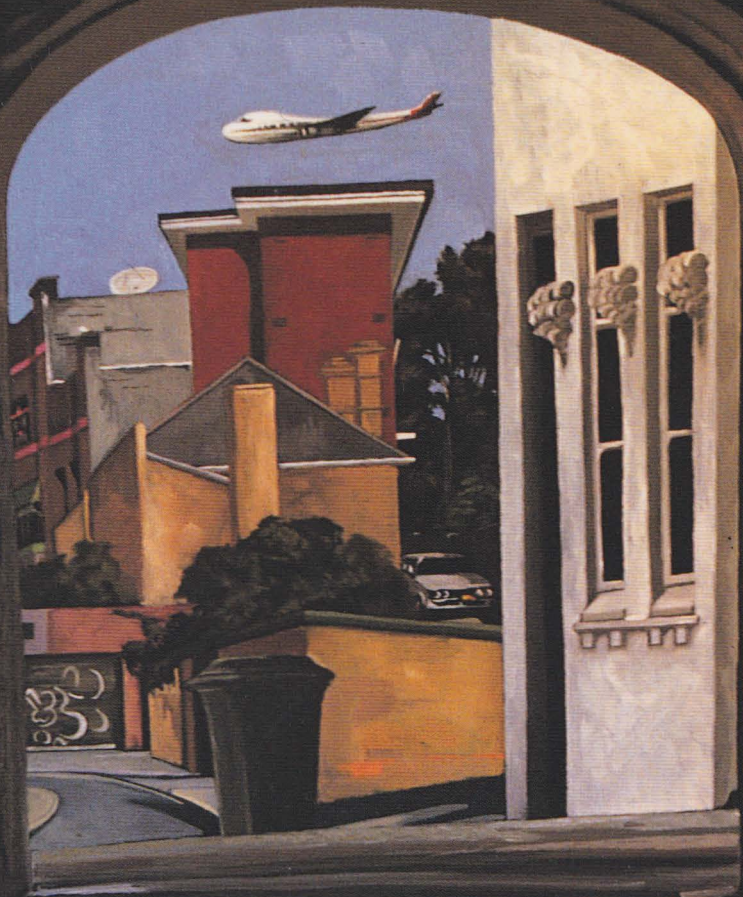


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overland

Temper democratic, bias Australian

154

autumn 1999

ISSN 0030 7416

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

Subscriptions: \$34 a year posted to addresses within Australia; pensioners and students \$26; life subscription \$500; overseas \$70. Payment may be made by Mastercard, Visa or Bankcard.

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overland extra!: <http://members.xoom.com/olande/extra.htm>

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

EDITOR: Ian Syson

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DESIGN: Vane Lindesay, Alex Skutenko & Ian Syson

PUBLISHER: O L Society Limited, 361 Pigdon Street, North Carlton 3054, incorporated in Victoria, ACN 007 402 673

BOARD: Stuart Macintyre (Chair), David Murray-Smith (Secretary), Michael Dugan (Treasurer), Nita Murray-Smith, Rick Amor, Shirley McLaren, Judith Rodriguez, Richard Llewellyn, John McLaren, Vane Lindesay, Ian Syson, Robert Pascoe, Foong Ling Kong, Leonie Sandercock

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TYPESET BY SKUNK

PRINTING: Australian Print Group, Maryborough. ISSN 0030 7416

overland has been assisted by the Federal Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. *overland* acknowledges the financial support of the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria – Department of Premier and Cabinet. *overland* gratefully acknowledges the facility support of Victoria University of Technology and the financial support of its Department of Communication, Language & Cultural Studies.

The *overland* index is published with the spring issue every year.

overland is indexed in APAIS, AUSLIT, *Australian Literary Studies* bibliography, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* bibliography.

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

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1

RUNNING AGAINST THE GRAIN of corporate publishing's dislike of poetry, *overland* 154 is heavily focused on the works and lives of four diverse Australian poets. It also has a colour insert featuring nine of Jenni Mitchell's poet portraits along with an essay on her project by Carmel Bird. The increased expense of the insert has been offset by the generous advertising support of a number of bookshops and smaller publishers who recognise the value in such an issue. Please return their support!

Sadly, a number of 'higher end' publishing companies (presses whose books are often well-represented in our review pages) weren't interested. I eventually gave up trying to solicit advertising, being heartily sick of unreturned phone-calls which were then followed-up by embarrassed complaints of "locked-in budgets", "over-commitment", blah, blah. During one rejection I suggested: "You big publishers should model yourselves on the small publishers; they seem to have lots of money to throw around."

It's time for those of us with an interest in Australian literature to act. The refusal of publishers to support Australian poetry or other forms of literature should be made explicit. For example, Penguin's recent record seems to me hopeless in poetry and poor elsewhere. And magazines with little or no interest in Australian writing and debates don't deserve our patronage. The *Australian's Review of Books* fails to produce little more than padded, puffed-up dollar-a-word rubbish and syndicated overseas material, little of which is by or about Australians. *Australian Book Review*, a magazine which commissions Australians to produce readable reviews of a good number of Australian books is much more worthy of our and the Literature Fund's support. We can act to emphasize *ABR's* role as the pre-eminent Australian review organ.

Without this kind of conscious activism in the relaxed and comfortable, economically rational Australia, the practitioners of literary culture face the continued shrinkage of public space for their activities. *overland's* ongoing commitment to poetry and poets is in part an expression of that literary activism.

Ian Syson

2

TO CONNECT THE FOUR POETS featured in this issue of *overland* could seem facile as each one attends to cultural & political issues in an individual manner.

Judith Wright is well-known for her commitment to conservation. Many of her poems consider Australian attitudes & relations to nature and to indigenous people. Gig Ryan's trenchant essay places Judith Wright's poetry in a historical context of poetic traditions and the struggle for Aboriginal equal rights and land. Whilst acknowledging that "her poetry and prose writings have been a thorn in the conscience of white Australia", Ryan also analyzes Judith Wright's poetic content from a current perspective. Judith Wright has broken her poetic silence especially for this issue and has written some pearls of advice 'To Younger Poets', a gesture by which everyone at *overland* is, frankly, chuffed. (Because of the special case that this silence represents, *overland* has broken one of its golden rules and has included some of Wright's previously published poems.)

John Forbes was always examining the effects of colonization on Australia, including its Americanizations via slick media. John once said something along the lines of "Les Murray writes about the bush, we write about BHP", meaning, of course, corporatization and its extensive imagery altering the way people see & live with or on the land & in cities. John wrote '3 Songs for Charles Darwin' in 1997 – a poem which registers some anger at "our scabbed ancestors". John Forbes had a brilliant knack of tempering anger, sentiment, even intellectualism with a kind of staged bewilderment. This technique meant that he could be very funny. When John Kinsella laments the absence of dickheadism in Cambridge, England, John suggests:

You can always try
mentally hurling
half empty cans
at dons on bikes
by greens that centuries of topsoil
& power
make jewel like
pointless imitating...

And in the letter/poem to Ken Bolton he attempts to write in Ken's style and while discovering something new about Ken's method, decides it's impossible for him, although the poem itself works. One of the least pretentious poets, John Forbes was deft.

Adam Aitken continues the line of anti-colonial critique. He looks at Australians looking at Asia. Adam began what he calls his "narrative life" in Australia in 1968 when John Forbes and a few contemporaries were already practising, prototypically, a poetics later to be inventively mythologized by John Tranter as the "Generation of '68". Adam's focus is partly an informed & critical re-inscription of his personal background in that his mother is Thai, his father Scots-Anglo. Interviewing Adam, the Chinese poet Ouyang Yu asks some percipient questions. Together they engage in a cogent discussion of Adam's writing and complexities that concern not only poets but also the people of the entire region. Asian countries have changed dramatically through the impact of capitalism. Adam Aitken also addresses the Australian terrain in poems like 'Terra Nullius', seeing the absurdities and

incongruities of people visiting the edges of outback landscapes – Australia's centre.

Coral Hull locates much of her poetry and poetic prose in a similar place. One of her recent books is set in Brewarrina in outback New South Wales. Like Judith Wright, Coral is concerned with conservation and, more particularly, with fauna in the landscape and human treatment of and effect upon it. Her powerful descriptive style carries the intensity of her commitment to animal liberation.

Essays, reviews, notes, poems and an interview amplify the featured poets' work. The Sydney artist, Ken Searle, a friend of many poets, painted the cover image especially for this issue. These days poetry is unsupported by corporate publishers and in a kind of back-to-the-future (the 'seventies, at least) way, poets are having to collectivize and publish each other. It's up to magazines to continue to place this vital medium equally alongside other literary genres. *overland* has a reputation for doing so and with this issue we consolidate that reputation.

Pam Brown

To Younger Poets

A light comes off the Object, called Relation.
It connects the maker with what is to be made,
and illuminates both. That is all you have to do,
to see it.

But remember, the poem, to be a poem,
isn't in the end a product of you.
You are the prism the beam strikes,
but it isn't you.

Poets who keep on saying 'I' and 'me'
are drunk
on Ego.
Simply stay attentive
to the source of the light, and always
keep the prism clean.

Judith Wright

Martin Flanagan

Henry never got to see the weirdness that is . . .

Looking at Lawson from the end of the Twentieth Century

LAWSON CAME FROM the land. “Does the reader know what grubbing a tree means?” he asks in ‘Settling On the Land’. “Tom does.” It means digging beneath the tree until its tap root is “somewhat less than four feet in diameter and not as hard as flint”. Still without room to swing his axe, Tom burrows out another ton or two of earth, sinks a shaft on the other side of the tree then fills it with logs he carts from around his plot of land. The blaze, when he succeeds in igniting it, severs the top of the tree which falls on a squatter’s fence, thereby inciting his powerful neighbour’s animosity, while leaving the stump intact. Tom goes to work with pick, shovel and axe.

He traced some of the surface roots to the other side of the selection, and broke most of his trace-chains trying to get them out by horse-power – for they had other roots going down far underneath.

(How many better writers of work and work-place are there than Lawson? His passages could be used in manuals but for the fact that they are underlined by a faintly sardonic humour.) ‘Settling On the Land’ ends with the news that Tom has recently been released from Parramatta Asylum and has a job on a night-cart. His one regret is that the authorities didn’t find him to be of unsound mind before he went up-country. This is one of Lawson’s gentler, more humorous stories of life in the bush.

CONTRARY TO WHAT is implicit in most of what is written about Australian culture, Australia is not a city or a couple of cities or, to be more precise, a couple of suburbs in a couple of cities. Australia’s a land and, more than once, Lawson said he hated it. He ridiculed the romantic object of Banjo Paterson’s muse, Clancy of the Overflow: “As the stock is slowly string-

ing, Clancy rides behind them singing”. That was the equivalent of Gene Autry or Roy Rogers to Harry, as Lawson was known to his mates. He wrote about droughts that left people feeling as dry and withered as the land, followed by rains that threatened to wash them out to sea and left their few surviving sheep with footrot. And, all the time, waiting in the bark hut with the wife and kids was a mounting pile of debts. It is no real surprise to learn that Lawson, in Bob Dylan’s words, once tried suicide. Look at the forces, both natural and man-made, against him. At times, his bush characters act out shadow plays against voids of meaning. This can be humorous, as in ‘The Union Buries Its Dead’, when a procession to bury a man no-one knows acquires a life of its own through the power of heroic sentiment, or it can engender a genuine sense of pathos, as in ‘The Drover’s Wife’, when the solitary woman observes her weekly ritual of dressing, tidying the children, putting the baby in the pram and going for a walk through the maddeningly monotonous and unresponsive bush that has driven her husband away. ‘The Bush Undertaker’ takes it upon himself to ceremoniously bury a shrunken corpse he finds along the way. This is after he has previously visited an Aboriginal burial site and, for no apparent reason, dug up a body. After engaging in a conversation with the decomposing corpse of the white man, he buries it ceremoniously. Searching around for appropriate words, he mumbles a prayer about the ‘Resurrection’. The story ends: “And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush – the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird”. And Henry never got to see the weirdness that is, or was, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party Pty Ltd.

THERE IS AN IDEA of Lawson as a poet of defeat and, in that sense, as a shadowy forerunner to that most shameful idea of our own time – what John

Howard calls the black armband view of Australian history. However, what those who denigrate Lawson as a poet of defeat rarely make clear is that his best writing came out of a social and economic depression. His characters know what hunger means and unlike the Banjo's, who mostly get around on horseback, Lawson's travel by foot. In 'Stragglers', a group of swagmen rest for twenty-four hours in a deserted shed. "They need it, for there are twenty miles of dry lignum plain between here and the government bore to the east; and about eighteen miles of heavy, sanded, cleared road north-west to the next water in that direction." They hope to get a few "stragglers" to shear somewhere. If not, they must rely on the charity – Lawson calls it the goodness – of boundary riders and station cooks.

You can only depend on getting tucker once at one place; then you must tramp on to the next. If you cannot get it once you must go short; but there is a lot of energy in an empty stomach. If you can get an extra supply you may camp for a day and have a spell. To live you must walk.

MARRIAGE IS ECONOMICAL, the idea being that two can survive better than one. Women make hard-headed decisions about whether particular men will meet their half of the bargain. One of Lawson's sharpest characterizations is Bill, the Sydney factory kid who arrives at Aspinall's to tell his absent mate, Arvie, to hurry back to work lest his job be given to someone else. Arvie, a weak sickly lad, has died in the night (in a late poem, Lawson wrote, "I was Arvie Aspinall"). Bill is as sharp as a razor; he knows the landscape of poverty and what he must do to survive it. Reading the story I imagined him to be seventeen. He's twelve. I've not met anyone that old that young in Australia, but then I haven't lived through a depression. My grandfather lived through two and he said the 1890s was far worse than the 1930s. In the western suburbs of Melbourne, there were recorded cases of people starving to death. People who promote the idea of Lawson as a poet of defeat also usually neglect to say that he was a poet of revolution. 'Faces in the Street', which Lawson wrote in 1892, is the Australian equivalent of Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy': both make the point that the political strength the dispossessed and marginalized possess is weight of numbers.

THE TWO WORDS from our own time most conspicuously absent from the world described by Henry Lawson are social security. I mention this because Australians have now voted to move away from the principle of direct taxation. Indeed, it would seem the richest man in Australia, Kerry Packer, sees little reason to pay tax at all. At the same time, John Howard, who was endorsed by Packer before the last election, says notions of class are outmoded and irrelevant. Yet poverty is multiplying, there is a corresponding growth in fabulously wealthy elites and the assault on our poor ravaged planet continues. The former Labor Premier of Victoria, John Cain, recently described economic rationalism as post-modern laissez faire capitalism. What does that mean? It means that a journalist entering America from the south recently observed that while the rich of Tucson had joined the global elite, the poor of Tucson had joined Mexico. 'Faces in the Street' begins: "They lie, the men who tell us, for reasons of their own, / That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown".

LAWSON'S PROSE IS as flat as the landscape he is seeking to describe. His words sit so deep in the sense of what he is seeking to express they seem almost incidental to his purpose. This puts him, in terms of style and technique, radically outside the ornate conventions of his day. It also explains why the power of his best work – e.g. 'The Drover's Wife' – remains undiminished. The artistic achievement of that story is to disguise the woman's heroism as ordinariness. In a real sense, the story has no end. The snake that slithered into the wall of her slab hut is dead, but the new day will bring another trial. Again, it will find her alone, her one solace being the measure of understanding she has received from her small son who wishes he was a man but isn't. The story concludes: "And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush." Lawson, who left school at the age of fourteen, wrote 'The Drover's Wife' when he was twenty-five. The general consensus of opinion appears to be that within five years – that is, by 1897 – he had written his best work. He lived until 1922.

LAWSON WAS CAPABLE of hating the land but the bond was elemental and inescapable. Like a relation-

ship with an unloving mother, which, various books suggest, Lawson also had. In England, he described Australia as "The land I love above all others – not because it was kind to me, but because I was born on Australian soil, and because of the foreign father who died at his work in the ranks of the Australian pioneers". Henry Lawson was the son of a Norwegian sailor, Niels Larsen, also known as Peter Larson or Peter Lawson. Would we see Henry Lawson more clearly if we thought of him as Henry Larsen? Is the bleakness of his tone to be likened to other Scandinavian writers of that period, like Ibsen? Descriptions of Lawson vary only slightly. His friend Tom Mutch said he had a quick temper but was "magnificently unselfish". When Lawson was preparing to leave for London in 1900, A.G. Stephens provided this pen picture:

He is tallish and leanish, with heavy dark hair falling flat on a high, narrow forehead, a mouth that twitches this way and that, in the humour of the moment, and those great dark eyes – woman's eyes, dog's eyes – full of sympathy and emotion.

Nearly everyone remarked on his eyes. Lawson was partially deaf from an early age and for periods of his adult life weighed as little as nine stone.

His mother, Louisa, was a high-spirited, ambitious woman whose parents were from Kent, in England. If accounts of his life are to be believed, Lawson was deeply hurt – perhaps, indeed, paralysed – by the deep and violent division between his parents. Lawson is full of division. A plasterer once told me the measure of his craft is getting a wall "straight". Lawson's prose is straight, without crack or ripple, page after page of it. By contrast, his poetry bounds about like a live thing in a sack. Socialist William Lane, founder of the New Australia experiment in Paraguay, told Lawson that when he was in a blue mood he responded with volcanic verse: "The bluer you are the more volcanic you get".

WAS LAWSON A RACIST? As that word is now understood, the answer has to be yes. He makes unflattering references to other races, particularly Jews and Chinamen (he is curiously indifferent to Aboriginal people – Old Mary, the Aboriginal woman who helps the Drover's Wife deliver one of her children, is the "whitest" gin in the district, that sort of

thing). Perhaps not surprisingly, on the Internet, Our Harry is claimed by the Far Right. After all, he predicted all-out war between East and West, barracked loudly for Russia in the Russian-Japanese War of 1905, and wrote poems during the First World War which were basically rhyming recruitment posters. Does his racism go to the essence of his art? Not his great art. If racism is a failure of moral imagination, it seems significant that Lawson's more intemperate work appeared during the long twilight of his creative life. He also became increasingly critical of women (he was jailed repeatedly for failing to pay maintenance), but the subject of his greatest work is a woman, and to say that he was racist at the end of the nineteenth century is not to say he would be a racist now. The greatest human quality Henry Lawson possessed was compassion ("Let this also be recorded when I've answered to the roll,/ That I pitied haggard women – wrote for them with all my soul"). One of the greatest qualities he possessed as a writer was his facility for direct observation. The Australia he would observe now is markedly different from the society of the 1890s. He would also have been given cause to reflect upon the dangers of racial theorizing. Lawson toyed with the idea that he was descended, on his mother's side, from gypsies. Less than twenty years after his death, European racists were murdering gypsies, along with Jews and homosexuals, in a systematic, remorseless way.

WHERE IS LAWSON TODAY? Not in our schools, I'm told. I last encountered him the morning after the second 'Goanna' concert at last year's Melbourne Festival. The 'Goanna' concerts brought together indigenous artists from Australia (e.g. Bart Willoughby, Lionel Fogarty, the Pigram brothers) with indigenous artists from Ireland (Liam O'Maonlai, Seamus Begley), the two groups being linked by the skeleton of the old Goanna band – Shane Howard, his sister Marcia Howard and Rose Bygraves. Basically, the night celebrated the vitality of two ancient, earth-based cultures that have seen off the myth of empire. The person in whom the concert's various parts met was Shane Howard. His *Clan* album tells the story of him returning to his "birth country" – around Warrnambool, in western Victoria – after eight years of living in northern Australia and several tours of Ireland. One song on the album came from him visiting the cottage on the west coast of

Ireland that his grandmother left as a girl of thirteen during the Famine. Her grave is in the Tower Hill cemetery, outside Warrnambool. Another song, 'Tarrerer', celebrates the significance of the same area as an Aboriginal meeting place, particularly when whales beached on the nearby dunes. Shane Howard is a direct descendant of one of the miners who took up arms at the Eureka Stockade. *Clan* also has a song about Eureka which uses the lyrics of Lawson's poem, 'Blood on the Wattle'.

The reason the concerts worked was Howard's selflessness as an artist, and his belief that by extending the circle, by admitting others to the artistic enterprise, what is created is thereby made larger. In the course of our discussion, he sang me one of his earliest songs, a Lawson poem, 'Will You Write That Down For Me', which he put to music. A poet's in a pub reciting his verse, a drunk gets up and approaches him with a look of startled truth in his eye and says, "Will you write it down for me?" The poem goes on:

*And the backblock bard goes through it, ever
seeking as he goes
For the line of least resistance to the hearts of men
he knows;
Yes, he tracks their hearts in mateship, and he
tracks them out alone –
Seeking for the power to sway them, till he finds it
in his own;
Feels what they feel, loves what they love, learns to
hate what they condemn,
Takes his pen in tears and triumph, and he writes it
down for them.*

For the past few decades, discussions of western literature have been dominated by the same ideas of radical liberalism that have shaped our economic and social structures with, I would argue, much the same effects – not least a retreat into lots of small, lonely notions of what it means to be human. Is it not time to recognize, to use an old but apt phrase, the irredeemably bourgeois nature of such views? Equally, is it not time we considered – seriously – the wisdom of other ways? Irish poets have been in communication with the land for thousands of years; Aboriginal songmen likewise. So, for a period, was Henry Lawson – with the land and the people of the land, as he understood those terms. Even now, re-reading Lawson's first collection of short stories, *While the Billy Boils*, it is hard to suppress a thrill thinking how it must have felt back then, opening a book and discovering the possibility that there may be a great writer in your midst, one who would henceforth speak to you and for you. In the end, Lawson's flaws were as large as any part of him, but in so far as he understood them he wrote about that too, telling his readers about his shame at being a drunk. Small wonder the public felt they knew him. What the intuitive, half-deaf Henry Lawson understood was the strength of our common humanity; now, more than at any time in the past half century, that is a strength we need.

