japan, China

and the NICs. One searches in vain for convincing connections between distant economic past and present, a key requirement, one might think. This book contains a range of information on trade, population and policy which will no doubt be useful for those economic history students at whom the manuscript seems to have first been aimed. One remains to be convinced that the Rim is anything more than an artifact of policy- or rather, publisher-speak.

Mark Askew is a member of the Department of Asian Studies and Languages at the Victoria University of Technology.

Sometimes a Poem is a Darn Good Read

DORIS LEADBETTER

Jenny Boulton, Chris Mansell, Coral Hull and Sue Moss: *Hot Collation* (Penguin, \$16.95).

J. S. Harry: *The Life on Water and the Life Beneath* (Angus & Robertson, \$14.95).

Kevin Hart: *New and Selected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, \$16.95).

Rhyll McMaster: *Flying the Coop: New and Selected Poems 1972-1994* (Heinemann, \$22.95).

Vivian Smith: *New Selected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, \$16.95).

A RUSSIAN LINGUIST, Yury Lotman, wrote: “You can tear apart a poem to see what makes it technically tick ... but you’re back with the mystery of having been moved by words.” You can ponder the semiotics of poetry and what a poem is really about, but you can’t get away from the fact that, sometimes, a poem is a darn good read. As these books amply demonstrate.

Reading Jenny Boulton is something like a walk on the moon; either you’ve been there and understand or you marvel at the people who survived. Although her landscapes (love, drugs, being broke, accepting or struggling to escape from something) are often bleak and rocky, like the moon they have a wonderful way of illu-

minating lovers. There's no sentimentality in Boulton's writing; fatigue, sharp observation, humour, a keen awareness of what she is doing and why, and so much power you end up understanding why the moon drags tides around. These lines from 'Dada' catch something of her spirit:

i never was 'a beautiful young woman'
am congenitally afflicted with an overdose
of soul & an overnight bagful of surprise

Chris Mansell's poetry, happily, is hard to nail down. Each poem in this book strikes a chord in the reader, but each poem is a different, closely examined experience. Reading Mansell's potted biography in the book, this reviewer got the feeling that perhaps each poem arrives, almost unexpected, in the middle of a very busy day. The poem demands to be written, hot and neat, and has the same invigorating effect on its readers. There are so many felicitous lines to choose from – try these from 'Dirty Realism':

... there are local details and
here people really do live in converted
three bedroom short stories in nice
parts of town in what silly city ...

You have to read Coral Hull's poetry out loud: loud and clear, watching her typographical oblique strokes and listening for oblique strokes in the words. Hull has a wide-ranging gift for finding and telling a story: 'Male Friend' is an acidulated and witty interior monologue, and it's on the page opposite 'Evening Feeling', a sensitive exploration of the nature of darkness. In 'Brewarrina Tip', there are wonderful lines like these:

the dogs like the tip/ they find
things to eat/ dad likes it/ he finds things/
yarnevano/ wotyarfind/ downther/ people/
throwinout/ goodgere/

Sue Moss has a background as much musical as it is theatre, as much literature as it is performance. Her poems reflect all these interests and experiences. Some of the poems in this book

are meant to be sung or rapped; many call for the performer's skill. Moss has a happy ability to detect a poem in unlikely places: use-by dates, having your legs waxed (which brings Bob Hawke with it), shoulder pads, Australian cricketers' urge to spit. It's difficult to find 'typical' or engaging lines: Moss's poems are for serendipity and matching the poem to the moment.

Altogether a delightful collection; only one complaint – the photographs of the poets look like poor photocopies.

IN J. S. HARRY'S book: *The Life on Water and the Life Beneath*, the title poem searches over the drowned part of Tasmania for meanings, for reason. It's a wonderfully evocative poem, with rich descriptions of water-borne and water-logged life. The second section of Harry's book concerns the adventures of Peter Henry Lepus, the rabbit with a literary family tree, who encounters or even converses with Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell and Mother Teresa in his search for the comforts of home. Peter Henry Lepus is an extraordinary, brilliant invention. The third section of the book contains more of Harry's poems, rich with imagery and clarity of purpose. These lines are from 'Navigating Around Things':

A small
sliver of moon
pale as a paperbark flower's
ghost spider
floats on the late,
blue, pre-dark sky – a moon
fraying at the edges
into wisps of white
like a child's worn-out
cotton undergarments ...

Kevin Hart's new book nicely balances the old with the new. The first section contains poems written between 1975 and 1979; the second section, 1980-1983; the third section, 1984-1990; the last section, 1991-93. It is astonishing to realise that the earliest poems in the book were written when Hart was twenty-one. Inside the exuberance of a young man, there is already a challenging urge to make matters clearer, to see

more deeply, to explore. All it took was time, and experience. The later poems, mature and with a continuing concern with first principles, have a measure of spirituality that gives them layers of meaning. The poems are accessible but complex. Here is the poem this reviewer keeps reading, 'The Room':

It is my house, and yet one room is locked.
The dark has taken root on all four walls.
It is a room where knots stare out from wood,
A room that turns its back on the whole
house.

At night I hear the crickets list their griefs
And let an ancient peace come into me.
Sleep intercepts my prayer, and in the dark
The house turns slowly round its one closed
room.