Originally from Tasmania, Martin Flanagan is a Melbourne writer and journalist. His most recent book is The Call (Allen & Unwin), a historical novel based on the life of Tom Wills, the founder of Australian Rules football.

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Sean Scalmer

The Battlers versus the Elites

The Australian Right's Language of Class

Who are the battlers?

IN 1996 JOHN HOWARD KNEW: the ordinary, struggling people who voted for him. Living in suburbs, paying off their homes. Employees or small business people. Battling hard. Like the 'forgotten people' that Menzies summoned up in 1942, the battlers were part of a three-tiered class structure: sandwiched between the elites on one side and powerful unionists or the welfare-dependent on the other. They were dominant in numbers but weak in influence; large yet comparatively powerless; ordinary yet assailed by the 'special' and the powerful from either side.¹

While Menzies associated the forgotten people with a "piece of earth with a house and a garden", Howard promised a more "comfortable and relaxed" Australia. The image of 'home' was central to both visions: the feminized place of rest, of retreat from the woes of class struggle and public discord. The mother's domain. The home is also a cross-class image, a means of drawing together the self-employed, the unionist, the part-time worker. Behind the white picket fence they're all the same: yarning about the kids and cricket; worrying about interest rates; seeking solace in the breast of the family.

The term 'battler' also has a nationalistic and faintly musty, historical air. Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers* (1941) focused on the travails of Depression-era workers, made homeless by economic convulsion and forced to travel in search of work and shelter. Published a year before Menzies' forgotten people speech, the book itself looked back to an earlier moment. It was dedicated to 'the battlers':

*I wonder where they are now?
They will never read this, never know it is written.
Somewhere a dirty crew of vagabonds,
Blasphemous, generous, cunning and friendly,*

*Travels the track, and wherever it takes them,
Part of me follows.*

The term 'battler' also has less grand, literary antecedents. 'Little Aussie battler' is a term sometimes used in ironic, bone-dry verbal exchanges: "You're a little Aussie battler, aren't ya?" – you're the hero of your own drama, how do you manage to fight on in such difficult circumstances? Sarcasm and mockery aside, the image is clear: battlers are active. They work. Things are against them but they keep going. The battler is the antithesis of the whingeing welfare recipient. The 'little Aussie battler' also conjures up earlier historical images, this time more masculine – Billy Hughes, the little digger, 'our boys in Galipoli', national myths of sacrifice and struggle.

Clearly, the term battler is rich with meaning. While Menzies' 'forgotten people' has been praised for its ideological suppleness, in some ways 'the battlers' is a more evocative, capacious designation. It doesn't invent a new term, but takes up a phrase already rich with positive historical associations. It doesn't connote the overlooked, but the truly struggling. It doesn't merely recognize a social group that has been forgotten, but addresses a social group that is hurting. Membership of the battlers is less exclusive. You don't have to feel overlooked, just that you're doing it tough. Even if your struggles become recognized, after you have been addressed in political discourse, you can still be a battler. Menzies addressed the 'forgotten people' in 1942, and didn't win power until the end of the decade. Howard addressed the battlers in 1996, and thanked them for securing his massive electoral victory. The term 'Howard's battlers' became a staple of political commentary and analysis during the first years of conservative government.

The strange disappearance of the battlers

HOWEVER, the term 'the battlers' did not figure so prominently in the most recent federal election campaign. In Howard's policy speech, the Prime Minister didn't construct a three-tiered class structure, with the battlers again the central term. This time, he spoke more generally about Australian characteristics: egalitarianism, classlessness. Australia was not made up of three classes, it was without a class structure:

My love of Australia is based upon my innate embrace of a society that judges people according to their decency and their worth and not according to how much money they earn or what school they went to or what class they might think they belong to . . . My love of Australia is based upon believing that it is still possible in this country to start with nothing to work your heart out and build up a business and to leave something more behind to your children.

The battlers had seemingly disappeared into an undifferentiated, egalitarian, Australian society. What explains this shift?

One answer is that Howard is a political improviser. His rhetoric is not prepared, polished and measured, but extemporized, note-driven and repetitive. He only infrequently depicts Australian society in detailed terms, preferring the pencil and sketch-book to the paintbrush and the big picture. The pressures of incumbency, too, make a difference. People shouldn't be struggling so intensively once Howard is in charge. Neither should 'the battlers' be expected to embrace a goods and services tax. In this situation, the language of 'the battlers' was a political hindrance. It was quietly dropped.

There is another explanation. Like Menzies' use of 'the forgotten people', the language of the battlers was an attempt to weld together a political bloc of middle-class and working-class Australians in support of Liberal government. Menzies integrated the 'forgotten people' into a stable capitalist society, counterposed his language of class to that of the retreating labour movement, and gained a succession of political victories. In comparison, Howard produced the rhetoric of the battlers in an environment of economic instability and proliferating in-

equalities. He did not counterpose 'the battlers' to the labour movement's rhetoric of class. Indeed, by the 1990s that rhetoric had lapsed into silence. As a result, 'the battlers' enacted, rather than reacted to a pre-existent discourse of class within the public sphere.²

In some ways, this made Howard's rhetoric a more impressive, strategic performance. However, it led to unforeseen consequences. The language of 'the battlers' did not buttress the hegemony of sensible, Australian conservatism against the political ideology of the Australian working-class movement. On the contrary, it created a powerful new dynamic that resulted in a fracturing of Australian conservatism. Like Frankenstein's monster, Howard's unlikely political creation fled from its maker. Between 1996 and 1998 the awakened constituency of the battlers became an increasingly dominant presence within the Australian polity. Many of 'Howard's battlers' were detached from the Liberal Party, and found their political home elsewhere: in support of a new political organization, Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.

Hanson as the battler

A LAWYER RESIDING ON Sydney's affluent north shore, John Howard was always an unlikely battler. Pauline Hanson is a more direct embodiment of the battler ethos. In her political biography, *Pauline: the Hanson phenomenon*, author Helen Dodd emphasizes Hanson's battler credentials. Her early life is sketched out in detail: the apparent family closeness, the hard work, the 'old values', the struggling small business that provides for young Pauline. Through a detailed reconstruction of the small business, the family's economic struggle and emotional closeness are integrated into a single image: a family's love amidst the struggle to provide; private ties amidst public battles for economic security; the shop in the front, the family in the back. The image of Hanson's early home/business is a map of the battler's identity: the economic and the familial merged in struggle. Life inside these walls is the life of the battler *par excellence*.

These early experiences are seen as formative: "She admits that her experience with her parents' business definitely motivated her to have her own business". Born from battlers, Pauline cannot but be

a battler herself. This is a life of struggle – “it was not easy for Pauline”. It is also an opportunity for material gain through application and hard work:

It is inevitable that Pauline Hanson would become a business woman. This was the way in which she could realize her dreams and ambition. She wanted to be a successful person in her own right. This meant having money and accumulating some assets.

Clearly, this is not a classic working-class family history. There are no accounts of Dad’s unionism or Mum’s early jobs. No political activism; no accounts of past bosses, luckily snagged jobs, workmates. This is a history of battling self-employment in the hope of (long deferred) financial reward.

Just as importantly, it is also a ‘white’ history.³ *Pauline: the Hanson phenomenon* also contains an account of Hanson’s family tree – the emigration to Australia of her forebears, the pioneer lives of her grandparents. One set of grandparents were Catholics, the other Protestants. In the mythical history that the biography creates, the transcendence of this ‘division’ is given an odd prominence. The coming together of Hanson’s parents from different religious traditions is presented as the creation of unity, an overcoming of division:

This was a marriage between two religions, the Websters being strong Catholics and the Seccombes being Protestant.

The battler family that Hanson grows out of is one without division. It is Australian. The battler is Catholic and Protestant. Reconciled. In an eerie synecdoche, the Hanson family symbolizes the unity of white Australia: One Nation.

This political myth is shared by other recent texts. In Paul Sheehan’s best-selling *Among the Barbarians*, the author documents the ‘dividing’ of Australia by Labor politicians and bureaucrats of the ‘multicultural industry’. This process of dividing requires an earlier image of unity (much like ‘One Nation’). Sheehan asserts that unity, denying the class, gender and racial divisions of Australia’s past. Again, the issue of the reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants in Australia’s history is given priority. Rather than Hanson’s parents achieving that reconciliation,

Sheehan lodges it in the experience of war against the Japanese:

In the [Japanese prisoner of war] camps Australians discarded their differences (the biggest was the suspicion between Catholics and Masons which even showed up in the camps until crushed by the conditions) and became a tribe, a tribe which was always the most successful group. The core of this success was an ethos of mateship and egalitarianism which not only survived the ultimate dehumanizing duress of the death camps, but shone through as the dominant Australian characteristic.

The battler, then, is white. Spanning the classes (working class and petit-bourgeoisie), spanning the suburbs (north shore to western suburbs), spanning the (white) religions (Catholic and Protestant), but unified in battling whiteness. The battler is the key actor in the drama of white Australian history; the key exponent of the ‘Australian’ values of egalitarianism and mateship. The whiteness of the battler is amplified by the historical resonance of the term – its very mustiness harks back to an earlier time when inequalities of income were not strongly associated with ethnicity, and when non-whites did not struggle economically (because they were politically invisible). It recreates the moment of Depression struggle. Economic struggle, whiteness and the family are integrated into a single image. It is from this powerful combination that conservative politics has drawn much of its strength, and its unpredictability, over the last two years.

Who are the elites?

THE ELITES ARE a new class. They rule not by armed force, but by ideas. They are defined not by military power or by capital, but by access to the media and bureaucracy. This ruling class is a ‘cognitive elite’, created by the university system. It is not Australian, but cosmopolitan. It is defined by its cultural habits, such as the drinking of cappuccino and the reading of the ‘quality press’. It does not struggle on the terrain of the everyday, but plans on the terrain of the big picture. The new class elites are “coercive utopians”.

This characterization of ‘the elites’ is drawn from

a discredited publication of the extreme right: *Pauline Hanson: The Truth*. However, the image of the elites that it evokes is shared by figures within the Liberal Party organization and parliamentary party, and by political commentators within the so-called quality press itself. A range of conservative public intellectuals denigrates the power and decisions of this elite with a range of interchangeable terms: the multicultural industry, the guilt industry, politically-correct elites, cappuccino-quaffing journalists, media elites, new class elites, femo-nazis, minority-dependent academics, urban elites, etc. The difference between P.P. McGuinness's "political elites", Tony Abbott's "chattering classes", John Carroll's upper-middle-class elites, Paul Sheehan's "multicultural industry" and One Nation's "new class elites" is by no means clear.⁴ This family of terms all evoke the same basic image: a bureaucratic knowledge-class attempting to reshape Australia and refusing to pay attention to 'ordinary Australians'.

In some ways, this vision of the elites (like its complement of 'the battlers') also takes up a number of well-worked traditions of Australian political rhetoric. Most obviously, it fastens onto an historical valorization of the practical over the intellectual in Australian political culture. This valuation of the practical and commonsense over the abstract and the theoretical has been a long-standing characteristic of the moderate, 'labourist' stream of working-class politics in Australia, as well as the more contemporary discourse of commercial talkback radio, where the expert is typically denigrated, and contrasted with the virtues of the 'little Aussie battler'.⁵

At the same time, this vision of the elites as a newly formed knowledge-class also adopts a stream of post-1960s social theory. In Australia, the journal *Arena* has long been associated with the notion that the intellectually-trained possess common characteristics, and that they represent a newly ascendant social group, central to future political change. This notion is a product of both the rethinking of the foundations of Marxism, and the political activism of students and intellectuals over the last three decades. Its most famous formulation is in the work of an American – Alvin Gouldner's *The Future of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*. In the current political context, it has been taken up by the political right as evidence that a 'new class' now rules and as proof of its tyranny over the battlers.⁶

An odd historical inversion

THE RISE OF A LANGUAGE of class that pits the battlers against the elites represents an odd historical inversion for the Australian left. This is because it is the Australian left that is most associated with the historical reproduction of both political terms.

The figure of the battler is the protagonist of the Australian legend. It is from radical nationalist literature that the figure of the battler gains its cultural resonance – not only from the work of Kylie Tennant, but of Vance Palmer, Russell Ward, Alan Marshall, and of *overland* itself.⁷ In a sense, the successful use of the term by conservatives expresses the strength and importance of the cultural labour of 'radical nationalist writers' over the past half-century.

Equally, the concept of an evolving class structure, in which intellectuals rise to a new prominence, has formed an important part of the left's rethinking over the past three decades. It has animated works as committed and important as Jack Blake's *Revolution from Within*, and the collective project of the *Arena* journal. It has gained authority through the political insurgency of intellectuals since the 1960s.

But in the 1990s, these terms now haunt progressive politics. The figure of the battler is not used to mobilize Australians to seek equity, but to cut welfare and demonize the unemployed. It is not used to encourage anti-imperialism and to stimulate the peace movement, but to foster patriotic breast-beating and Anglo-Saxon grievance. In the same way, the figure of the ascendant intellectual is not used to widen the scope of social change and encourage struggles outside the ambit of working-class institutions. Instead, it is used to wind back the meagre victories of the new social movements and to stigmatize the university-educated as a new ruling class.

Sad ironies abound. In an historical moment when class politics has supposedly been superseded by identity politics, Australian conservative intellectuals have taken up the old cultural tools and concepts of the left in order to develop a new language of class. Progressive intellectuals, many of them adherents of the importance of discourse and cultural construction, have now become discursively constructed as a new ruling elite. The university-domiciled intellectual who had 'moved beyond' class as a supposedly outdated academic fashion, is no longer

capable of such detachment. If this situation vindicates the critics of post-Marxist politics, it makes that situation no less troubling. If it moves class politics back to the very centre of public debate, it makes the form that politics takes by no means clear.

ENDNOTES

1. Judith Brett analyzed the rhetoric of Menzies in *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1993. She drew a series of comparisons with Howard in 'The Politics of Grievance', *The Australian's Review of Books*, May 1997, vol. 2, issue 4.
2. A point made by Marilyn Lake, 'Howard's battle cry', *The Age*, 29 October 1996, p.A15.
3. Peter Cochrane has already noted that Hanson's constituency is made up of "Anglos from the school of hard knocks" – 'Race Memory', *The Australian's Review of Books*, November 1996, vol. 1, issue 3.
4. See, 'New Class Elites and the Betrayal of Australia', *Pauline Hanson: The Truth*, St George Publications, Parkholme, 1997; Tony Abbott, 'Free Speech: A Test of Leadership', *Australian*, 28–9 September 1996, p.28; P.P. McGuinness, 'The Political Elites' Contribution to Hansonism', *Two Nations*, Bookman Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 131–140; John Carroll, 'The middle-class quake', *The Australian's Review of Books*, February 1997, vol. 2, issue 1, p. 18; Paul Sheehan, *Among the Barbarians: The Dividing of Australia*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 1998, p. 138.
5. The importance of the practical in Australian culture is emphasized in Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998, p. 168; its role in working-class politics is noted in Sean Scalmer, 'Being Practical in Early and Contemporary Labor Politics', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 43:3, pp. 301–11. For its relevance to talkback radio see Phillip Adams, 'Emperors of Air', Phillip Adams and Lee Burton (eds) *Talkback: Emperors of Air*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, pp. 17–18.
6. For example, it is used in combination with work by other progressive intellectuals, such as C. Wright Mills, in 'New Class Elites and the Betrayal of Australia', *Pauline Hanson: The Truth*, St George Publications, Parkholme, 1997, pp. 88–9.
7. An anthology of Alan Marshall's work is even entitled *Alan Marshall's Battlers*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1983.

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Police Horses, *linocut by Mark Dober 1998*

Verity Burgmann

Tribunes of the people?

Tas Bull: *Tas Bull: an autobiography – Life on the Waterfront* (HarperCollins, \$24.95).

Hall Greenland: *Red Hot: The Life & Times of Nick Origlass 1908–1996* (Wellington Lane Press, \$24.95).

Tom & Audrey McDonald: *Intimate Union – Sharing a revolutionary life: An autobiography* (Pluto Press, \$24.95).

SINCE THE LAST QUARTER of the nineteenth century, Australian trade unions have constituted important battlegrounds for left-wing activists to argue their respective cases. For almost as long, from the first-wave women's movement onwards, radicals of differing persuasions have plied their political wares within social movements. This aspect of trade union and social movement life has even become more rather than less intense as the futility of staging left-wing skirmishes within the political wing of the labour movement became all the more apparent: when the right or strategic coalitions of the centre and right almost always had the numbers, and the entire spectrum of debate within the Labor Party was shifting ever rightward, what was the point? Turning to the trade unions and the movements was a rational response to the gradual realization that the parliamentary road to socialism ended in a cul de sac.

Has it benefited workers that the organizations formed to protect their wages and conditions have also functioned as a wrestling ring for left-wing ideologies? Has it benefited the people represented in social movements that its internal debates are often furious re-runs of sectarian slanging matches? This is the important question raised in three recent additions to our storehouse of collective wisdom about the left in Australian history. Written from three opposed perspectives – so that 'the Other' in

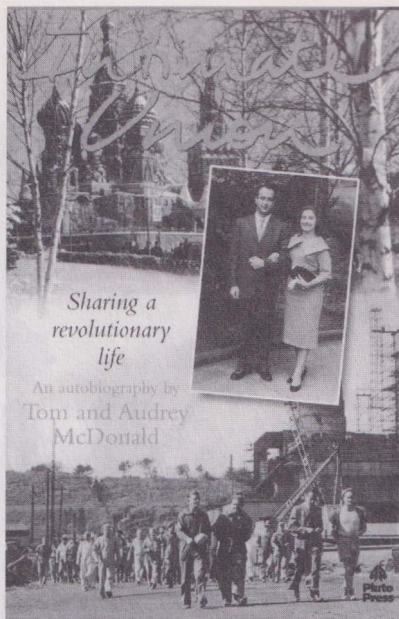
each is elsewhere given a right of reply – these two autobiographies and one biography reveal, though inadvertently, the way in which the relationship between the people and their tribunes is often imperfectly refracted via the prism of a particular left position, whether Moscow-line, left Laborist or Trotskyist.

Tom and Audrey McDonald's *Intimate Union: Sharing a revolutionary life* unwittingly sets itself the daunting task of explaining how two competent and humane people could devote much of their adult lives to the cause of a foreign country characterized by incompetence and inhumanity. Tom McDonald served for decades as a full-time official in the Building Workers' Industrial Union, self-confessed sidekick to Pat Clancy, the leading Moscow-liner in the trade union movement of the time. When the Communist Party of Australia became more critical of the Soviet model from the late 1960s, Clancy and McDonald were important in the formation of the breakaway Socialist Party of Australia from 1971 that maintained loyalty to the Kremlin as the litmus test of true socialist credentials. The BWIU became the flagship of the SPA, which provided the Clancy-led forces with the resources to maintain control of the union. Audrey, too, was important amongst these breakaway Moscow-liners and, just as Tom represented the SPA within the BWIU, Audrey similarly brought this perspective to bear in her work within the Union of Australian Women, just as she had previously championed the Soviet cause via CPA channels during her earlier life as an organizer with the Hotel Club and Restaurant Union.

Tas Bull, a full-time official with the Waterside Workers' Federation from 1967 to 1993, tells his tale in *Life on the Waterfront*. Like the McDonalds, Bull had joined the Communist Party in the 1950s but

unlike the McDonalds he left the Communist Party before the 1960s, gradually moving away from continuing association with it during the 1960s and throwing in his lot with left Laborist forces, joining the ALP in 1974. His personal political voyage was indicative of the gradual shift of power within the maritime unions away from communism towards left Laborism, as the 1971 split in the Party tore apart the once monolithic structure that had dominated the waterfront unions for nearly half a century. Against an internal opposition led by Trotskyist Peter Ellston, who regularly polled around one-third to almost 50 per cent in union elections, Bull played a leading role in the process of waterfront 'reform' of the 1980s and early 1990s that saw a reduction in its workforce of 57 per cent; and, as General Secretary of the WWF from 1984 and Senior Vice President of the ACTU, he was crucial in the amalgamation of the Seamen's Union and the Waterside Workers that created the Maritime Union of Australia in 1993.

A dramatically different style of politics is related in Hall Greenland's *Red Hot: The Life and Times of Nick Origlass 1908-1996*. The "most expelled man in Australian political history", Nick wins hands down as the most interesting and appealing subject matter, many offensive personal characteristics notwithstanding, and Greenland by a similar margin for authorship. The Origlass panacea was maximum democracy – in the factory, in the office, in the union, in the neighbourhood – a commitment he expressed through association with the international Trotskyist movement and maintained during his life as a delegate for unemployed workers during the depression, for builders' labourers and ironworkers in Brisbane in the mid-1930s, as a shop steward for Balmain ironworkers from the 1940s (the principal source of militant left-wing resistance to Communist Party control of the Federated Ironworkers' Association) and as Labor and later independent alderman and subsequently Mayor on Leichhardt Council for much of the period between 1958 and 1995.



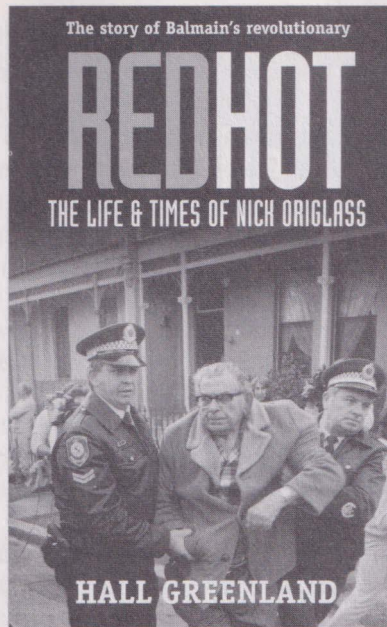
A Trotskyist attachment to a bolshevik political style occasionally confused Nick's democratic instincts. Even after breaking formally with such 'substitutionist' politics in the 1960s and deciding power should reside in the people and not the party, the formative influence on Nick of Trotskyist principles continued to demand that he intentionally marginalize himself, at the same time as he was insisting that all citizens of Leichhardt be given their voice to challenge Labor and other bureaucracies. Having rejected 'socialism in one country', he dedicated himself in maddening

ways to trying to establish socialism in one municipality. During his mayoralties he instigated 'Open Council', whereby any resident could claim the right to speak at a council meeting; but residents were lucky if Nick's long-winded speeches left them with any time to claim this right before midnight. He had brought similar participatory democratic practices into play as an ironworkers' delegate on the Balmain waterfront.

Origlass's attachment to something like Athenian democracy infuriated the Communist union officials, explains Hall Greenland. His championing of "maximum democracy" prompted them "to try to bring Origlass to heel".¹ At its worst, the Communist authoritarianism that Origlass contested expressed itself in ballot-rigging of union elections. Nick opposed such undemocratic dishonesty, arguing that periodic defeats for the left were something to be endured. "No official should imagine he has a proprietary right to a union position and a return to the workshop would not hurt anybody."² Besides, Origlass emphasized, the day after any lost election, union democracy would begin over again with branch and job meetings where the new executive could have its policies criticized and reversed. The CPA took no such pleasure in the thrust and parry of union democracy; as Daphne Gollan has noted there were certain union elections the CPA had no intention of losing, though the comrade charged with rigging the ironworkers' union ballots never enjoyed it. "It always put him in a foul temper."³

So anxious was the CPA to exert its influence from above rather than from below, it assiduously manoeuvred its cadre into trade union positions at all levels. Audrey McDonald, at the tender age of nineteen, was placed by the CPA into an organizer's position with the Hotel Club and Restaurant Union. "I had to work as a waitress for a period . . . to qualify to be taken on as an organizer by the HCRU. It was a busy, exhausting job. I started at about 5 p.m. and finished at 11 p.m. My feet were always aching."⁴ The underpaid and overworked waitresses probably benefited from Audrey's aching feet. The hard work of many CPA officials is not to be dismissed. Tas Bull observed: "I was also much impressed by the officials of the Seamen's Union, the majority of whom were very persuasive communists, and the many party members with whom I sailed, directly attributing to them, or at least the CPA union leadership, the much better standards which existed on Australian ships than I had found overseas."⁵

Yet these militant and effective trade union leaders may have carried out their trade union functions just as devotedly if they had not been members of the CPA; moreover, they may have pursued workers' interests more effectively had they not been subject always to the discipline of parties endowed with the political tunnel-vision of the SPA or pre-split CPA. These people were not trade union militants because they were communists. Rather, they were already trade union militants who gravitated towards the CPA as the only viable left-wing party, which then recreated them in the image of the party functionary rather than the union activist. As Tom McDonald reveals: "The Party had an industrial committee, primarily made up of a couple of Party officials and a number of key rank and file activists and senior union leaders, that made decisions for the Party members to campaign, endorse and act upon in their workplaces and unions."⁶ Audrey concedes the contradiction between the party activists in mass organizations and the party functionaries was always a problem within the communist movement, be-



cause the party always wanted the union to do its bidding.⁷ Naturally, trade union leaders hoped to resolve such dilemmas by persuading their union members of the wisdom of their particular party's standpoint, even when the issues were remote from the interests and needs of the members. Tas Bull recalls "the sharpness in the political scene with the Sydney waterfront Maoists and the Moscow liners in daily confrontation and a new division emerging in the CPA as a result of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia . . . The tremors would be felt everywhere . . ."⁸ On drier land, too, CPA builders' labourers leader Joe Owens recalled

this 1968 invasion "caused total consternation in the building industry . . . there were even punch-ups on jobs".⁹

Moreover, the warring policies that clouded union life on the ground were generally formulated from above within the parties. Audrey admits that respect for "the leadership" was "always a part of the culture of the communist movement" and that Clancy, who had an ego and an unshakeable belief in the correctness of his own judgement, nonetheless had "Godfather" status amongst his followers.¹⁰ Leadership cults at home sustained the leadership cult within the Soviet Union. Tas Bull now recalls with some embarrassment his "unease about the CPA leadership not querying the failure of the CPSU to hold congresses for so many years", an unease to which he did not adequately respond.¹¹

Origlass did and with an impressive remorselessness. If Origlass enraged Communists by his commitment to union democracy, those Communists infuriated Origlass, for the way in which they saw themselves as "middle order leaders of an international movement led by Marshal Stalin" and who accepted their role was to bolster his foreign policy.¹² Greenland might have added trade policy. Audrey McDonald mentions one of the issues Australian farmers' representatives raised with Moscow-line organizations was marketing opportunities in eastern bloc countries, so she negotiated with the Soviet Embassy for an Australian farmers' delegation to be

invited to visit the Soviet Union, in 1976, as the guests of the Soviet Agrarian Workers' Union.¹³

With the needs of the Kremlin foremost in the minds of such union leaders, union activities were very much subject to such concerns. Discouraging strike action was necessary when Soviet interests decreed it, during the Second World War for instance; by the same token, left turns were similarly decreed by Moscow and strikes embarked upon with scant regard for the real sentiments of members, "dictated not by the needs and aspirations of workers, but by Stalin's foreign policy".¹⁴ For those communists who formed the SPA in 1971 and maintained loyalty to Moscow, their industrial relations strategies were characterized in this period by reluctance to strike or pursue militant workplace strategies such as industrial sabotage, encroachment upon managerial rights or green bans. "The SPA-influenced BWIU made the mistake of regarding the Green Ban movement as a trendy movement, when it was, in fact, a broad people's movement."¹⁵ Clancy's style, Tom McDonald admits, was to rely on "skilled wheeling and dealing" behind the scenes. "Rarely did he encourage major strike action as a means of winning a struggle."¹⁶

Public relations exercises on behalf of the Soviet Union must have distracted from struggles on behalf of workers or women:

those of us who formed and joined the SPA believed it was our duty to defend the USSR at all times. . . . When the CPSU made mistakes we convinced ourselves that they would be overcome. . . . Our worship mentality led us into some tricky situations. . . . I remember Clancy arguing that nuclear power was only a problem in the West, because safety was secondary to profit making. But in the East, where there was no such thing as profit making, safety would be the first consideration and therefore nuclear power would be safe. Chernobyl proved how wrong we were.¹⁷

Tom McDonald is to be commended for his repeated honesty: "History proved that we were wrong. . . the leadership of the Communist Party of Australia was generally correct in respect of their criticism of the Soviet model of Socialism."¹⁸ It is to the McDonalds' credit, too, that they departed the SPA in 1981 when it

pursued a turn even more authoritarian about party organization and even more hostile to the need for union leaders to act democratically and responsively to their members. Tas Bull likewise recalls with regret that he "rationalized the many twists and turns of the socialist movement".¹⁹

Ironically, Origlass's opposition to the authoritarian practices of official communism was flawed by bolshevik characteristics he in fact shared with those he criticized. Greenland notes he imbibed from American Trotskyists some unattractive attitudes that sat rather uneasily with his championing of participatory democracy, that he was an unabashed hierarch as far as political practice was concerned. Origlass had no sympathy for the rule of experts in other fields, and in fact spent much of his life contesting the notion, breaking down the barriers between expert and layman, and championing democratic scrutiny and decision-making. "But he was resolutely blind when it came to his own field of expertise."²⁰

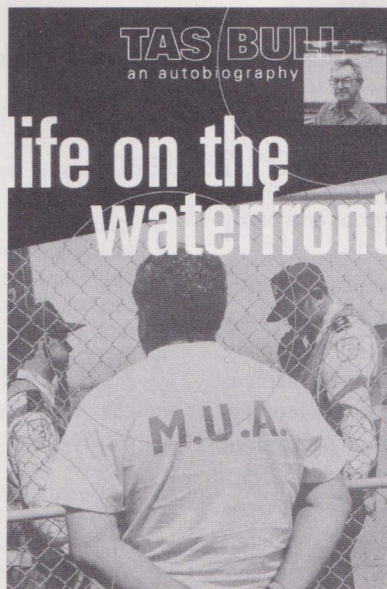
But there was always an important difference between Origlass and his Trotskyist comrades on the one hand, and the CPA and its various successor organizations on the other. The Trotskyists simply did not count: in a labour movement divided between militants who defended the Soviet Union and moderates who did not, there was very little room for militants who criticized the degenerated nature of the first workers' state and who did not dismiss media reports of Stalin's brutalities as lies of the capitalist press; they also lacked the resources enjoyed by the communists as a result of sycophancy towards a foreign state. Trotskyism offered no seats in parliament, no reliable prospects in the trade union bureaucracy, no sustainable law practice. Adherents such as Jim McClelland and Laurie Short departed in due course. "By 1948 it was abundantly clear that ambition and Trotskyism were mutually incompatible."²¹

Nor did Trotskyism offer Origlass the opportunities for overseas travel enjoyed by the McDonalds courtesy of their Moscow-line connections, which "opened doorways everywhere for the SPA in the international arena";²² and by Tas Bull as a waterside workers' union official. These autobiographies read at times like travelogues. Audrey thanks her hosts, the same people whose boundless cordiality had also

footed the bill for Australian farmers flogging wheat and wool. "The Soviet people sacrificed so much in their generosity for the national liberation movements and the resources they ploughed into frequently subsidising very diverse and representative international gatherings of trade unionists, peace activists, women, and youth... I was always conscious that Soviet workers were paying for this support."²³ Had the Kremlin extended the Soviet people the courtesy of consultation about their hospitality, her graciousness would be entirely appropriate.

The globetrotting is not only unabated but unappealing. In one instance, Tas Bull visited Hungary for a World Peace Congress in Budapest in 1971, pleased to have a look at a socialist country. "However, this was a disappointment, especially since I knew Hungary was the most economically advanced and politically liberal country in the Eastern bloc."²⁴ At least he was not expected on return to lie about his disappointment. Tom McDonald was. For example, in 1979 on one of many similar occasions, Clancy asked him to lead a twenty-member multi-union delegation for six weeks at the Moscow Trade Union College, to study the life of Soviet workers and the role of their trade union movement, part of Clancy's effort "to increase the level of understanding in Australia about the Soviet Union and to build the Marxist Left".²⁵ This diligent delegation produced a pamphlet announcing the Soviet Union was "steadily advancing along the road of social and economic progress in circumstances free from economic crisis and unemployment". Privately, the delegation felt Soviet trade unions were 'paper tigers' and therefore prepared to accept working and safety conditions that would not be tolerated by unions in Australia.²⁶

This enthusiasm for visiting a future that did not work had earlier prompted Tom and Audrey to study in Moscow for six months, leaving behind their infant son, Daren, who grew up with similar wanderlust after travelling with a youth delegation to the Soviet Union at the age of thirteen. Daren and his wife are now national officials of the Miscellaneous



Workers' Union, just as Tas Bull's son followed daddy into the trade union bureaucracy. It is no wonder that 'left bureaucrats' in the mid-1970s were so appalled by the New South Wales Builders' Labourers Federation's commitment to the practice of limited tenure of office for union officials that they preferred that this union and its famous green bans be extinguished rather than defended from a combined assault of employers, politicians and Maoist union officials.

Bull considers the decline in unionism is due to changes in technology which have reduced employment in traditionally unionized industries; the complacency of some unions; and trends which encourage individualism. True, but the decline in unionism has not been arrested by formerly communist trade union leaders whose fascination with power finally expressed itself in collaboration with Labor governments and a barely concealed enthusiasm for the high-level contacts this connivance brought them. Tom McDonald, part of the so-called left within the union hierarchy that cajoled unionists into accepting the Hawke-Keating plans for ensuring that workers bore the brunt of restructuring, praises the Accord for achieving an end to union-inspired wage increases outside the arbitration system. Tas Bull, another Accord supporter, at least concedes it was "a bit naive to think the business sector would put the nation's interests first in the way the union movement did through wage restraint, etc."²⁷ In arguing that changes had to occur on the waterfront, he expresses pleasure that being involved in the negotiations offered him an opportunity to influence the process "to some degree".²⁸

Nor can union decline be reversed by dynasties of officials isolated from their members by dramatically different lifestyles, whose anxieties are less about rent or mortgage repayments but about whether they will be upgraded on their next flight. Neither can social movement leaders represent their constituencies by becoming unlike them. Audrey McDonald OA became part of high-level women's advisory groups during the Hawke-Keating period.

In a very female aside, she summarizes the change in her personal situation in her comment that once she would never travel without packing her own picnic; now she never considers taking her own food to reduce costs. Of the four, all from deprived backgrounds, only Nick Origlass remained poor and badly travelled.

While there is no essential virtue in economic hardship nor necessary venality in union and social movement leaders who escape their earlier privations, hard questions nonetheless pose themselves when champions of the exploited and oppressed experience personal material and social advancement to such a degree that, while certainly not rich, they have nonetheless become noticeably different from those they 'represent'. Perhaps the tragedy of the left in Australian history is that its various factions have functioned more obviously as competing power bases for positions within the trade union bureaucracy and social movements rather than as capable and forthright proponents of identifiably left-wing strategies that argue in healthy competition with other viewpoints about how best to improve the lot of the exploited and oppressed. From such an interplay of ideas the people would benefit; from the machinations of left factions competing for power, it is their representatives that most obviously profit.

Only Nick Origlass remained recognizable as a tribune of the people: an octogenarian arrested on a demonstration rather than conferring with cabinet ministers about how best to solve the capitalists' recurring problem of the declining tendency of the rate of profit. Nor is it a coincidence that it is also Origlass alone amongst these four who maintained a thorough distrust of both Laborism and what George

Orwell aptly described as "the stupid cult of Russia".²⁹

ENDNOTES

1. Greenland, *Red Hot*, p. 138.
2. *ibid.*, p. 199.
3. *ibid.*, p. 137.
4. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, p. 43.
5. Bull, *Life on the Waterfront*, p. 50.
6. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, p. 173.
7. *ibid.*, pp. 143-144.
8. Bull, *Life on the Waterfront*, p. 118.
9. Quoted in Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union. Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders' Labourers Federation*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998, p. 22.
10. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, pp. 143-44.
11. Bull, *Life on the Waterfront*, p. 77.
12. Greenland, *Red Hot*, p. 127.
13. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, p. 152.
14. Greenland, *Red Hot*, p. 173.
15. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, p. 177.
16. *ibid.*, p. 197.
17. *ibid.*, p. 221.
18. *ibid.*, p. 172.
19. Bull, *Life on the Waterfront*, p. 86.
20. Greenland, *Red Hot*, pp. 167, 169.
21. *ibid.*, p. 179.
22. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, p. 217.
23. *ibid.*, p. 254.
24. Bull, *Life on the Waterfront*, p. 124.
25. McDonald and McDonald, *Intimate Union*, p. 205.
26. *ibid.*, pp. 205-6.
27. Bull, *Life on the Waterfront*, p. 181.
28. *ibid.*, p. 204.
29. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Penguin Books, in association with Martin Secker & Warburg, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 190.

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Stop Work Rally, 6 May, Linocut by Mark Dober 1998

Dissemblance

Josette Di Donna

MARTHA CAME TO THE TABLE. She came for the stranger. She came to see him off. Not for the others. She gracefully arranged the layers of her dress so that it modestly covered most of her legs. She had been a stripper in her younger days, twirling and swinging a fan with speed and precision. It took years of practice, but at the end it had paid off. She had been the best in the business. Sometimes she had used feathers. She had considered passing on her skill but could not afford the distended belly of the pregnancy.

"The young ones today have no integrity. Sloppy. No manners." Martha had told the stranger.

Martha had spotted the stranger walking around. An insignificant, skinny little man annoyed with his aimlessness. She took him in for a feed, a drink and a browse through the big house with the large TV screen. This was a one-TV petrol station caravan park at the back' town and Martha had it. The TV. A large disk in front of the house, most coveted evidence of her elevated status.

"It's the head," Brenda, the mechanic-maintenance woman, had told the stranger.

"I'm on my way to Darwin. What do you reckon?" the stranger had asked.

"Can be done. I'll call Katherine, scrounge for parts with the garages around," Brenda had replied, wondering about the money. That is if he had any.

During her lunch break, he went to Brenda's caravan.

"It's all fixed. Steve will drop the parts tomorrow, by the end of next week she'll be back on the road." Her greyish hair, firmly trapped in a pony-tail, bobbed as she'd handed him a beer from the fridge.

The stranger had lingered, grateful for the airconditioner coolness, reluctant to confront the heavy heat outside. His eyes had swiped at the cards wallpapering the van: birthdays, mother's days, Christmas days, any-kinds-of-days cards.

"It's my daughter, Sasha," Brenda had explained. "Myself I don't really care for all that crap." With a fatalistic wave she dismissed the adornment on the walls, "... and letters ..." She had dragged and plonked down on the table a bulging sports bag. A pile of letters tied with a string was dug out.

"That's the 1997 ones. I sort them out by years, you see. My daughter's in Sydney. A lawyer now. She graduated two years ago. I wasn't very happy with her moving in with her boyfriend. He's a doctor, you know. I was a nurse myself, way back, so I can tell you a thing or two about them."

Out of respect for the welfare of his car, the stranger had nodded knowingly.

"She worries all the time!" Brenda, brandishing a letter accusingly, "Nag ... nag ... here, in that one, she wants me to have this lump checked by a doctor ... I neglect myself, she reckons. She wants me to wear nice long skirts and perfume ... Kids!" she'd said, laughing.

Brenda had folded the letter back in the envelope, banished it on the '97 pile and knotted the string.

"In her last letters she's been hinting ..." Brenda added thoughtfully, "I don't know how I'll go as a grandma. We'll see."

Outside, the air had been thick with the blackness of the sky. Ditta had been burning off the hair on his chest. The lighter clicked on and off. The acrid odour trailed.

"I need to go to Darwin. I'll come back later for the car," the stranger had said.

Ditta had rubbed the singed hair from his chest. He had felt the coarse skin and shrinking, powdery hair under his podgy fingers.

"They say if you burn the hair it never comes back. That bull! It always comes back," Ditta had told the stranger. "On its way to Darwin, tomorrow night, the bus'll stop here to drop the mail bag. Tell you what, for twenty-five bucks you can have the caravan at the back for the night. Not many tourists during the wet . . . If it wasn't for the buses that stop here for refuelling and the mail, I wouldn't be able to keep Brenda on the payroll." He pocketed the stranger's money. "May as well get yourself a drink from the shop, on the house," Ditta offered magnanimously. "I'll show you the van later."

"That was Monday . . ." Ditta had said disinterestedly. The stranger had sat, waiting for the keys.

"I'm from the South meself. Everyone in the Territory came from somewhere else, I reckon. That Monday I'd stopped at the newsagent, got meself a lotto ticket, regular like, and off on me bike again. And you know what? I just couldn't do it . . . I had me overalls under the jacket. It was still raining. I thought about the little white mask in me pocket, the one we wear working at the silos, all clogged up with grain dust. I crouched against the motorbike and just kept going." Ditta had extricated his bulk from the chair. The left hip dragging behind as he got the keys from the shop and led the stranger.

"There's this baobab tree, you see. A huge bugger. The owner here had a refrigeration business lined up in Darwin and wanted to get rid of the petrol station pretty quick. I couldn't make up me mind about the business. Then, I run into that tree. The funny thing is, it's the only one around here. I mean, how did it get there in the first place? It's not even its turf and here it was giving the finger to all the others, fern and that . . . Back at the station, I got the shop off the old feller's hands."

Ditta had opened the van's door. The stairs had

crunched under his weight but held. Ditta always marvels at its stubbornness.

"It's going to bucket outside, any minute now. We all sit on the verandah till midnight. Well, Brenda and I. Martha, Her Grace, reckons she can't be bothered with the likes of us," Ditta had said, in case the stranger felt sociable, later on.