More than twenty years of writing poetry are illustrated in Rhyll McMaster's book, *Flying the Coop*. Perhaps her sense of irony has increased, but her willingness to show us what she is, and what she wants, have certainly not dulled. Poetry about family life sometimes seems easy to write, and read, because so many of the experiences are common to writer and reader. But McMaster's perception of family life is seen through sharp eyes, eyes that sometimes sting with pain and hurt but see very clearly what's

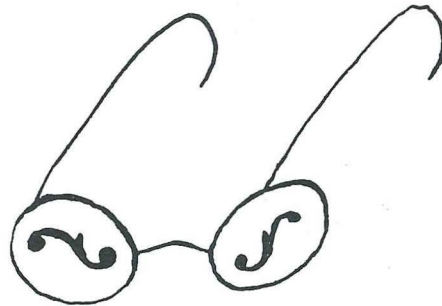
going on around her. This is the last poem in the book, 'When Absent':

I asked my father the question
each night when he put me to bed.
He said, 'You're beautiful when
you're asleep.'
I pleated the hem of the sheet.
I asked him the other;
he switched out the light.
He said, 'I love you
when you're asleep.'

Vivian Smith's new collection of poems demonstrates again the imaginative strength of an accomplished poet. Imagery seems to burst out of some of his poems in a flood of colour; 'The Man Fern Near the Bus Stop' is one of those. Smith writes often in rhyme, and his earlier poems in particular are metrical, comfortable and measured. His later work seems to have become more liberated in form, but his enjoyment of language is unabated. Here is a verse from 'The Colonial Poet' which nicely relates to the poem about the man fern:

It took me years to learn to use my eyes,
to see the way a fern frond stands unscrolled,
to try to make each stanza look as if
it had been drawn by Gould.

Doris Leadbetter is a Melbourne poet and reviewer.



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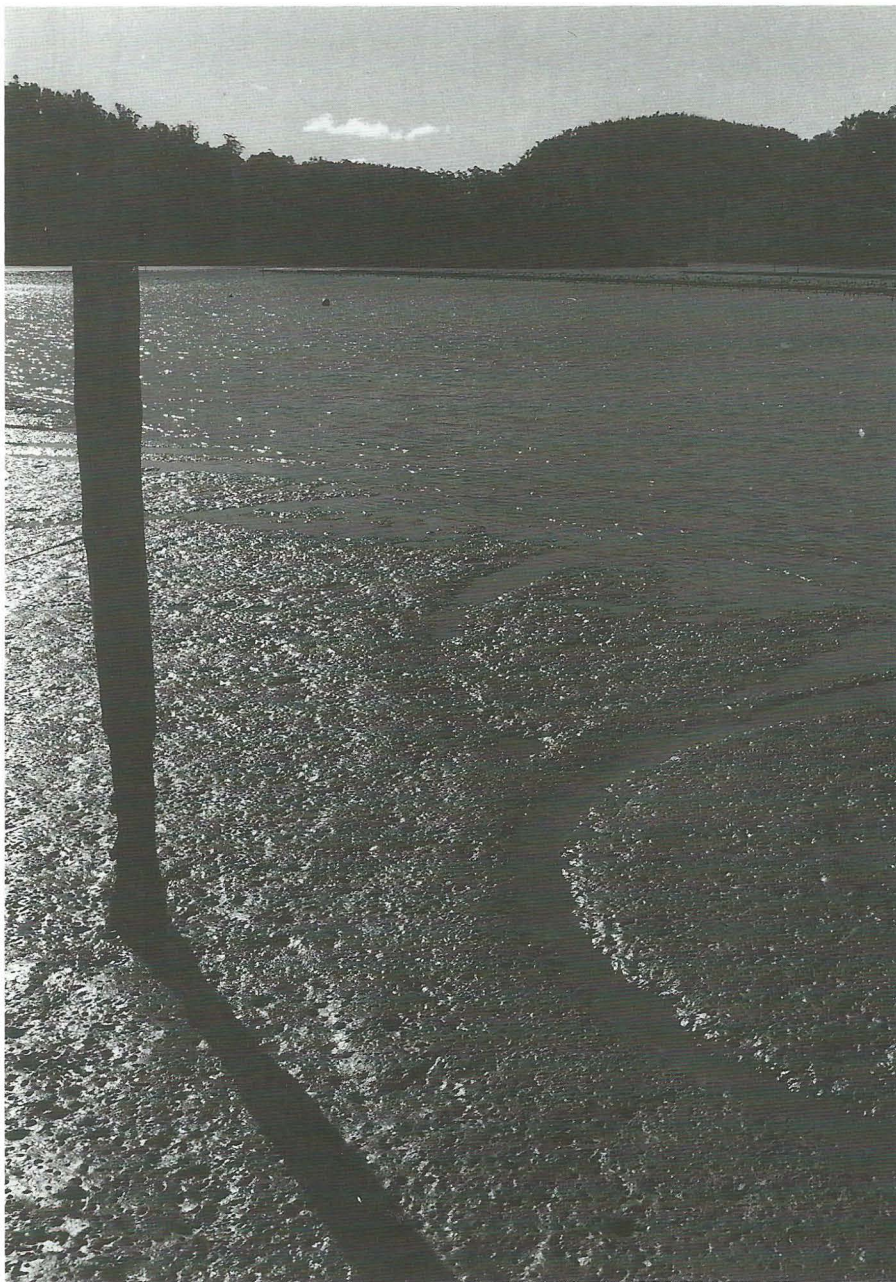

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