MARTHA CAME TO THE TABLE. She came to see the stranger off. She did not look at the others. She nodded. Briefly. The other nights, they sat. Their stories silent, old. With nothing to say, they sit. Tonight, Martha had swapped the thick material for silk stockings. The abscesses on her legs dry and ooze. In turn. Musical chairs. At parties, Martha had leapt on the tables and danced, and stripped. Slow and fast and faster . . .

Martha looked at the stranger and smiled. She wanted to fill him with the image of her, dancing and stripping with the music, her sound body quivering with the rhythm, oozing permanence. She told him about the music, the movement, the dexterity and strength in her wrists, her toes caressing or slapping the flat surface.

Martha looked at the stranger as he listened and absorbed. In his eyes she rediscovered herself, refreshed, happy. The stranger saw what she has seen. She can read her story in him.

Brenda glanced at the stranger. She was glad that she had told him about Sasha. He knows. She has filled the empty shell of the stranger with her beautiful tale. He has seen Sasha's letters. The stranger has been impressed with Brenda's caring daughter and her love for her mother. Brenda is not alone. The stranger knows the truth and understands.

Once, she had dreamt that her beautiful baby daughter was dead. She, Brenda had given birth to Death. "Not life, Brenda, death, you have given death . . ." the doctor had said in her dream. But that was a bad dream. He could not have said that. Not a doctor. Not with her mother and the people around her. Brenda had escaped her dream when she came here.

She had never gone to a doctor ever since . . . But now Sasha is living with a doctor. Back with a doctor and Brenda was scared. But everything was going to be all right. Sasha was going to make her a grandma. Brenda will have a little granddaughter. She was happy. Brenda's voice softened as is proper when one talks to a stranger about a future granddaughter. The stranger listened and nodded. They talked about Sydney and names for Sasha's baby. Brenda soaked up the look in his eyes. Brenda fed herself from the stranger.

Ditta's butt was almost welded to the chair on the verandah. Every wet he was thinking about packing. Chucking it in. He watched the skinny stranger. Could have been his son. He chuckled to himself. Very unlikely, though. Still, the kids would be the stranger's age by now. Three of them.

After that Monday he had nothing to say to them or the wife. Not the Monday he left. The Monday before that. Paul, his workmate at the silos, was on holidays that week, so he ended up teaming up with Greg. A mean bastard and a whinger. The lazy slug would watch you struggle and not budge an inch! They were on late afternoon shift that Monday and the boss had said these silos will have to be cleaned sometime this week or next, before the harvesting. That's when Ditta had said: "Well, may as well get on with the job now. Me and Greg. With a bit of luck the lousy bastard might fall off the top!"

Ditta can't remember if it was Greg screaming or him howling. Just a long scream. He kept saying to himself that it was an accident. They all looked at him, serious, "An accident, mate . . . couldn't be helped . . . could happen to anyone . . ." and their eyes shifted. Or maybe that was him all the time. They all said "an accident", then nothing. And Ditta was looking at them and he knew . . . He wanted to shout "I bloody know it was an accident!" But he looked at them and he wondered. That following Monday, he left. No point hanging around for the bloody funeral.

Ditta wanted to tell the stranger about the accident. His large face opened to the stranger's stare.

But the words are about the baobab tree and how it came to grow in the middle of ferns and eucalypts. Alien. The tall tree with the swollen belly, an accident. Maybe . . . just maybe, everything is an accident . . . Nature giving us the finger.

Ditta saw that the stranger believes in accidents. It is preposterous to expect being spared, after all. It is only fitting. Untroubled sleep lays in the certainty of accident. The light was quickly turned off before the onset of the insects.

"It's going to bucket any minute now," Ditta said. And it did.

THE BUS DRIVER RUNS under the verandah with the rain in hot pursuit belting, thick like leather boots. A hot coffee is swapped for the mail bag.

"You'll prob'ly get the tail end tomorrow night. The cyclone's not far from Darwin. I heard the rescue service is trying to reach a tourist bus that rolled over in the Kakadu," the bus driver rushes on. They drink the news from the outside, taste its unknown flavour and reject it.

Driven by the rain, the stranger runs to the bus ahead of the driver. He slumps in an empty seat. On their way, the driver tells him about the accident, expanding. The stranger forages in his pocket. "A baobab seed. I collect them and try to grow them. Can't say I had any luck so far. In Darwin, you may want to give it a go, mate," Ditta said as he slipped the hard seed in the stranger's hand. "In Darwin, don't forget to post the letter. It's stamped and all," Brenda said. Martha stood, skin shafting and smiling.

The stranger reads the familiar handwriting. It is addressed to "Ms Brenda Wesley, Warranora, North Territory". He flips the envelop over and reads: "Sender: Ms Sasha Wesley 23 Seaview Road Sydney. NSW". The stranger crushes the envelope and opens the window slightly. The maenadic rain lashes and tears letter and seed from his hand. It rams and flashes away letter and seed into the torrent of diarrhoeic, red mud.

It buckets. Outside.

Biohazard

An evening at Crown

Jamieson Kane

“GIVE HIM THE THIRD CAP!” A young Vietnamese in a headlock spits it into a shaking hand on the corner of Russell and Little Bourke. I’ve seen the cops do this, when they get a kid. Now the junkies are doing it.

I tell John about it over dinner. We often meet for a curry on a Friday.

“Yeah, you just wait for the raised eyebrow inside the door of the video arcades,” he says.

We’re getting pretty tanked on the beers and wine. I know he’s sussing me out. He’s done smack quite a few times. Pushing the friendship. Wanting to know how far I’ll go with him.

I tell him I got us a deal of hash. This girl in my street, she doesn’t smoke herself. Really nice I tell him.

“I freaked her a bit though, turning up in a suit.”

We laugh. The world’s largest casino is opening tonight in this small city. It’s fucking madness. So we’re going. After we’ve blown two big joints we’re going to infiltrate. Dressed in suits and ties.

I’m feeling sick. John’s on a rave about Buddhism again. Always taking his ego to bits with all kinds of drugs. Eggplant peshwari churns in the beers and wine. John’s doing medicine at uni, his main thing is kayaking though. He’s just come back from doing the Franklin in Tasmania with a fantastic body. John tells me about some of his pharmacology lectures. He can talk for hours about the effects on the brain of smoking a spliff – serotonin levels, pleasure centres, synapse activity – especially if he’s just had one.

“Let’s get down to the car,” I say.

“You’re excited about all this aren’t you?”

“You bet, I love the idea.”

“I dunno.”

“You’ll love it.”

So here it is. After talking about it for months. The post-dinner suggestion. A couple of words.

“OK.”

We’re between two walls full of roaring Daytona and Street Fighter for what seems only seconds. Then out again, on the street crowded with desperates, after-workers and late-night shoppers. John shows me the little red water-balloon cap on his tongue as we get in the car.

“It crossed the kid’s mind I was a cop,” he says.

“The suit huh?”

“Yeah, he reached down and felt my calf. If I was a junkie, I’d be wasting away.”

“Cops wouldn’t dress in a suit to buy anyway,” I say.

I turn down St Kilda Road. Heaps of people are making their way through Southgate to the casino. Millions of dollars worth of fireworks shower over them and the Yarra below. Lucky people? They’ve built a place to test that.

We park outside his house and I sit in the car while John walks to the St Kilda clinic to get the fits. I think about gambling. I think about him. About his calves. About pushing the friendship. We do our gambling before we go in.

One-millilitre single-use syringe for one hundred units or less in two-unit increments. Sterile in unopened or undamaged package. Swabs – 70 per cent v/v Isopropyl Alcohol. A plastic spoon. SHARPS CONTAINER – BIOHAZARD. Cottonwool.

John tastes the heroin while I look for a CD to play. I get excited, morbid, depressed, angry and excited again in the time it takes me to choose it. *The First Day* by David Sylvia and Robert Fripp. The track 'Firepower' says it all. I lie on the bed and shiver as it plays. Will he want me like I want him?

John comes into the room cursing. I realize he's been in the kitchen. He's burnt his hand boiling water. I don't need a sign like this. Shit.

"Take off your jacket."

I take it off and roll up my sleeve. He does the same.

"You want me to go first?" he says.

"Yes."

"If I go first it'll be harder for me to shoot you up."

Shoot you up. Shoot you up.

He takes his belt out of his pants, winds it around and pulls it tight with his teeth. I look at his clenched jaw, the needle, his forearm and desire him more than ever before.

"It's good," he says, holding his arm in the air. It's good.

I close my eyes as I tighten the belt and let him push inside me.

I feel the heroin materialize in me like a Tardis. Millions of particles inside me change form. I become pixilated and supersonic. Then I drop down into it and the room becomes a womb. I hear John telling me to hold my arm up and laugh. I pull him onto the bed and hug him. He doesn't mind it when I kiss him on the lips.

"I want you," I say. "Take off your pants."

He does, so I grip his legs and push his cock into my mouth. I wonder whether the smack will make it difficult for him to come. I suck him hard – a race against the drug – till he comes. I kiss him again and he licks it off my lips. I pull out my cock and press it up to his face. He looks up at me, then shuts his eyes as I watch his tongue on me. I reach for his hand and kiss him wetly where he was burned.

I DO A COUPLE OF 360-degree turns in the middle of City Road, chasing parks. Eventually we find one under the King's Way overpass. I look out of the car and see it. Crown Casino. It fucking towers. Searchlights spin like helicopter blades from its walls and roof. It extends for what seems like a kilometre. We cross ranks of taxis, follow a red carpet to a revolving door surrounded by men dressed in black with white security badges. It is a movie. They let us pass through only because we are famous.

In the atrium we walk through the last days of decadent Rome. Computer-controlled fountains, crystal ceilings and hundreds of young attendants in new Doc Martens shoes. One girl is employed simply to mop away the six or seven drops of water that spill over the edge of one of the fountains every minute or so. And cameras. Everywhere. With the ability to zoom to examine the lint on your lapel, play it back thousands of times and store it for a millennium that will never come to pass. In a month she will lose her job. But she is here tonight. On film for a digital forever.

We visit Planet Hollywood. Its atmosphere is generated by a huge screen running hundreds of spliced movie excerpts into each other, mercilessly. A planet dominated by continuum. I search for the switch. To turn everyone off: the payed inhabitants who toss bottles and glasses to each other behind their backs in time to its pulsing soundtrack; the paying visitors who glance in trances; and the robotic heads of the stars that move and speak to no-one. We are told to leave if we don't want to drink or eat. We laugh our famous laughs and tell them to fuck off in our famous voices.

The salesman in the Faberge egg store is pissed on opening-night champagne.

"We've had a big win on the tables," I say. "We're ready to drop some cash on one of your best eggs."

"Right sir. Yes sir. Well, this egg here was made for a Russian prince two hundred years ago."

"Could you take it out for us?"

"Oh certainly sir. Exquisite isn't it? You deserve it sir."

John tells him he is in a dilemma.

"Maybe I should give the money to charity you know."

"Well, you could do that or there is this beautiful emerald ring."

"Oh yes, I like that. Maybe I could buy it for you, sir," John says with a smirk.

We laugh and try the ring on, waving it about, winking at the other sales assistants.

"Twenty thousand bucks you say, well we'll be back, another hour you know, at the wheel."

Hundreds of people are pushing against a cordoned-off area below some escalators.

"What's happening?" I ask a woman in gold sequined dress with a badge which says 'Crown Escort'.

"The Premier has arrived with Lloyd Williams."

"Yeah?" I say. "Who's he?"

I have to hold John back from spitting on them as they float on down in white tuxedos. Following them are a group of hack celebs – that guy from 'Wheel of Fortune' and the presenters of those 'Good Morning' programs on television.

We tag along as they walk towards the Mahogany Room. I come up alongside them and walk through but John gets turned away. Vast expanses of cream carpet. Desks with special wooden housings for computer monitors and phones. Vents in the walls which spray some kind of 'Inner Sanctum' scent. I cross the floor to a bar and ask for a vodka and soda. The bar staff try to place me. I wink and smile knowingly, down the drink and turn back to find John. He's just outside, arguing with the security guys.

"Look I didn't receive a pass... that shouldn't even fucking matter."

"Come on John, let's go down to the gaming area," I say hurriedly.

The young croupiers work in near silence amidst a hum of looped ambient sounds and voiceovers about all the games that can be played, the astronomical jackpots and what's so damn amazing about

this place. I watch one guy dealing blackjack, his mouth and hands saying the same things over and over. I see him looking at the gamblers, see him learning about losing, watching human pain and joy and pain and joy until it doesn't mean a thing. I feel a deep ache in my spine beginning. I touch my face and feel the strange grin – like some corporate smiling disease out of Tokyo – I'm coming down.

"Let's go."

We get in the car and I drip the hash over some tobacco and roll. John's raving again, about dark satanic mills, the nature of suffering and attachment, heroin as the ultimate commodity.

"I don't think I'll take smack again," I say, passing him the joint. "It's amazing sure, but not much better than good hash."

"I feel like I did after I saw *Blade Runner* for the first time," he says, taking the smoke in deeply.

"Yeah I know what you mean, it was like a movie you know, the heroin trip's like a movie too, it was perfect for the casino. I don't want to do it again though. You know it's fucking dangerous."

"Yeah I know," he laughs and passes the joint back to me. "What we did back at my place was pretty full-on too."

"Do you want to do that again some time?" I ask eventually, passing the last of it back to him.

"No, I don't think so."

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Gig Ryan

Uncertain Possession

The politics and poetry of Judith Wright

[For the poet R.D. FitzGerald] no question of moral guilt and justification arises; there is no self-questioning, for instance, on the plight of the aborigines or the denudation of the land. Indeed, reading his poetry one might think Australia to have been uninhabited before the white man's coming ...¹

FOR JUDITH WRIGHT, whose chief theme as a poet is human relationship to nature, the prior occupancy of Australia is a dilemma she must of necessity confront. Questions of ownership, the legality or otherwise of that ownership, the usage to which the land is put and the results of that usage must be of utmost importance to any landscape poet in Australia. These are questions Wordsworth, who sought a similar communion with nature, need never have framed.

We have the chance to legitimize our presence here by ... negotiated agreement for return of lands where possible, and purchase on behalf of Aborigines, or compensation for dispossession, where it is not possible ...²

... the Wilderness Society of Australia's ... aim, to "preserve Australia's wilderness" assumes that it is the right of the invaders, not the original owners, which is dominant everywhere except where Aborigines may be able to prove, before our tribunals, "traditional attachment" ... (Its) policy thus adds up to a confirmation and endorsement of the *terra nullius* judgement ... That judgement has resulted, over the past two hundred years, in dispossession, destruction and the denial of all human rights to

Aborigines, has turned all Aboriginal land in Australia over to destructive interests, and is the chief stumbling-block to justice and reconciliation.³

If one considers the Yorta Yorta claim in Victoria in 1998: that claim failed because the Yorta Yorta people were deemed to have a discontinuous relationship to their land. The more successfully white Australians have driven out or killed traditional owners of tribal land, the less able are they to be allowed access to that land or to be compensated in any way. The victims of theft have no grounds on which to appeal because that which has been stolen from them has not been treasured by their continued use of it. A similarly bizarre lack of reasoning which we have now come to expect from Australian law was used by the Kennett government to take away the traditional name Gariwerd and return to the Scottish name The Grampians in respect for those hard-working pioneers who so named it. Wright, whose grandparents paid the indigenous people who worked on their land at half-pay (most paid nothing), feels acutely the illegality and injustice on which Australia has prospered. There can be no 'My Country' – at least not yet – as Dorothea Mackellar's poem would have it in which possession is validated by love, but in its place a consciousness in Wright as far

back as her first book that white Australians have dispossessed and exploited the original inhabitants and done harm to the land by inappropriate usage. She cannot truthfully write her family history or Australia's history without knowledge of the rampant so-called "dispersals". Yet in 'South Of My Days'⁴ (1946), the country is hers, "part of my blood's country", that is, the land where she grew up. Wright's dilemma then is also Australia's.

Given that it took white Australian law until 1992 to recognize that Australia was not 'terra nullius', it is not so surprising that those early poems and ballads which became popular are those which ignore the effects of white colonization on the indigenous inhabitants (though many are filled with indignation at white conditions). When these effects are mentioned by early poets – starvation, illness, prostitution, slave labour, rape, death – it is often with an acceptance of an inevitable though tragic extinction of indigenous people and an acceptance of the violence of human nature in its Darwinian progress. Many did however lament the 'plight of the aborigines', for example Kendall's 'The Last of His Tribe' (1864) or later, James Devaney's 'Song of the Captured Woman'⁵ – these had become common, though less popular, themes. Harpur's 'The Creek of the Four Graves'⁶ (1853) is famous as a sustained romantic description of Australian landscape, not as one of few poems to relate an attack by "Savages" on 'innocent' whites. That this poem is commonly anthologized gives a skewed view of the politicized Harpur who more typically wrote 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament'⁷, perhaps an echo of the earlier Eliza Hamilton Dunlop's 'The Aboriginal Mother'⁸ in which the mother speaks:

*"Yes! o'er the stars that guide us,
He brings my slaughter'd boy:
To shew their God how treacherously
The stranger men destroy."*

This poem was published in *The Australian* in 1838, as controversy raged over the hanging of some of those men responsible for the Myall Creek massacre, a massacre controversial at the time not for the number of 'natives' killed (twenty-eight children, women and men) but for being the only time that whites were condemned to death as a result.

More unusual is 'The Gin'⁹, published in 1831 by

the pseudonymous 'Hugo':

*Their health destroyed – their sense depraved –
The game, their food, for ever gone;
Let me invoke religion's aid
To shield them from their double storm*

*Of physical and moral ill;
We owe them all that we possess –
The forest, plain, the glen, the hill,
Were theirs; – to slight is to oppress.*

As Wright says:

There has been much in that life that was never translated into balladry – the silent war with the blacks, the change that had come over the country itself . . . But Australia had found her idealized hero-pattern, in 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Clancy of the Overflow' and the rest, and few looked farther . . . The proliferation of political demagoguery and the cult of the unreal bush-hero nationalist hid the beginning of the twentieth century in a kind of mist of bad writing.¹⁰

That "mist of bad writing" would probably include Mary Gilmore¹¹ who, like the Jindyworobak movement later, recognized indigenous culture as something uniquely Australian and therefore to be appropriated and memorialized.

Wright's first poems in *The Moving Image* (1946) are not only a celebration of the pioneering spirit many take them to be but are often shadowed by this parallel and tainted history. 'Bora Ring' and 'Half-Caste Girl', although they may seem paternalistic now, were an expansion of those earlier Australian motifs. But 'Nigger's Leap, New England', which recalls a massacre, was radical in Australian poetry for having real consciousness of a country already inscribed and 'owned' by its original inhabitants.

*Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.
Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies*

Her popularity, though, is in spite of these poems which draw attention to white Australia's fundamental and long-running conflict Wright, that is, dis-

comfitingly questions white ownership of the land.

Having had a continuous relationship with rural Australia and being told by her father, also a conservationist, of the history behind "Nigger's Leap" (Darkie's Head), she has been privileged to know the original and bloody foundations of white Australian history. From the 1960s on, her political awareness and activism have gnawed at governments and into her poetry. These poems and her prose works on these themes have predictably been less well-received. As she says in 'Advice to a Young Poet' (1970):

*There's a carefully neutral tone
you must obey;
There are certain things you must learn
never to say.*

Wright recommended the publication of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first book of poems¹² and questioned the validity of white criticism of black writing. In 'We Call For A Treaty'¹³ (which documents The Aboriginal Treaty Committee 1979–1983, of which she was a member), one of the rights to be enshrined in that idealistic and disappeared Treaty was parliamentary representation in both State and Federal Parliaments: one indigenous member per State in each House to be elected by the indigenous people of that State. But 'Two Dreamtimes' (1973), to Kath Walker as she then was, is a confused and sentimental poem. Like any Wright poem it contains some fine lines:

Kathy my sister with the torn heart . . .

*over the desert of red sand
came from your lost country
to where I stand with all my fathers,
their guilt and righteousness . . .*

*I am born of the conquerors,
you of the persecuted.
Raped by rum and an alien law,
progress and economics . . .*

but it romanticizes both indigenous Australians and the landowner's guilt, attempting to make her sorrow for the current state of the land equivalent to that of the dispossessed and finishing with a pathetically noble Christian gesture of atonement for white Australian history, she turns the knife to the narra-

tor. Like 'The Dark Ones', this poem is historically important in alerting some Australians to unwanted truths:

*On the otherside of the road
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound . . .*

The facts presented in these later poems explain the elegiac pathos in 'Bora Ring':

*The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.*

Her second book, *Woman To Man* (1949), with its powerful five-line mostly iambic tetrameters of the title poem and in the poem 'Woman To Child', also astonished with what was seen to be its frank depictions of sexual romantic love and childbirth:

*I wither and you break from me;
yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.*

Like Blake and Wallace Stevens, Wright sees love as the unifying force of life, and there are echoes of both these poets in her work, although Yeats remains an important influence. Like those of Yeats, Wright's poems are underpinned with a complicated and rather woolly philosophy which tends towards mysticism, but, also like Yeats, it is not necessary to know the exact intent in every line in order to appreciate the poetry. It is this ill-defined metaphysical aspect that is part of her political conscience. If art is seen as consummation with nature, then stains on the landscape she must enter are utterly her concern, and the stains on the Australian landscape are historical and legal (hence her fight for indigenous land rights and for a treaty), and environmental (hence her work for conservation). These causes for Wright are inseparable:

The times before time, when aspects of ourselves
were merged – not imaged – in the natural world,

are inaccessible to our disinherited age . . . Yet unless we can somehow strengthen the small bridge offered by such stories and painting (indigenous), we other Australians will never begin to heal the wounds we have inflicted on ourselves as well as on the people we have wronged.¹⁴

To love the Australian country then includes responsibility towards it and, where possible, a reparation of past wrongs to its indigenous occupants. In 'At Cooloolah' (1955), Wright recalls her grandfather "beckoned by a ghost – / a black accoutred warrior . . . / who sank into bare plain, as now into time past" and cold history halts her enjoyment:

*The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's twilight
has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colour till he dies,*

*but I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.*

Along with knowledge of a bloodied past, Wright also recognizes a destructive present that implicates us all and 'Creation-Annihilation' wrestle in 'At Cedar Creek' (1976):

*How shall I remember the formula for poetry?
This morning I have abandoned the garden.
Too overgrown to recall the shapes we planned,
it flourishes with weeds not native to this country . . .*

*By the waterfalls of Cedar Creek
where there aren't any cedars
I try to remember the formula for poetry.
Plastic bags, broken beer bottles
effluent from the pig-farm
blur an old radiance.*

But her poetic infertility is temporary as this is followed by 'For M.R.' with the vivid, though perhaps bitter, lines: "Poems can chill, shock, / stop you cold in your tracks / functional as an axe", and she sees the poet's role, appropriately, as to "make(s) immortal what would wordless die" ('The Wattle-Tree', 1955). It

is language that creates meaning for Wright, as it must be for any writer, and so her need to speak the truth of white Australia's history is seen as an urgent task: without this truth, or treaty, she cannot approach her ideal of poetry.

*Time locks us up in the mind,
but leaves this window, art.
'Picture'*

In 'The Morning Of The Dead' (1963), a reflection at her landowning grandfather's grave, written mainly in the pentameters she favours, this fusion between language and nature is elaborated:

*Shape making perilous way from shapelessness;
sense budding where the blind rock knew no sense,
language carving all silence into meaning . . .*

*For this is what the dead desire – their meaning.
"I was borne down; my work was left unfinished;
alive I turned to stone; my love was ruined;
ignorance, oppression, pain left my sight tarnished,
my world corrupt and dying.*

*"Oh make me perfect.
Burn with a fire of sight the substance of my sorrow.
Take what I was and find in it that truth
the universes on their holy journey
watch with their eyes of fire. Illuminate my death.
Till all the dead stand in their essence shining
Time has not learned its meaning."*

There is however conflict between love of language itself and its ability to conceive nature and the reverent silence that echoes nature's silence, as in 'Falls Country' (1973):

*They spoke the tongue of the falls-country,
sidelong, reluctant as leaves.
Trees were their thoughts . . .*

This longing for silence, obviously an evasion of poetry, deifies nature and is suspicious of the human-made as also in 'Summer' (1985):

*. . . I try to see without words
as they do. But I live through a web of language.*

In 'Gum-Trees Stripping' (1955), the irony of such a stance in a poem is made obvious by the effectiveness of her description:

*but wisdom shells the words away
to watch this fountain slowed in air
where sun joins earth – to watch the place
at which these silent rituals are.
Words are not meaning for a tree . . .
If it is possible to be wise
here, wisdom lies outside the word
in the earlier answer of the eyes.*

But desire for the "wisdom" of silence is a conservative and passive stance, condemning one surely to thoughtlessness.

There is a fundamental conflict within Wright's work between the possessiveness of love and the recognition of prior claims. That is, if nature is the impetus for her work, and if language creates meaning and thus 'fusion', then the land she conceives in her poetry should by her effort be hers; yet she knows this is not historically the case, and that no amount of art or love can claim 'her' land for herself.

*once the truth is known:
Law surpasses Art.
Not the heart directs
what happens to the heart . . .*

*Let the song be bare
that was richly dressed.
Sing with one reserve:
Silence might be best.*

'The Unnecessary Angel'

The ambitious 'For A Pastoral Family' (1985) elaborates this conflict between love of country and a recognition that it is not, in a sense, hers to love. In the first section 'To My Brothers', she both praises and disdains her family's history:

*Well, there are luxuries still,
including pastoral silence, miles of slope and hill,
the cautious politeness of bankers. These are owed
to the forerunners, men and women
who took over as if by right a century and a half
in an ancient difficult bush. And after all*

*the previous owners put up little fight,
did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely
human.*

As Wright has explained in the inflaming *The Cry For The Dead* which shows the other side of her earlier family history *The Generations of Men*¹⁵, that is, the contemporaneous history of indigenous Australians in the same area and the officially-unrecorded wars, white settlers were unable to perceive any cultivation of the soil and thus they could see no sense of ownership:

Since cultivation was the highest use to which land could be put, by biblical authority as well as by English custom, the rights of the intending cultivator were obviously over-riding.¹⁶

The poem attempts a reconciliation with her own past as well as with her family but the conflict of loyalties this entails can never be fully resolved. The guilt the landowners must bear comes not only from the illegality of their possession of land but also from their subsequent abuse of that land. In the second section 'To My Generation', she rehearses the common explanation given to justify the past, the supposed innocence of the ignorant:

*The really deplorable deeds
had happened out of our sight, allowing us
innocence . . .*

*If now there are landslides, if our field of reference
is much eroded, our hands show little blood.
We enter a plea: Not Guilty.
For the good of the Old Country,
the land was taken; the Empire had loyal service.
Would any convict us?
Our plea has been endorsed by every appropriate
jury.*

The crisp irony of this section is relieved to some extent by the fourth part 'Pastoral Lives' with its almost Wildean social comedy:

*We were fairly kind to horses
and to people not too different from ourselves. . .*

*... We knew we had no betters
though too many were worse.
We passed on the collection-plate
adding a reasonable donation.*

*That God approved us was obvious.
Most of our ventures were prosperous.
As for the Dies Irae¹⁷
We would deal with that when we came to it.*

The conflict of the poem concludes in the final section with an acceptance of family, a truce with its past. As in the title poem that ends her book *Shadow* (1970), Wright's later works explore the idea of wholeness as stemming not from an idealized sacred state, but from a recognition of good and evil existing simultaneously, that is, a recognition of accumulated history:

*Possessed by day, intent
with haste and hammering time,
earth and her creatures went
imprisoned, separate
in isolating light.
Our enemy, our shadow,
is joined to us by night...*

*World's image grows, and chaos
is mastered and lies still
in the resolving sentence
that's spoken once for all.
Now I accept you, shadow,
I change you; we are one.
I must enclose a darkness
since I contain the Sun.*

Earlier, Wright presciently had written of the negative effect of the Ern Malley hoax:

But the real damage done to the public attitude to poetry was less immediately definable, and more persistent... What cannot be immediately understood is too often dismissed as unimportant or over-subtle, or even as a shallow attempt at self-aggrandization. So the critical atmosphere that greets the new poet in Australia is thoroughly unfavourable to experiment or to adventurousness – a fact which perhaps has something to do with the number of poems written in the 'fifties and 'sixties in either an academic and classical, or

a rumbustiously masculine, vein, both these manners being recognizably 'safe'.¹⁸

The rare occasions Wright adopts a persona, employing a more conversational rather than a portentous Eliot-like tone, show how varied she can be, from the colloquial chatter of the old farm-hand in 'South Of My Days' to the bemused and unshockable Eve in 'Eve to her Daughters' (1966) and 'Eve Scolds' (1976) (interesting to compare these with Gilmore's 'Eve-Song'¹⁹, 1918):

*you thought his maleness chose
you out of the unshaped clay
(his huge masculine beard, his dictator-hand
giving you strength). But I –
I was the clay... Little boys
have to invent such tales
It's insecurity – always your trouble...*

*But my trouble was love –
wanting to share my apples...
But you and I, at heart, never got on.
Each of us wants to own –
you, to own me, but even more, the world;
I, to own you.*

It is Wright's love poems however that knell most through the consciousness of those who follow her. Love "who cancels fear" ('The Maker'), in these poems as in John Donne's, is a reciprocal force, not an observation platform.

*The eyeless labourer in the night,
the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,
builds for its resurrection day –
silent and swift and deep from sight
foresees the unimagined light.*

*This is no child with a child's face;
this has no name to name it by:
yet you and I have known it well.
This is our hunter and our chase,
the third who lay in our embrace.*
"Woman to Man"

Unlike Donne, Wright *uniquely* can claim love as the centre of (human) creation, not as metaphysical conceit but as fact. Wright, that is, legitimized many

Two Dreamtimes

For Kath Walker, now Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Kathy my sister with the torn heart,
I don't know how to thank you
for your dreamtime stories of joy and grief
written on paperbark.

You were one of the dark children
I wasn't allowed to play with –
riverbank campers, the wrong colour
(I couldn't turn you white).

So it was late I met you,
late I began to know
they hadn't told me the land I loved
was taken out of your hands.

Sitting all night at my kitchen table
with a cry and a song in your voice,
your eyes were full of the dying children,
the blank-eyed taken women,

the sullen looks of the men who sold them
for rum to forget the selling;
the hard rational white faces
with eyes that forget the past.

With a knifeblade flash in your black eyes
that always long to be blacker,
your Spanish-Koori face
of a fighter and singer,

arms over your breast folding
your sorrow in to hold it,
you brought me to you some of the way
and came the rest to meet me;

over the desert of red sand
came from your lost country
to where I stand with all my fathers,
their guilt and righteousness.

Over the rum your voice sang
the tales of an old people,
their dreaming buried, the place forgotten ...
We too have lost our dreaming.

We the robbers, robbed in turn,
selling this land on hire-purchase;
what's stolen once is stolen again
even before we know it.

If we are sisters, it's in this –
our grief for a lost country,
the place we dreamed in long ago,
poisoned now and crumbling.

Let us go back to that far time,
I riding the cleared hills,
plucking blue leaves for their eucalypt scent,
hearing the call of the plover,

in a land I thought was mine for life.
I mourn it as you mourn
the ripped length of the island beaches,
the drained paperbark swamps.

The easy Eden-dreamtime then
in a country of birds and trees
made me your shadow-sister, child,
dark girl I couldn't play with.

But we are grown to a changed world;
over the drinks at night
we can exchange our separate griefs,
but yours and mine are different.

A knife's between us. My righteous kin
still have cruel faces.
Neither you nor I can win them,
though we meet in secret kindness.

I am born of the conquerors,
you of the persecuted.
Raped by rum and an alien law,
progress and economics,

are you and I and a once-loved land
peopled by tribes and trees;
doomed by traders and stock-exchanges,
bought by faceless strangers.

And you and I are bought and sold,
our songs and stories too,
though quoted low in a falling market
(publishers shake their heads at poets).

Time that we shared for a little while,
telling sad tales of women
(black or white at a different price)
meant much and little to us.

My shadow-sister, I sing to you
from my place with my righteous kin,
to where you stand with the Koori dead,
"Trust none – not even poets".

The knife's between us. I turn it round,
the handle to your side,
the weapon made from your country's bones.
I have no right to take it.

But both of us die as our dreamtime dies.
I don't know what to give you
for your gay stories, your sad eyes,
but that, and a poem, sister.

The Dark Ones

On the other side of the road
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound.

In the town on pension day
mute shadows glide.
The white talk dies away,
the faces turn aside.
A shudder like a breath caught
runs through the town.
Are they still here? We thought ...
Let us alone.

The night ghosts of a land
only by day possessed
come haunting into the mind
like a shadow cast.

Day has another side.
Night has its time to live,
a depth that rhymes our pride
with its alternative.

Go back. Leave us alone
the pale eyes say
from faces of pale stone.
They veer, drift away.

Those dark gutters of grief
their eyes, are gone.
With a babble of shamed relief
the bargaining goes on.

At Cooloolah

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's twilight
has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colour till he dies;

but I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,
for earth is spirit; the invader's feet will tangle
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

Riding at noon and ninety years ago,
my grandfather was beckoned by a ghost –
a black accoutred warrior armed for fighting,
who sank into bare plain, as now into time past.

White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark,
clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan –
I know that we are justified only by love,
but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.

And walking on clean sand among the prints
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear
thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather,
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

Judith Wright

'Two Dreamtimes', 'The Dark Ones' and 'At Cooloolah' are reproduced from Judith Wright, A Human Pattern: Selected Poems (ETT Imprint) with kind permission from Tom Thompson.

elk in minus twenty

elk in minus twenty, grazing on the frozen river bed, digging for green like dogs with their forelegs, they turn from me, a world of ice between us, they are part of the snow landscape, if you held a camera and turned 360 degrees taking photos, you would see how much they were part of the landscape, slow movement on a small segment of the horizon, and how they were completely immersed in the snow, like placing a stocking over the lens of your camera as you took the shots, there may as well be a blizzard between you, deep snow, that makes everything beyond your touch shy and unreachable, for as you move towards it you become sleepy, with the first warmth of hypothermia behind the eyelids and in the stomach, sleep with the landscape that wanders off gaining momentum to deep within itself, sleep with the winter elk in minus twenty and your mind will go wandering away with them, the pain in your toes and fingers has stopped, the skin on your face begins to turn white as it dies, as stunning as a blizzard, it has all become so easy

joeys in a sack

the shooters' terrier was starving, too small to get his teeth around the roo tails, so mum fed him noodles on the side, from a polystyrene container, behind a big old ironbark, mud up to her knees, her hair in rollers, the shooters' children were using joeys as skipping ropes, lassos & dolls, tugging & snapping their limbs, small mouths shrieking, mum called me over, & told me to keep away from them, dad was down the riverbank throwing in a line, his brylcream hair gel spikes glittering in the sun, i kept a may holiday diary of animals living & dead, i heard the faint hiss & grunt from a hessian sack, through the canvas of the camper van, they were motherless joeys, the blue does strung up by the legs on the roo shooters' trucks, wobbling together in rows, necks hanging loose, grey ears bent & torn, i sat by myself in the afternoon & played with some strands of grass, the green tree frogs chirped out from the toilet block, & i thought of their flat pulpy bodies, smooth & squashed in under the lids, & the way they slimed up in my palm, frogs as big as saucers, the water systems flushing them cold, just the way frogs liked it, how i loved those frogs, & how i wished i was dead, as the joeys squeaked out from the sack all night, with plum blue eyes, too early to open, but they had enough life left in them, to show me how they could suffer, & how they wanted to live so badly, for their first day out of the pouch, with tails like levers, pushing the gangly legs forwards, until the heads first, exhausted, tumble back in, the black claws scissored together, mum wouldn't let me save them, as the rain fell down & soaked the hessian, & how as the morning light came on, i knew that sack moved less & less

Coral Hull

she-oaks in the grey mist were roaring like trains

the she-oaks in the grey mist were roaring like trains,
on a still day, they will pick up the slightest breeze,
the land is talking, a train approaching from all directions,
she-oaks, a few left standing in a grey winter field,
if you stand long enough to listen to the roar,
a paddock of she-oaks on the way to deniliquin,
dirty grey bark and when there were trees on the land,
many she-oaks and grey box and dry sclerophyll forest,
there would have been many levels of roaring,
liberate yourself by walking in a paddock off the highway
past the crown land and stock route, keep going in order to die,
the she-oaks are out there, talking to each other,
beyond recognition, the mist rain gently hanging, filtering,
to the point of saturation, dropping down through them,
the large black ants are wriggling slowly, hiding in their holes,
are clicking their iron bodies, brassy antennas and legs,
deep in timelessness, red holes in the red dirt,
listen to wind roaring through the victorian she-oaks,
like a train approaching from all directions,
whilst you remain in awe of the cold and directionless,
the distance is helping you along, off the cobb highway
away from your vehicle, into paddocks of roaring she-oaks,
sending you further in, upon your strange watery approach

Coral Hull

John Kinsella

Working with Coral Hull on Zoo

WHEN I STARTED writing *Zoo* I just wanted to write about caged animals, to try and describe them as best I could. Although I was engaged in a Zoo Check¹ with a primarily political motive, I felt that I could achieve a greater depth and intensity by poetic exploration of the subject matter. It is a great task to describe another lifeform with accuracy and compassion. During the creative construction of the book, I was quickly led beyond politics and into a greater sorrow for life on earth, including humanity, the saddest animal of them all. This is seen in poems such as 'The Globe Is Wearing Down', 'The Moon Rocket Crashes on Planet Trauma' and 'The Baby Mouse Is Dead'. The basis of my work is a quest for truth and knowledge, and the need to construct an identity from a chaotic universe. I want people to think more about this strange existence. My greatest achievement is where I am able to turn sorrow into joy – to transform. I admire the strength of the superheroes, and feel that it is only morally correct to pull out words like swords, rather than write a witty poem about a paper clip.

Coral Hull

BEFORE STARTING THE *Zoo* project with Coral Hull I'd known her work for almost a decade – first seeing it in literary journals and at *Salt*, and later writing on *William's Mongrels* for the *Australian's Review of Books*. Hull's explorations of landscape and concern for ethical issues were strong attractions for me. I use the word 'explorations' in a heightened sense here, as it is the negative aspect of human colonization and occupation of place that she so strongly writes against. A visual poet, she makes her observations in an ethical framework that qualifies the way we see and the potential ramifications of this seeing. It makes sense that Hull is also a photographer and an artist, that there is a synthesis between words on the page and other forms of illumination. Hull's landscapes are also of the body and the unconscious – the exploration of the land and the exploitation of the body and soul, almost a visually exploding *écriture féminine*, are intricately linked. Hers are poems in which conspiracy is actualized – they reject the politics of imposition and invasiveness. They are about the rights of the individual, of collective consciousness, of animals, of place, of different cultures. Read by some as purely emotional reactions, they are often rather logical, calculated responses to oppression, infused with a 'passion' that makes the target 'see red'. Hers is political poetry that at its best transcends the polemical. Infused with extended metaphor and a strong sense of metonymic build-up, the poems take things head-on both artistically and rhetorically.

A couple of years ago when I was visiting Sydney I met with Hull who was going over to Taronga Park Zoo to do a Zoo Watch. She asked me to accompany her. After much deliberation – zoos to me are concentration camps (as they are to Hull), not places of preservation – I decided to go with her and to help with her report. Both of us ended up angry and disgusted at what we found. Our collaborative book *Zoo*, due for publication this year with Paperbark/Craftsman House, comes directly out of that experience. The title does not refer purely to the Taronga visit, but to human interaction with animals in general. It's the process of collaboration, and the ethical issues confronted by this work, especially as they reflect on Hull's work as a whole, that I wish to discuss.

The question of whether the process of writing poetry is more important than its ethical basis, or the subject matter that inspires and drives it, is fundamental to understanding the 'poetics' or modus op-

erandi of Hull. Hull's prime concern is animal rights and the well-being of animals in general. Like myself, she is a committed vegan. She functions as an advocate for animals – a go-between for the generally insensitive and exploitative world of humans and the multiple worlds of animal life. And she is a 'doer' – a direct-action person heavily involved in Animal Rights activities, both in the tradition of the 'pamphleteer' and as a 'field operative'. Which is not to say she is unconcerned with specifically human issues. The nature of recollection and memory, of family, of the destructive nature of patriarchy, and all forms of oppression, come constantly under scrutiny in poems such as 'Praying Mantis', 'Sharpies', and 'Liverpool' – all from *William's Mongrels*.

Hull can approach such things through prose, photography, and other media with as much enthusiasm and determination. But in the end, it is the ability to create conceits, to distil the moment, and enrich through metaphor that makes all her art poetic at its core. It's not so much a case of the 'perfect words in the perfect order', but of layers of sensibilities simultaneously interacting. Romantic claims to vocation and talent are convenient and mostly class-driven. Writing out of a 'working-class' ethos as conscious construct, Hull takes 'inspiration' and enhances it with necessity, even expediency. One writes because one has an obligation to do so. Even at her most 'confessional', she works solidly against the notion of the 'confessional poet'. The self and personal experience may be a focus of observation, but they are always vehicles to some 'greater' political end. Hull doesn't ditch herself, but uses herself as a mouthpiece for the unspoken and often the unspeakable.

Her process is about using the tools at hand, the most appropriate device for translating – the self. She sees the poet as having a genuine role in 'society' – making a firm contribution to the physical and spiritual well-being of the individual and the collective. For Hull, poetry is a powerful tool for highlighting, and potentially righting, multiple wrongs. This politicization may have placed her outside usual funding environments; she has struggled for many years without the support that many ostensibly apolitical poets of equal critical stature have found more readily available.

So poetry and politics are inseparable for Hull. And this is another thing we agree on. In *Zoo*, the majority of Hull's pieces are 'direct action' in nature; most

of mine work by allusion and circumlocution. I think this is what makes the collaboration function as a book. Where Hull will say something outright and then build layers of metaphorical allusion, I'll start with the metaphoric allusion and leave the reader to distil the politics. Of course, there are exceptions on both sides, but this is a general principle. Also, Hull's pieces in *Zoo* tend to be prose poems in the main, while mine tend to be lyrical – if at times, experimental 'anti-lyrics'. We both, however, agree that genre is there to be crossed, and really the realms of prose and poetry, words and paintings, sound and sight, are indivisible.

The very act of collaboration is a political one, in the willingness to break the boundaries between one's own personal territory and that of another, to take this then into the public arena. Even when the poems in *Zoo* focus most on the 'self', it is in the sense that this 'self' is part of a public consciousness, that it is concerned with universal issues. The poetic voice made 'ethical'.

Over the last few years I have been involved in a number of collaborations – from text-based book-length structures based on the works of Deleuze and Guattari with the Swiss poet-sculptor Urs Jaeggi, through to e-mail collaborations with the American poet Susan Schultz, the Australian Louis Armand, and the British avant-gardist Keston Sutherland. I have also collaborated on a quasi-narrative poem with John Tranter and a variety of projects – primarily based on responses to paintings – with Tracy Ryan. Most recently the volume and cd *The Kangaroo Virus Project*, with sound artist and photographer Ron Sims, has been published. Different from most of these, but sharing some features with *The Kangaroo Virus Project*, *Zoo* covers not only textual ground but entire worldviews. It has been as much an ethical collaboration as an artistic one – though as the book attempts to demonstrate, such divisions are false anyway.

The methodologies of a Hull poem and a Kinsella poem have some things in common. There is an accumulation of data, a series of moral/ethical references that move in and out of the text, an interplay – or meta-textual play – with the readers'/audience's expectations. The fundamental differences relate to the use of formal poetic devices, the build-up of an internal referentiality in my poems as opposed to Hull's more externalized references, and the idea that I pursue: that language can be an end in itself. Of

course these are issues that arise in Hull's poetry, but there is always a specific emotional and consequently socio-political response looked for in the presentation of a Hull poem. Hull will deploy devices that lure, arrest, and eventually make the reader complicit in order to get the message across – such as conflating a child with an animal in order to stimulate a response of disgust, which is then skilfully transferred onto the object of sympathy. Persona and rhetoric are deftly manipulated to keep the reader compelled, to prevent alienation from the speaker. This is how guilt and complicity are evoked. Then a series of mnemonic triggers provides a familiar framework for the reader to position response – an incident, sight, smell, or emotion from childhood, the recollection of a story, and so on. Infused with a strong sense of visualization – of painting – the reader is moved to respond. An atmosphere of verisimilitude is created.

Hull's previous book, *Broken Land – 5 Days in Bre 1995*, is a brilliant example of this cumulative process – a photo-essay, a documentary, a series of visual and emotional responses, an ethical and political manifesto, a deconstructed picaresque that confronts the spectre of death. The 'river' of this land-bound picaresque is the flow of blood from the slaughter of kangaroos, the slaughter of all animals by the machine of human exploitation.

The following poem by Hull from *Zoo* illustrates part of this cumulative process at work:

A broken down train is reclaiming the same tunnel on a circular track. Now confronted with this living red miracle, I was intent upon making contact. Yet the red fox would have none of it. All the tantrums of my small plump legs, couldn't get that fox to stop and look. Mission had turned to obsession, down the long highway of hysteria. Her eyes shone like rich liquor, unfocused and timeless, captured like an insect in amber. Her fiery tail like a stubbed cigarette. There was no reaching into her, fingers on the wire, my chubby knees pinned to the dirt, the soft skin stapled by twigs and stones. I knew that something was very wrong here, yet I trusted the world. "Foxes are beautiful," I said.

I suddenly felt her full of pain and worry. Nan thought the bears had frightened me, those zoothotic polar bears that swayed deep inside

the concrete pits. Once my brother dropped his plastic bottle, and crawled through a barricade in his nappies to get it. The polar bears' eyes were already on the toddler that teetered on the edge. For a moment I felt the silence of nightmares that emit strained and desperate cries. This was the world of the captive bears a long way from the icefloes and Churchill. The animals were teaching me lessons. It was like a shadow crept into my heart to settle there. "This is the world," it said, "welcome little girl who learns from everything."

'Fox In A Cage At The Zoo'

A more rhetorical though equally forceful piece by Hull from *Zoo* is the poem in which she replaces 'cow' with 'child':

I am going to replace the subject of 'cow' with 'child,' in order to reply to your statement/question that: 'it's better to wear the skin off a dead child than to go and kill a child yourself.' First of all being a children's rights activist, this statement is offensive to me. Why? Because I think that the use of the word 'better' somehow condones the former. But aside from my gut response, I will elaborate on why I think that wearing the skin of a dead child is not a good tactic for children's rights. 1) the child is dead and has been murdered and you participated in the murder. (from a children's rights perspective, to wear the skin of a murdered child that you participated in murdering, whether that child is part of your family or someone else's, is unacceptable) 2) the child is dead and has been murdered by others and you did not participate. (from a children's rights perspective, to wear the skin of a murdered child is unacceptable even if someone else did the murdering) 3) the child is dead and has been found by you in a paddock and you don't know whether s/he has been murdered or not. (from a children's rights perspective, to wear the skin of a dead child is unacceptable, because you cannot be sure in a society that openly promotes the genocide of children, if that child has been tortured and murdered) 4) the child is dead and you have seen that child die, so you know that s/he hasn't been murdered. (from a

children's rights perspective, to wear the skin of a dead child is unacceptable, because you cannot be sure in a society that openly promotes the torturing and genocide of children, what kind of life that child has had or if that child has been tortured. Also if you saw the child dying, I would expect that you might have tried to save his/her life) 5) the child is dead. s/he is your own child, and you know that s/he has had a good life and s/he died quite peacefully in his/her sleep. (from a children's rights perspective, to wear the skin of a dead child is still unacceptable in a society that openly promotes the torturing and genocide of children, because to do so, means that you will be advertising the skin to others who might like the look of it, and who might either support or participate, in the murdering or torturing of another child to have skin like yours.) None of the above promote children's rights, therefore they are all unacceptable from a children's rights perspective.

'November 3rd, 1997, Murder Scenario'

In the Zoo collaboration, we as poets are responding sometimes to each other, sometimes to an ethical concern or specific event, sometimes to a general principle, but most often the poems are parallel evolving texts quite independent of each other. Many of these poems couldn't have been written without the interactions, but others would have been, and indeed were. Which made the process fascinating. The book, the end result was the 'collaboration'. The order of texts is all-important. There is no indication of who wrote what, but it is easy to pick up the individual voices and stylistic differences. These are 'universal' voices moving in through, with, and on occasion against each other. Hull and I have different views on how much the reader/audience can take directly – I generally feel allusion and a residual effect evoke a greater response. But generally, we exist in each other's poem, and conflate, collude, and work as a chorus line. My digressions are mainly to do with experimentation, such as in the 'Echidna poems', but in the end, the concern is universal.

Which brings me back to Taronga Park. The whole business of arriving by ferry, being hauled over the circles of inferno by cable car, and being confronted by icecream and confectionery shops set the stage. And

a stage it was – animals in their cages and glass boxes, the absurd sideshow called the nocturnal house, an elephant with a genital growth, performing seals, the psychologically-wrecked apes, and so on. Coral's Zoo Watch report was damning, to put it mildly. I couldn't cope and didn't know why I was there – I felt lurid, like a voyeur of the most damaging kind. To give some meaning to it all, to make sense out of it, we proposed writing a book about the experience.

Thus Zoo. Coral was at Taronga for investigative purposes, to report on the conditions and help work towards an improvement in the animals' lot. I was there to make myself aware of what I condemn in word, what I once condemned in direct protest, but now have filed away in a series of references in my writing. Zoo is an attempt to redress this – to make active my protest, to frame it in such a way that there can be no equivocation about the ethical concerns at stake. But by working with Hull's more direct voice, I am enabled still to explore the poetic and linguistic concerns that have so dominated my project in recent years. I genuinely believe that it is ethically responsible to explore what it is that constitutes language, that by freeing explication, by investigating its inner workings, one can move closer to a truth. Here is one of my poems from the collaboration:

*Each cell a pixel screened in the upper register;
what impresses the human ear but silence or the
quarter-
tone of the condensed mental cycle, the psychic
expedition,
those passing-the-time tricks we know prisoners
have at their fingertips? The bird's a fucking astral
traveller I reckon! Can't ya tell? Standing there
with your chips & Fanta . . . those birds'-nest soup
swiftlets
– Collocalia – echo locating a way out as the whole
zoo
bristles like quadrophenia: cheetah, chicken,
chimpanzee,
coatimundi, cockatoo, CONDOR: icon, soarer rip-
roaring
thermals over kodachrome Andes from Venezuela
to Tierra del Fuego & back again.*

'The Virtual Zoo'

And part of Hull's 'Taronga Park Zoo In Sydney':

... I will not forgive the zoo for the elephant, for his far-fetched torment. His lengthy sway in every waking moment and when he slept, thrown sideways like simulated waves inside the sea lion tank. A whiff of ocean from the harbour persisted and grew strong, as the ferries glided further and further away, whilst captive marine mammals circled in parallel swimming pools. At every cage John said, "that's the worst". It got worse as the day grew longer. I knew that he would not forgive them for the Andes Condor. "It's a bird that SOARS in high altitudes!" he said, words rising up inside his throat. The choke of tethered emotions, and the damp finality of wings that would never meet clouds. A tremendous lonesome bird sat hunched behind layers of mesh and pipes, a wire cage six foot above its head. Taronga Park Zoo flattened the Andes. They made that condor crawl.

One aspect of Hull's work that fascinates me is her ability to make the familiar dangerous, to take the complacency implicit in our interaction and generation of popular culture and render it confronting. As we sit back and laugh at ourselves disfigured into our negative character components on television, while safely distancing ourselves at the same time, we avoid the issue. In her poem 'The Zoo Ark' Hull repeats the line "Oh my god, they've killed Kenny" like a mantra:

A black bear with a sugar addiction is a large
 problem.
 Scientists found it exciting but worrisome.
 "Oh my god, they've killed Kenny!"
 If you could actually feel their misery.

A short sound bite from the continual flow of the television, the zoo. The uneasy laughter that comes with a splatter scene from 'South Park'.

In looking for the influences of other poets on the construction of *Zoo*, one might look in all the obvious places – landscape poetry, the pastoral tradition, polemical verse, and so on – or nowhere at all. The influences on the texts may be manifold – from Judith Wright to Jacques Derrida, Les Murray to Peter Singer, Marianne Moore to J.H. Prynne, Robert Adamson to Pablo Neruda, but as a book it has arisen out of an ethical concern and its origin is in debate, investiga-

tion, and revelation. There are a myriad of other concerns subtextually explored – questions of gender identity, institutionalization, isolation, racism, and bigotry in general. In many ways its catchcry is Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity – but for all living creatures!

Hull's work strikes me as having much in common with Blake's – an element of faux-naïf of the best kind, a sense of the visionary, and a framework of moral investigation fused together in a voice that is at once hermetic and public. On the completion of *Zoo*, I look at the book as a kind of illuminated manuscript – sometimes with texts by Hull, 'engravings' by me, and at other times vice versa. Hull's is a voice in which Heaven and Hell are in constant struggle, and there is a sense of contraries. My boundaries are more blurred than this, but both of us see it as necessary to break down boundaries for some kind of truth to be envisioned. But for Hull there is a right and a wrong world, and in this she is an optimist. *Zoo* is a positive book – or, at least, a book in which the hope that wrongs can be made right is strongly expressed. For me the bird is the symbol of hope, as it is for Hull; as are all animals. For both of us, humans are the phantom limb of all animals, as they are of us.

One of the invigorating aspects of the project was the diversity of styles. As mentioned, Hull makes most use of the prose poem in block format, while I concentrated basically on the short-line lyric. But there are lyrical pieces by Hull, and a range of line-length and stanza patterns from myself. But in the end, the subject matter dictates the form. And though writing of animals and zoos, we are not, as Hull points out, 'Zoo Poets'!

But this is not a zoo poem.
 It sounds like a complaint.
 It sounds more like,
 I want to spoil all the fun.
 I am not a zoo poet.

ENDNOTE

1. Zoo Check is an investigative action taken by animal rights advocates to expose stereotypical behaviour, such as swaying and pacing amongst other things that occur in imprisoned animals, to give evidence of unnatural behaviour in unnatural habitats via written and photographic documentation.

John Kinsella is an Australian poet based in Cambridge.

Terra Nullius

for Victoria Dawson

The Marlboro billboard ads seem too green
against the abattoir's iron dust.
Marlboro-man wears his dead heart, open-cut, on his sleeve
greets new custodians at the airport.
The young visitor's poems jangle like camping gear.
Everything he wears borrowed or a hand-me-down.
Cleaner than a new 4-wheel drive
but with far less revs, they go bush
pissed off, broken hearted.
She'd been reading Salman Rushdie
in a cemetery for dead miners, and combed her Mohawk.
It was women's business brought her here
to the boneyard shade of men's business.
Somewhere half way to Arltunga
coping with immense distance
and depressed parents he telephotos
spinifex pigeons, cooing in their prickly nests.
Out Glen Helen way they lilo green waterholes
where water dampens everything inside
they never knew was dry.
At Ormiston scree-run and climb a dinosaur of hills
with Bob, snake portraitist who'd stuffed his knees
this way a marriage back.
In saltpan Terra Nullius caravans and nissen huts,
cask wine transfusions from hole-in-the-wall bars.

Wake in pre-dawn frost, gold, purple, 256 colours;
residual embers powdered to nothing, a dingo
having scoffed the leftovers.
Flames brighten and fade, the morning is surplus, clarity
turning to a dusty slipstream.
Road ruled straight and narrow,
odd curve and hill (forgotten which)
bending their minds – all snake, no head
nor tail: like a roll-your-own
open at both ends. They learn how, say please
every step taken, pixilated tracks
across the land. Endless painting.
Enter anywhere. Drivetime talk of
national style. Cowboy, what void was that?
Marlboro-man closes the gates behind them,
like an earnest God, when they leave.

Cheap Eats

(Siam Cuisine, Lurline Street Katoomba)

Hot rice will inundate their plates.
Till then they wait, doublewrapped in wool; it's slow
striving to keep things traditional
when your country's lost to traffic jams,
another colonel's coup,
or overrun
by hamburgerology.
Homesickness slows the waiter down,
worse than paperwork.

Here the diners talk success, few are.
Inspectors sneak in, disguised as gourmets,
& are pleased

because, theoretically, it's all
authentic. Because
the questions anyone would ask back home
no-one here but the cook's grandmother
will ask: how old are you?
Are you married? No? Why not?
Here, the babes are off the frosty streets,
bred much bigger here, like
bigger chickens or that piglet
rugged up against disease and snow
strapped to a high chair &
throwing the cutlery around.
Go easy on the chillies, the heat's
5000 miles away

where the lighting is somewhat better.
Table cloths or a four track stereo could make
a huge difference. Note that down.
Then the poets walk in, without
a reservation.
They do algebra to split the bill;
obscured by wine casks and a raving style:
sex, walking boots,
saints and prizes
& you might as well
hand them the calculator.

Notice

the way laminex reflects his face,
how one chair leg's shorter than the other,
exorbitant and so few the prawns.
The extractor fan blows in reverse, and to a poet
how much more interesting that it does!
Certificates, stars against a name,
press cuttings framed & hung
near a chubby Buddha in the corner,
royal portraits & fruit pyramid, incense
for any occasion (a smell to perk up
the atheist).
No King or I will live in poverty
when all are fed on time!
It's slow, & the rice arrives, finally
delicious & out-of-order
but (note this down, inspector) blessed by care.

Adam Aitken

Reflecting a Culture of Convergence

Ouyang Yu interviews Adam Aitken

Ouyang: *I checked you in the latest edition of Oxford Companion to Australian Literature but you weren't there. Then, to my delight, I found you in A Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writers published at Deakin University in 1992. Are you happy with this?*

Adam: I think you have hit upon one of my central anxieties, one which generates my need to write. I am happy to be in the *Multicultural Bibliography* because much of my work relates to that discourse of multiculturalism. It's the only directory I'm in, and it's better to be in than invisible. But I've always thought the term 'multicultural' was pretty broad, and if you look at who's included under that term, you'll find an immense variety. That term doesn't really help explain or describe much of that variety. I don't feel comfortable with the boundary line between multicultural and the rest. Having said that, it is important politically to draw attention to the writers who do not find themselves in the mainstream. Most of us feel that the 'Oxford' label carries that remnant of old colonial shoe leather we should all get beyond. But it would have been nice to be in the Oxford too. Ideally, there should be one huge directory called 'Australian Writers'.

Ouyang: *You were born of Thai and English parentage. How does this affect your writing?*

Adam: My mother's life has always fascinated me, as has my father's decision years ago to leave stuffy 1950s Melbourne and seek his fortune in Asia, at a time when the White Australia policy was at its greatest heights (or depths). Thai Buddhism also interests me, because it seems so corrupt, I mean in a vital life-affirming way. Many Thais tend towards animistic practices and superstitions, excessive drinking and eating, and travel is considered a pleasure. My mother's garrulous and argumentative na-

ture also contributed to my love of books and discourse. My father's side is Scots-Anglican, and he has a very protestant side to his personality – hard work, self-denial, individualism. My mind oscillates between these two force fields.

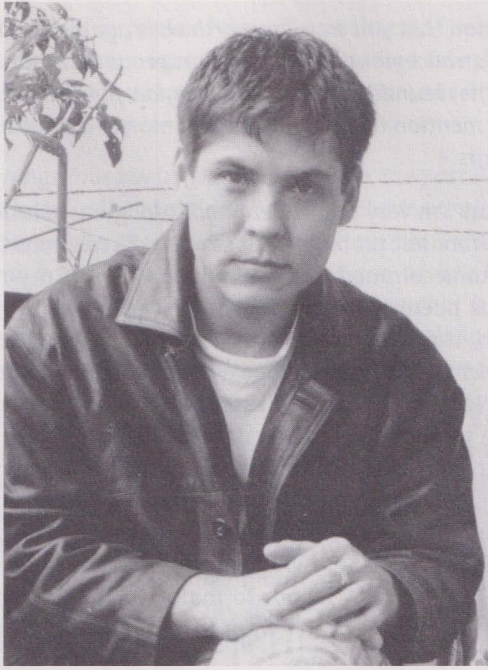
Ouyang: *To me, you seem one of the few young Australian poets who write extensively about Asia. Why is there such an interest?*

Adam: Asia is the part of my childhood that was made to seem almost completely irrelevant as I was growing up in Australia. Like it didn't matter where you were from, you were in Australia now. You had to start your life's narrative from the date stamp time of arrival in your passport (in my case late 1968). At primary school Asia wasn't on the curriculum. My life up till then was a tabula rasa. My writing often re-inscribes that past, or at least my distorted unreliable memory of it.

I'm fascinated at how Australians imagine Asia, how they react when they travel through Asia, and whether that experience can influence their imagination and their self-identity. I'm also totally ambivalent about the modernization of Asia – as my mother was; she left Thailand before the Americans really shook the place up. Bangkok's an urban planning disaster, but it's got a great sense of life. I love rural Bali but when I was there I could not help remembering that savage massacres left thousands of corpses floating down the rivers; people killed in the name of 'progress'.

I've been writing a lot about this boundary line between ideologies, but in an imagistic, metaphoric way. Perhaps Asia was post-modern before it was modern.

Ouyang: *In your first book, Letter to Marco Polo, you say "no East, no West, East of no West...". Is this meant*



for sarcasm or a true reflection of what you experienced in Asia?

Adam: Not sarcasm. I really believed that a few years back. That was written fifteen years ago. But oddly enough the structure of my books perpetuates that dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'. *Letter to Marco Polo* is divided into two halves and the second part contains my 'Sydney' poems. *In One House* also has a lot of Sydney poems, but this time I mixed up the topography of the book. The Sydney poems seem to have been buried in the greater critical interest in all things Asian. I think I was describing myself, my predicament. I didn't feel very different from my friends in Sydney, and I wasn't particularly interested in living in Asia, or making it a speciality. But I knew I had a subject that was rare and was worth pursuing. That line also refers to a way of thinking that Edward Said pioneered – that in order to meet the Other, you had to become it in some way, instead of cordoning it off and defining bits of the world geo-politically. It was a way of dissolving a dialectic that wasn't creative.

Ouyang: I detect a note of criticism of British imperial legacy in *Letter to Marco Polo* such as 'Confessions of a Sheriff's Daughter' and 'Bangkok 1968' where references are made about 'the savage beast' and 'noble savages'. Is this a major concern in your poetry set in Asia?

Adam: "Music calms the savage beast." You still hear people say that this or that race of people have inherent talents that other races don't have. Even Asians say that about themselves (all that Asian Values stuff). At uni I was fascinated by Caliban – the way he is a model of the uncivilized native. But he also happens to speak the most amazing poetry. Also, Robinson Crusoe's Man Friday is the British sailor's link to order, survival. The Brits always needed their 'savages', but their relationship to them was symbiotic, erotic, sexual, ambivalent. The noble savage theme goes the other way too. Look at the popularity of Paul Hogan's *Crocodile Dundee* films in Asia.

Ouyang: Take 'Confessions of a Sheriff's Daughter' again. Poems like this seem very autobiographical, not in the sense that they are literally about yourself but in the sense that they seem to be about your family members. Is there a conscious effort on your part to search into the non-European part of you that cannot be found elsewhere but in Asia?

Adam: I try consciously to find the non-European everywhere, not just in Asia. I also want to find the European in the Asian. So 'Confessions' was about the dilemma my mother faced when fraternizing with the European ex-pats who were her teachers at university, and with one who ultimately became her husband. She wanted to be European. (So did my father!) The problem was she had to cut off Asia to become European. It's a classic post-colonial situation, an alienation that writing redresses to some extent, at least emotionally.

Ouyang: Do you speak and write Thai, your mother's mother tongue? And does that affect the way of your writing at all?

Adam: I speak enough to get around, order food, and be polite. I once talked my friend and I out of a dangerous situation in a Pat Pong Bar ("My uncle is a policeman. Why do you do this? My family are Thai. Be careful, or else!"). There are Thai figures of speech which sound interesting when translated: 'He speaks with a golden tongue' which means he is diplomatic, perhaps overly flattering. I turned that into 'golden-tongued diplomacy'. There's a kind of indirect mode of speaking which may have influenced me – an evasiveness – which has something to do with middle-class manners, not wanting to offend, but which can also turn to biting irony and sarcasm.

Ouyang: *What I mean is that I find the way you write is quite deliberate, a characteristic that is lost in your second book, In One House, in that the English you use is a little out of the ordinary, things like "I feel sixteen I am" ('All Too Human') but then it is not consistent because such lines are rare. Can you explain this apparent discrepancy?*

Adam: As I get older I get more circumspect, doubtful. *In One House* is a searching unresolved book. Though I am trying now to get back to the deliberateness of the first book.

Ouyang: *I also notice that your poetical imagery is often related to the movies and TV, things like 'Folk Movie, Set in the 1940s' and "a war in full UHF colour" ('Breeding'), something I don't notice many poets do and at least I myself don't do at all. There are many such instances. Could you elaborate on this a bit?*

Adam: 'Folk Movie . . .' was a response to watching a Thai movie audience react with racist mirth at the misfortunes of rural Vietnamese, who were depicted as self-interested smugglers. I was shocked and disgusted at the audience. I guess movies and visual media are opportunities for groups, families, to sit together as spectators, a practice that used to centre around puppet theatre and village fairs.

In Thailand you get a lot of passive viewing; you pass open doorways and there's a family watching something. Obviously TV meets a need in their lives, measures status, and provides models of lifestyle that millions aspire to. TV in Asia is the best dream you can experience for free. In Malaysia, I've seen how Tamil movies are popular because they're at a level of fantasy that keeps people watching for hours. Then you realize why political control of the media is so total there.

TV is a big part of my reality. I studied film at university, and my partner is an avid plot follower. I like to take advertising copy, slogans etc. Like the Coke line: "The pause that refreshes" is a great metaphor for the line break in a poem. There's a pop art side of my work that I learned from the New York school of poets. When I was living in Newtown, a lot of other poets like John Forbes and Chris Burns used to talk about TV. Pam Brown, Ken Bolton, Joanne Burns – they all address TV in their poetry.

Ouyang: *Do you find much in Asia that is worth learn-*

ing and that you consider worthwhile against an Australian background where "Ex-Europeans get mothered /in the rotundity of this sun"? Religion, for instance, as you mention in a poem, "religion more fragrant than dollars"?

Adam: I'm very ambivalent about religious solutions for economic problems. But so are most religions that try to accommodate materialism. A lot of my religious poems present the seductive images of religion, then pull back from them. Organized New Ageism really doesn't appeal to me. What has it done for Nepal? Politicians misuse the donation system in Thai temples. Ex-dictators spend a year atoning for their misdeeds in monasteries. On the other hand I love spending an hour in a temple, gathering my thoughts and changing gears. I have a lot of respect for Balinese rice-growing culture, which is based on free exchange of labour to maintain the irrigation system, but I wouldn't want to do that work myself. I'd be dead in minutes.

I am also impressed at the way my mother's extended family has always performed as a kind of mini bank for members, and it's got its own revolving counselling service. But even this is becoming rare in Bangkok with its huge rise in people living singly. Family integration is a legacy of the small country town, the village. But it's not a system unique to Asia. Think of Greek, Vietnamese and Chinese migrants to Australia. It's this sort of self-helping organization that scares the Hansonites, because it has worked quite well for migrants.

Ouyang: *There is a long gap of eleven years between your two books. Does that mean that you are a slow writer of poetry or that you keep revising whatever you write until it is perfect?*

Adam: Replace the 'or' with an 'and' in the previous sentence. Recently though, I've really sped up, because I've had so much more time to devote to poetry than previously. After I finished *Letter To Marco Polo* I had to do a lot of growing up. I travelled to England and Europe but didn't write much. Then I came back to Sydney in the late eighties and found that all my old support network had moved away. I suddenly felt that I had lost an audience, albeit a tiny one. I didn't have any material to submit to the Literature Board. I lost interest in the Scene. I found a job teach-

ing English in some of the schools that had sprung up around town. I got sucked into that for a few years and wrote when I could. Most of the time I felt too emotionally drained to write.

Ouyang: *Your poetry not only explores the past ('Folk Movie, set in the 1940s' and 'Sailing to Byzantium'), but also excavates the future, so to speak, such as 'Treasure Island, 2010' and 'A Short History of Pagan' with its "2nd century proclaimed year zero", something that is not common in Australian poetry. Is that something you borrowed from Thai Buddhism and what exactly is that?*

Adam: Actually it was my friend the poet Steve Kelen who showed me that you could write poems that were science-fiction. He's also well read in Buddhist and Hindu notions of circular time. Poetic modes of divining time are so much more interesting than linear narratives which begin with a given experience, founded in the past. Why not start in the future and work around that? Perhaps it's mystical too, so that's a bonus.

Ouyang: *The critical note can still be found elsewhere in your second book, In One House, where you say in 'Mandalay Fort', that "it's the old master's language/dirty as salvage". It would be preposterous to ask if you are deliberately rejecting your English past in favour of your Asian cultural heritage but still one feels that there is a tendency on your part to do this. Is that right?*

Adam: On the contrary, I'm not in favour of rejecting ANY cultural heritage! 'Mandalay Fort' was dedicated to an ex-communist guerilla I met. He was a refugee who had crossed into North Thailand, after having defected from one of the factions. He had been working on an autobiography, written in English, intended for an English-reading audience. He also spoke a kind of Oxbridge-accented version of English. The irony was that English was the ex-boss's lingo, and he was using it to tell his story. 'Salvage' is often valuable trash. What's left of the wreck.

Ouyang: *Many of your poems seem to be addressed to someone whose name is written immediately below the title, which is very Chinese (in that in ancient Chinese poetry poets write to and for each other a lot, but that tradition has got lost somewhere along the line in contemporary China) and which is also very Australian, or is it?*

Adam: I think it's a nice way of personalizing a very public poem like an Ode or Elegy. Dedicating a poem to people makes me write less obscurely: a certain friend, not necessarily another writer, has got to understand it, otherwise it's not successful.

Ouyang: *Commentators often mention John Forbes as an influence. Apart from him, are there any other major poetical influences on your writing?*

Adam: No poet really dominates. I'm probably a bit of a magpie. My very early poems were influenced by Rilke and the German Expressionism I read in a Michael Hamburger translation. Wallace Stevens, W.C. Williams, Berryman, Lowell, Marvell, Shakespeare, Akhmatova, Auden, Frank O'Hara, Bob Dylan, Bob Adamson. At university, Steve Kelen, John Forbes, and Susan Hampton were huge influences. For a while I couldn't stop reading Cavafy. I also read a lot of Martin Johnston. I recently re-read his poems about Greece, and recognized that among other things, he was writing about – or deconstructing – identity-in-place. Most recently, Wislawa Szymborska's impressed me for that deceptive simplicity and generous spirit.

Then there are a lot of poets I read who I am not consciously influenced by. I'm reading Ritsos at the moment, because he was writing about repression under the Greek colonels that is uncannily similar to what's happening in Malaysia at the moment. But I don't think I can appropriate his intensity and style and apply it to an Australian context.

Ouyang: *Considering how much importance Australian literary historians and critics attach to Australian writers attempting to construct their identity in Asia or their writing set in Asia, one does not seem to get much of a sense in your writing of an Australian living or travelling in Asia and writing about Asia and Asians. Why is that?*

Adam: I don't think I am constructing identity as such, nor do I try to describe a set landscape that you can identify readily as 'Asian' or not. The challenge is in trying to keep up with the changing scenario of late-twentieth-century capitalism and its incredible impact on this part of the world. The more you try to define it as 'Asian', the more it eludes you. As for identity, the person I am when I get off the plane in Jakarta feels different to the guy swimming at Bondi. I

am writing this in Kampung outside KL. Tomorrow I might go to a mall for coffee in a Deli France with completely imported decor and 'ambience'.

Ouyang: *In the last days of multiculturalism, as some, both poets and politicians in this country, would have us believe, do you, once classified as a 'multicultural writer' in the Bibliography, see any other alternatives or would you like it to be the way it has always been for the last twenty or so years? Or this is not a concern?*

Adam: As I said earlier, an ideal situation would be one big fat book which was flexible enough to 'contain multitudes'. The good thing about the term 'multicultural' is how vague it is and that it hardly excludes anyone who cannot find a place somewhere else. It was intended to add to the landscape, not subtract. Why is there a backlash? We have had multicultural arts policies for many years, and Les Murray still became famous.

But to my mind Multicultural means Australian, because the meaning of Australian is beginning to reflect a culture of convergence if you like. But there's the backlash and its influence on the arts. My fear is that writers like myself will have fewer choices about how we would like to be read and how we are categorized. But it suits this government to apply 'divide and rule' while pontificating about 'one Australia'. The fact is that certain models are valorized and others marginalized. I expect that writing which is awkward, which can't compete with the saleable versions of Australian mythology, will become more marginalized in the future, whether it deals with Asia or with South Coogee. I don't relish the prospect.

Ouyang: *You make reference to Chinese in a number of your poems; their image seems slightly comical and stereotypical (see 'The Chinese Are International' and the line "the Chinese, who in their spare time/go pippy fossicking" in 'Conan the Grammarian'). Does treating ethnic figures in your poetry pose a problem to you?*

Adam: Yes, this has worried me. In 'The Chinese Are International' I was experimenting by trying to write a pastiche of stereotypical descriptions about the Chinese, especially in Asian countries. I was relying on a reader picking up the irony – that it's not MY

opinion. That poem is also juxtaposed to the one about the Thai movie audience, which is clearly an attack on their bigotry. But in 'The Chinese Are International' I ran the risk of a reader missing the irony, in which case it IS a catalogue of stereotypes. I don't think that poem goes far enough, it's not self-destructing – it sounds too self-assured and smug. With the pippy fossickers, the context is a poem which is clearly a satire on ethnic stereotypes.

Ouyang: *Few read poetry these days. Are you still enthusiastic about writing poetry or are you considering taking up other more profitable genres such as fiction?*

Adam: I've started writing a long prose piece but I don't know how well it will meet the demands of saleable fiction. It frankly doesn't read as fiction, though I am struggling with it. Some parts of it started out as failed poems that just kept bloating up.

Ouyang: *To be honest, I find your poetry a bit hard going at times, lines not immediately accessible, images not very clear, references that one finds hard to relate to a common phenomenon I would think that is found in contemporary Australian poetry. I don't mean this as a criticism but offer it as an after-thought. Do you have a particular kind of readership in mind when you write your poems or do you just write whatever you like without regard to whoever the readers are?*

Adam: I write with the intention of winning new readers, whoever they are. I aim for the clear image and then I look for where it comes from and why it appeals to me. The last thing I want is to expect my readers to have a hard time, though obviously my kind of reader is a pretty resilient animal. While I write, I can't help getting into the very limits of an intuition or a subject, going as far as I can to expand the whole edifice of the text. The more one investigates the common phenomenon, as you put it, the stranger it seems. I lose it sometimes. So recently I've consciously tried to keep some poems short, as a discipline, or organizing a long poem into a 'cartoon strip' form.

Ouyang Yu is the editor of otherland, the Australian Chinese-language poetry magazine.

Discoveries Made Collecting Botanic Samples

In a dry winter, the point revealed his last horizon,
a vantage point.
The night the waiter died young men writhed in the scrub.
Off duty, relieved of dirty dishes,
the endless orders for Thai fishcake and more
sweet chilli sauce.
Last orders fluttered in his fractured skull.
I asked myself
what his killers ate that night.
His blood stuck there to the cliff face of their fists.
For weeks no rain faded it, dry winter,
bone dry. We walked past
through wild garlic, nasturtiums in a ferrous field
of brittle strata, petrified ocean floor, calcified cliff
criss-crossed with trickling urban runoff.
For months no confession
or personal sorrow came to light.
Families with a lust for wild cuisine & pearls
fossicked on the rocks of Bronte.
Someone snapped a few more Fujicolour postcards.
Cormorants preened themselves of lice,
learned to live with their parasites, singular birds
as black as undertakers.

I hoped for ritual effect, that someone
burnt him to dust bitter as Chinese medicine
and towed him out past the waves;
toward complete dismembering,
flocks closing on the prize.
His final fierce caress with no man. He might have
muttered *Kharma*, *tolerance*, servitude's vocab,
wondered if he was fat, worried over it
being an ugly target, till he died.
And so, unable to love men, I sank with him.

The god of all good fortune

An elephant making tracks
to the breeding grounds of India
stops off to raid the Frost Free, terrorise
a few local farmers. Now that
forests are a vague memory (even
to an elephant who can't forget)
he finds beer, Sang Som liquor
absolutely to his taste.
A decade past he blundered into their lotus pond
which was wrong, very wrong –
the instinct of the more stupid Buffalo.
Imagine: picking cashews from the tree,
playing soccer with the kids,
sleeping off a feast
under its blighted but shady branches.
Cousins, midwesternised, collegiate,
have grown into men,
come home with wives and calculator brains.
Then, come Sunday
they call in the herd
in shopping mall gardens
so airconditioned
the plants are deciduous
where an elephant, blimp-like and pink
takes off over the parking lot, god of
all good fortune.

Adam Aitken

John Forbes

3 Songs for Charles Darwin

for Daniel Syson

"Pasture everywhere is so thin that settlers have already pushed far into the interior: moreover the country further inland becomes extremely poor. Agriculture can never succeed on an extended scale: therefore, as far as I can see, Australia must ultimately depend on being the centre of commerce for the Southern hemisphere, and perhaps on her future manufactories. Possessing coal, she always has the motive power at hand. From the habitable country along the coast, and from her English extraction, she is sure to be a maritime nation."

Charles Darwin

1) the bush

*Agriculture can never succeed
on an extended scale*

1

begins with languor,
the past tense of caress
which, besides flies & heat haze
post stress,
the intense air supplies
– no ostrich feather fans
or punkahs needed – just to be at rest.
a stone that sweats
(at least that's how it seems
to a mind
like a cloudy billabong,

trained to believe
all floods recede,
all breezes die away)

2

here,
the only precision's / a scribbled
gumtree calligraphy,
so exact against the blue
it could almost be
that subtle code
by which the blacks / could read
their country
& themselves
& our scabbed ancestors
in a shamed rage against complexity,
killed them off to deny
(Snyder, a terrible
bone pointing
Martini – Henri,
white
kaditcha man)

"Not *killed*" they'd say,
"How do you slay a kangaroo,
how do you murder a tree?" –
speared cattle the merest –
"this race, sir
is finished,
finished I say!" – speared cattle,
speared cattle the merest excuse.

(then collapse) or "Caringbah!
that bosky dell!"

The First Fleet, as if
in some chaste & English *Lusiad*
should have gone to sleep / their pink
as yet unzinc'd pale faces
snoring beneath each hand made
idea of shade
like sail cloth sunhats
run up from pursers slops /
white dreaming maybe leaving
convicts scattered
up & down that protein rich
but subtle coast:
at least their offspring wouldn't be
like those famous runaways –
all Irish
Tench notes,
so entertaining setting out
continually for China,
200 years too early
like us, 200 years too late

3) the beach

*From the habitable country
along the coast*

dropped ice-
cream licked
despite grit
on your tongue,
vivid towels & the tang of ozone
overlaid with cooking oil & sunblock
plus waves & heads
bobbing out the back
constitute, for us at least,
a synthetic *a priori* that is a poem –
not like this /

a clever, preaching
trinket at its best
– *Mine tinkit they fit!* –

but the seagull & p.a.'d Top Forty
punctuated song
of where we, the overseas Australians,
belong.

Martin Duwell

“The truth that doesn’t set us free”

Reading John Forbes

HOW ARE WE TO READ the poetry of John Forbes? A good place to begin might be with an acknowledgment of its variety: this has the double virtue of avoiding a potentially reductive description and of resisting the illusion that there is a key to the poetry in the form of an aesthetic, an ideology or even a course in Cultural Studies. A poem like ‘After the Bombs We Invent the Future’, the second poem of Forbes’ first book, *Tropical Skiing*, introduces one kind of poem found in all his books. It is a brilliant, surreal (a good word to avoid in discussions of Forbes) meditation about a future that might occur. It is a poem whose polemical edge is pointed, as always in Forbes, beyond the immediate outrage – the war in Vietnam – to the more basic generative patterns. The body of the poem, though, is organized in its own Forbesian way and not according to the rules of the rhetoric of argument. In the line “we hope the earth has a centre, a fruity niche”, for example, the final phrase is a given, a mishearing of ‘Friedrich Nietzsche’. Similarly the lines:

*Where did you get that hat, Tarzan? Like miners
caught in a war of time capsules we quail
before your green fedora, your dreams.*

are clearly a result of echoed quotation from popular culture – “Where did you get that hat? Where did you get that tile?” – and a fascination with that unusual verb, “quail”. The structural principle seems to be that all details must be worthy of their prominent part in the play, never predictable, never boring, and the whole is animated by a distinctive brilliant wit that has, even in this early poem, a gallows humour about it:

*Still, after the Age of The Opposable Thumb there’ll
be alot to discover – will dolphins enjoy bingo?*

*Were the great comic operas written in perfect
order?*

Now it is light years from a poem like this to something like ‘4 Heads and How to do Them’ which is a unique example of a mode that might be called instructional-performative. One wishes Forbes had used it more often, though the instructional component does turn up in ‘Advice to Young Poets’ from the posthumous *Damaged Glamour*. And it is just as far from both of these modes to one of the great poems of celebration, ‘Rose Selavy’, in the second book, *Stalin’s Holidays*. This celebrates in fittingly surreal (to use that word again) fashion a surreal muse – or should it be a muse of the surreal?

Julie passing exams

*Julie the hand-made spine of rare first editions
sunburns*

under the Eiffel Tower

Golfball of insomnia!

*Julie the wedding dress cries like an Italian face
& when the aftershave factory explodes the Spirit
of Alcohol*

beams on Julie.

O bored cigarette Julie!

*Julie the myth of beauty where sex is “concerned”
and Julie the myth of ugliness where helicopters
are learning,*

slowly,

to dance (their feet are clumsy

but tender

tender!)

*Even the windscreen wipers on their electric stage
swivel*

for Julie, even the Enos bubbling in its glass.

CELEBRATION AS A MODE seems to diminish as Forbes' career progresses. But it is present in the first book in its title poem – which exults in a world in which almost everything is “a total fucking gas” – and it is there again in a very different and much quoted poem, ‘To the Bobbydazzlers’ which celebrates those American poets Forbes credits with saving him from “the talented / earache of Modern / Poetry”.

Then there are the Forbes list-poems: ‘Drugs’, ‘Europe: A Guide for Ken Searle’ and ‘Anzac Day’ spaced throughout his work. I read these as testing the limits of analytical intelligence. Can you encapsulate Spain, say, in two lines (“The Spaniards are not relaxed about sex / & tourists are attracted to this.”) and if you can, what have you got? I suspect that they are two-way mirrors, operating in a mode which demands brilliant intuitive wit in the form of generalizations but, at the same moment, registering the absurdity of such generalizations taken to an extreme of brevity. Forbes' poetry often takes as its raw material the beautiful truths which underlie and explain the details of the surface. But one feels that he wants to admit the impotence of such truths at the same time: as a late poem says, these are the truths that don't set us free.

Finally, in this rough catalogue of types, there is at least one example of an “all-over-the-page” poem, ‘Here’, – a kind of poem which Forbes once confessed to admiring but not being terribly good at. Published in this issue there is also ‘Letter to Ken Bolton’ which is, so far as I know, the only example in his work of what was once called the verse-epistle. There are also many examples of a meditative type quite different to poems like ‘After the Bombs We Invent the Future’ or ‘Stalin's Holidays’. These are marked by a silky movement in thought that makes them look like exercises in, or parodies of, formal philosophy. The earliest is ‘Topothesia’ from *Tropical Skiing* which begins:

*How we see things determines how we act and even
who 'we' are, as the fragile temper of our acts
breaks like a bubble from the drowning mouth
and into
the air, shaping these identities to begin with.*

The magnificent ‘Love's Body’ is of this type, as is, perhaps, ‘The History of Nostalgia’, ‘The Poem on its Sleeve’ and ‘The Promissory Note’.

To remind oneself of this variety makes generaliza-

tions about the poetry difficult but it enables us to think of the poems as something more than a solid block identically interpretable at all synchronic slices. It also makes a reader focus on questions of change – an abstraction that figures largely in Forbes' view of life and philosophy – and even development (something that one imagines Forbes sternly calling “change considered as romance”). One of the poems from *The Stunned Mullet*, called – in a way that recalls the last lines of ‘After the Bombs We Invent the Future’ – ‘The Age of Plastic’, explicitly connects change with career. It begins by recalling Heraclitus – “The dictionary definition of change / means your face looks different in the water” – and quickly goes on to speculate about poetry and poetic reputation in a world without change:

*[you'd] be irked by the serious options
a changeless life presents e.g. 'Minor
poet, conspicuously dishonest' would look funny
on a plaque screwed to a tree
while the blue trace of your former life
suggests an exception
generations will end up chanting: for them
the parts of speech will not need explaining
not lakes or sleep or sex,
or the dumb poets of the past
who, being lyrical, missed out on this.*

If we consider all the poems together as a career, there is no doubt that two things emerge in the books after *Stalin's Holidays*. The first is a desire to talk about Australia, both land and culture, and the second is a tendency to investigate his own functioning as a poet – his “vocation”, as he puts it. ‘Vocation’ is, in fact, the second word of ‘On the Beach: a Bicentennial Poem’, in which this desire to speak of the nation is most clearly expressed; in fact many of the other poems from *The Stunned Mullet* look almost like discarded fragments from this larger poem. The poem begins with the self because, obviously, Forbes is epistemologically far too sophisticated to pretend that our lives, both individually and collectively, can be described omnisciently from the outside. Immersion and identity are major Forbesian concerns. The alternative is the myth, enabling for poets as different as Lowell and Yeats, of believing that one's own life and that of the state have an empathetic connection. But at the beginning of this poem – parodying

perhaps something like the opening of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' or even the initial reluctance of prophets like Moses or Mohammed to "answer the call" – the called poet is far from the identification of self with nation that makes the act of writing about one's state (in both senses) comparatively natural:

*your vocation looks
more like a blurred tattoo
or something you did for a bet
& now regret, like a man
walking the length of a bar on his hands
balancing a drink on his shoe.*

Again, later, in the fifth section of the poem, the question of what conceptual model of the place might be the least distorting is raised. The favoured model, if I read it rightly, is a kind of collage animated through time; conceptually accurate while being impossible in reality:

*later,
& like any poet
avoiding myth and message
to fake a flashy ode, consider
what model of Australia as a nation
could match the ocean, or get your desk
to resemble a beach /
it would have to function
like Tom Roberts' Opening of the
Houses of Parliament, our nation being
a sort of awkward academic machine –*

The phrase "avoiding myth and message" is a reminder that anybody writing a bicentennial ode about Australia is not only stepping through a minefield of difficulties of method but is also stepping through a minefield of competition – of competition with all those voices who, for one reason or another, think that it is fairly unproblematic for a poet to write about his or her country. In this danger zone the mine marked Les Murray is by far the largest and most powerful and there is a clear reference to Murray both in this poem and in other poems from the same book.

IN THE POEMS 'ABOUT' Australia the real hatred is reserved for the 'boosters', the professional image-mongers, generated by capitalism, whose task is to win a war of representation in the interests of their

own interests. 'Sydney Harbour, Considered as a Matisse' from *Damaged Glamour* comes as close to despair about the likely outcomes of this war of representations as Forbes ever gets:

*One slip & you're back, via Whiteley & Ken
Done to what our boosters can't tell it's*

*distinguished from: her number lipsticked
on a crumpled Amex slip, or a forex dealer*

*with a view, still chatting on his phone,
fucks someone from behind. Pink tinged*

*clouds decorate a perfect afternoon, white
yachts weave & tack – the images don't change*

*beneath a varnish that embalms disgust –
girls reduced to tears just once, blokes in*

*sports cars fuming, their parasite careers.
Can art be good enough to save all this,*

*plus the perfume of frangipani blooms
crushed on the sandstone piers? Maybe just.*

To this Forbes – the worried and despairing poet of his country – must be added the Forbes who worries about whether he has lived up to his abilities. It is somehow comforting to see that the great, in their thirties (in Forbes' case only ten years from his death), have the same concerns as those of us who do lesser things. And so, in, 'Speed, a pastoral',

*your feelings
follow your career down the drain
& find they like it there
among an anthology of fine ideas, bound together
by a chemical in your blood . . .*

A lot of this comes together in 'Self Portrait With Cake' where the world of experience is something that gradually converts into detritus and then dust while the world of supreme fictions continues to shine, untarnished:

*I think I should write
more detailed poems about trees, or
tracts of reasonably clean water, maybe*

*the exact delineation of a marble layer cake
underneath a doily on the porch, not because
I can do it well
but more as a general anti-dust routine
where you wipe the grime off your hand
& kiss it etcetera etcetera, as if one day
all this sort of stuff won't make you laugh,
that once you thought
its day-to-day terror would equal change:*

This depressed Forbes had always been there – there is ‘The Sorrowful Mysteries’ in *Tropical Skiing* as well as ‘The Joyful Mysteries’ in *Stalin’s Holidays* – but in the last two books it becomes a recurrent matter, and the tone of these books is edgier, more irritated and more sombre.

One difficulty presented by these later poems is that they encourage us to see their author as a poet of pronouncement (of “myth and message”). In our few meetings (which included a long telephone conversation a day or two before his death) what always struck me was Forbes’ preparedness to relinquish a dictatorial hold over the meanings of his poems, to revert to the line of the Abstract Expressionists about meaning: “I didn’t know what its meanings were when I did it, but I am happy to think about it now”. More than most poets he needed an audience to share in the discovery of meaning: it was clearly a co-operative process rather than a coy and seductive deference to a reader. You can feel how important his poetic friends were by the frequency with which their names appear as dedicatees both of poems and books. Now that he is dead part of one side of the conversation is silenced. But there are still the marvellous poems, probably less than 150 in number, and they will always speak to us. And the poems should always have the last words. Forbes has several poems that deal with death including, obviously enough, ‘Death, an Ode’:

*Death, you’re more successful than America,
even if we don’t choose to join you, we do.
I’ve just become aware of this conscription
where no-one’s marble doesn’t come up;
no use carving your name on a tree, exchanging
vows
or not treading on the cracks for luck
where there’s no statistical anomalies at all
& you know not the day nor the hour, or even if
you do
timor mortis conturbat me . . .*

But rather more moving – because it is focused more on community than on the self – is the description of the Australian soldiers at the end of the last poem of his last book. Unlike the other nationalities going to war (each, from the French to the Americans, encapsulated in one of Forbes’ wonderful lists) the Australians, “unamused and unimpressed” went over the top “like men clocking on / in this first full-scale industrial war”:

*Which is why Anzac Day continues to move us,
& grow, despite attempts to make it
a media event (left to them we’d attend
‘The Foxtel Dawn Service’). But The March is
proof we got at least one thing right, informal,
straggling & more cheerful than not, it’s
like a huge works or 8 Hour Day picnic –
if we still had works, or unions, that is.*

Martin Duwell is the assistant editor of Australian Literary Studies. He co-edited The ALS Guide to Australian Writers.

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Letter to Ken Bolton (poem)

Dear Ken,
I'm writing this out
of curiosity –
how do you write poems like this?
(& just doing this much
makes me realise
how hard the rhythms are)
I'm in Sydney & as
usual can't imagine
how I could live anywhere else –
the names of the suburbs alone
& the way the nor'easter arrives
just when the day gets seriously hot
& stays till dusk
when things cool down:
"balmy" really is the word, despite
its connotations of ukeleles & islands –
not Sydney's style at all (flying beetles
knock against my brother's
uncurtained kitchen window) though I mainly
stayed at Mark's
where the windows rattle
when a jet goes over
& the noise is almost as bad as people say it is,
each plane's passing being accompanied
by the sound of thousands
of property owners grinding their teeth.
Today I killed cockroaches infesting O'Connor's
& visited Arthur Drewe & Kerri Mori
who don't share Mark's blasé attitude
to "aircraft noise" – a title deed in Lilyfield acting
like an invisible hearing aid
you can't turn off; which struck me as
a funny crack but now seems slightly shitty. I mean
even those old blokes in your poem
with their cigarettes in the T-shirt sleeve aren't
impressed
& Bob Carr will lose
an election the Liberals couldn't win.

JOHN FORBES' 'Letter To Ken Bolton' is not typical of his poetry, working rather different parameters. It plays very much with the net down in terms of pace & intensity. But it does give some idea of his conversation: great jokes like those about the hearing-aid effect & property owners grinding their teeth; the joke rhetorical phrasings like "though the quiet logic of misery asks" did pepper his casual speech.

It is so unmistakably John, that, atypical or not, it serves to illustrate much about his poetry. *It deals with & 'loves' the everyday & suburban* (suburban, coastal Sydney particularly). *It is political*, relishing the social indicators of things like cockroaches, observant about the politicizing effect of home ownership. *It is concerned with ethics*: with examination of his own errors & evasions & – especially significantly – is concerned with them as they are exemplified through style, through aesthetics. Viz the remark about "slightly shitty", the vigilance about "afterall". *It is concerned with aesthetics & with Poetry* – his, mine, the world's. *It employs* notions from & references to supposedly 'high' culture 'alongside' the popular, the mundane: Kamahl & David Shapiro, Tennyson/Clough & Baudelaire, the imagined 50s TV show. (The poem's diction shifts registers, for effect, between high & low – but mostly is a contemporary & serious amalgam.)

Incidentally it has John's love of the mooted existence of whole other worlds, other intellectual (etc) systems. (The famous early example is his 'Four Heads & How To Do Them'.) John found their boundedness & self-

Hypocrisy, at least
 comes easier to me
 – I mean how can a thing be “slightly shitty” anyway?
 & why does a typewriter made in the DDR (an *Optima* –
 the Trabant of portable manuals)
 have the question mark on the bottom of the key??
 & if I’m going to write “anyway”
 why not be completely saccharine
 & write “afterall”? Which sentimentality
 is what this letter is, or will be, about, *via*
 your comments in ‘Dazed’ on ‘The History of Nostalgia’
 (computers of the
 future scroll both
 poems in upper left
 & right-hand boxes). But first a politics-of-getting-
 your-ms.-accepted-by-A&R note: leave it out,
 ‘Dazed’ that is. The less JF
 the better,
 given JF’s the one
 writing the reader’s report. So no matter how
 glowing my remarks,
 I can see Loukakis knocking you back: while
 he really likes *The Ash Range*
 I fancy it’s for corny reasons – you know
 “the poetry of the real”
 or as Peter Kocan once wrote, by way of deploring
 some poet too “arid” or “clever”
 “when Ted Hughes describes a falcon
 you can feel its talons tearing out your heart”
 Or something. Well I think
 Angelo belongs to the left-wing, anti blood sports
 Wordsworth-via-Snyder
 tough mindedly embracing trees
 branch of the same well tenanted shrub.
 I hope I’m wrong about his attitudes but
 even so I think less JF would be a good idea.
 Not here tho’ so back to me:
 you’re right, of course
 about that poem –
 the feeling it engenders,
 suggests?
celebrates?? is disgusting

sufficiency funny, preposterous,
 relativistically destabilizing. The case
 in point is just the stylistic tic (almost)
 that has him not pass up the
 opportunity to evoke or invoke the
 communist world – represented by
 Optima typewriters, by the Trabant.
 There is the brief flirtation with (&
 invocation of) the hilarity of a cartoon-
 cliché episteme that has “balmy”
 ‘immediately’ suggest ukeleles, luaus
 & grass skirts, islands – a whole world
 – just as “Optima”, “Trabant”, “DDR”
 suggest a wrong-headed seedy
 communist dystopia.

The poem’s ostensible subjects are a
 typical enough roll-call of his concerns.
 One is the mystery of the mechanics &
 formulae of social behaviour &
 interaction: via the ‘Romantic’ (the
 quest for love) & a bathetically
 opposed ‘realism’ (of sex & parties). As
 well, Sydney is especially present, a
 Sydney he was revelling in on holiday
 from Melbourne – atmospheric, almost
 meteorological. (He is alert to the
 Sydney of (conventionally) democratic,
 working class elements & to the party-
 political situation – the noise
 pollution/runway extension election.)
 Clearly the poem is written about the
 same time as ‘Humidity’. It has the
 same moths battering the same
 window. Friends & sociality feature
 strongly – individuals are named, their
 situations suggested. Finally there is
 Poetry. There is *his* poetry (actually my
 poem ‘on’ his & his response to that) &
 there is poetry generally; there is
 poetry ‘business’ (my chances with
 Angus & Robertson); there is John’s
 pillorying of an opposed conservatism.

(Regarding poetry, he is *for*
 impersonality – or at any rate is
 against the spurious self of paraded
 sentimentality & badly disguised
 evasion. He is against the poetry of
 presence, against a poetry of

“Poetry never masters irony,
poetry is the present & constant mastering of irony”
which proves this letter isn't poetry
although I think
my better efforts
present a sort of Tennyson-attempting-Clough
to his suave & tenured Baudelaire.

I mean, I think,
if you're going to have your poems considered
as psychic documents
you are at least (Kamahl again!) entitled
to put the best interpretation you can on them,
don't you Ken?

Coda

It's not just the rhythms of this sort of thing
I can't begin to do,

I also lack the subjective objectivity
that fills your letters with the world
& leaves you, the Ego (sounds like a fifties TV show –

“This week on You, The Ego
we meet John Forbes & here's Johnnie!”
sorry, leaves you, modestly, out
& it's this modesty,
attention & good taste

that lets you write the way you do. Peter Porter
wrote a haiku, something like
“In the heart of the universe
sounds the
true mystic note: me”

but you avoid both mystic & message
sensing & not just believing
the world – even Adelaide – is more important
than you. I think

it's a neat trick Ken,
don't you?

John Forbes

'standards' John's were very high. But the ethical self-examination was also typical of John – & it strikes me as a legacy of a puritanical Anglo-Irish Catholicism.

Though it's arguable that 'Letter to Ken Bolton' is more interesting poetically (& otherwise) than 'Perugia to John Forbes', still John wasn't satisfied with it as a poem. He never talked about reworking it in the years after, not even to announce his having tried & failed. No. He abandoned the poem I think probably, *as he wrote it*, with the coda. The coda is good in its own right & achieves the intensity that, in beginning, it dissipates. But it is there I think because John figured “this poem's a loser, not going to make it, but it *is* a letter” – & he ends with some conventionally gracious remarks to the intended recipient. I was glad of them, but John was just being nice.

Though it is oblique there is some characterization of his own poetry & attitudes: the self-mortification re 'History Of Nostalgia', the joke vision of himself as a Tennysonian Clough & in contrast a Baudelairean Shapiro. This may prove suggestive to some.

Poem or text, the piece shows something of John Forbes' orientation in the Australian literary world – opposed to the messily Romantic, to heart-on-sleeve factions, uncomfortable with A&R's priorities (not much he approved of got published), positively aligned with, for example, Australian Laurie Duggan & New Yorker David Shapiro. In passing, there are echoes of Frank O'Hara (“myth & message”), significantly via one of the latter's casual aesthetic maxims.

Ken Bolton

c'est l'homme

for John Forbes

you
develop a style until
it can say what you want you need it may
take years and years

of need a style
is a bit like a life

and then
it comes together
style book life

and then
much to your surprise
this neat construction
falls apart

there is no book
the life is not what was planned
and the style
seems hopelessly out of date and
immortality a fading dream but

the need
turns out to be timeless

and in the house there is
some small drug or other
to tide you over

and the style
takes a mini cooper and throws it
down like a gauntlet

and choosing a word is again
the first mouthful of something
brilliant and daring
always perfect

and you know
despite all the stumbling about in the bushes
the stubbed toes the dirt the broken fingernails

there was a kind of twisted little track
leading to the photo opportunity at the top of the cliff
and from there you can see

a mini cooper burning in the snow
perfect

Lee Cataldi

For John Forbes

ex tuis litteris cognovi cursus navigationum tuarum

(from your letters I have learnt the course of your travels)

(Cicero)

Day after Valentine's Day

empty couch across the room

sombre Celtic drums from Shooglenifty

You could tell me who Saint Valentine was ...

a Roman martyr? Feb. 14 in

my calendar now is the day Pat died

I told you about Pat – off like a rocket

at thirty-one (what's more, you

remembered) 'You were right

about all that Catholic stuff, mate' –

it had more power to define us

forever than we cared to allow

You stood at the end of that table there

inclined at that alarming forward angle

declaiming 'Total Fucking Gas' to Gabe

inscribed your poems for him

with summary eschatology: 'be a spanner

in the works of death'

on the couch, and ill, chastened on a wet

November night, you talked about

your dad & mum, whom I didn't expect

to meet so soon. At your send-off

St John Bosco's, Engadine

the de la Salles reached out to claim you

via the *mitteleurop* celebrant, in a service

I thought you'd loathe, then thought

you wouldn't, the triteness would evaporate

from your vantage point in the gods

you'd see stricken us, hear the word 'poet'

repeated often, think – 'fair enough'.

Cath Kenneally

Carmel Bird

A particular kind of series

Jenni Mitchell's Poet Portraits

IN 1935 JUSTUS JORGENSEN came to the hilly forest at Eltham and built a pise house, inspired by places he had seen and loved in France. From this beginning grew Montsalvat, with its tiny artisans' cottages, all higgledy piggledy on the hillside, and at the foot of the green slope, the vast romantic great hall, medieval dining room and the swimming pool. Painters, poets and musicians came to live there, forming a bohemian community on the outskirts of Melbourne.

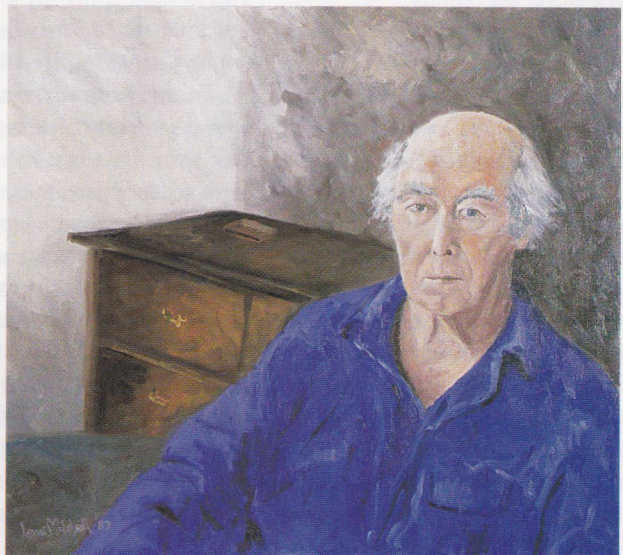
Jenni Mitchell grew up in Eltham, and still lives on the site of her childhood home, quite close to Montsalvat which has deeply influenced her life. Jenni is a painter whose first love is the landscape of Australia. She has painted a number of series of landscapes and seascapes, the deserts of South Australia, the Flinders Ranges and Lake Eyre, as well as coastal places in Victoria, wild expanses where sea and sky appear to merge. She painted a series on the Ash Wednesday bush fires at Mount Macedon. And she has done some large, atmospheric pictures of the Shoalhaven River at 'Riversdale', the former home of Arthur Boyd. In a picture of the fog-shrouded entrance to Barbara Blackman's home the canvas swirls with mystery and promise.

In 1983 when the poet Alec Hope was a guest at the Montsalvat National Poetry Festival, he stayed in Jenni's house, and Jenni painted his portrait. Thus began the project which has developed into a collection of a hundred portraits of Australian poets. This collection will be completed



A.D. Hope, 1983

A.D. Hope, 1989





Judith Wright, 1989

by the end of the century.

I first visited Jenni at her house in 1998. Jenni had asked me, as a novelist, not a poet, to sit for a portrait. The yellow road, just off the main road at Eltham, is narrow and dusty, and the house, designed by Alistair Knox and made from mud brick, nestles among the trees down below the road. The walls inside are hung with Jenni's landscapes, great glowing, eerie fields of wheat, vast sheets of water reflecting the heavens, haunting night skies, the moods of nature. We move through the house on our way to the studio which is down the hill; the land falls away sharply, and from the garden the only

visible sight is the sky and the trees. Beside the studio is the workshop where Jenni's partner Mervyn Hannan, a musician and sculptor, makes picture frames. A rickety hand rail made from tree branches edges the steps under trees and ferns, and then we are in the clearing by the studio. A mandarin tree, from the garden of a princess in a fairy tale, dark gloss on the leaves, small orange fruits, glowing sweetmeats. To the left, the studio, and winding down the hillside before us, a brick path which moves through beds of flowers, fruit trees, vegetables and herbs.

Above a blue-green haze of leaves float the dreamy purple heads, the

splashing scarlet heads of the opium poppies. The deep red rose, the black-silk burgundy hollyhocks; the fluttering lilac flags of irises. And everywhere shifting shades of green. Two dogs and a cat are resting in the shade. A likeness Mervyn has carved of one of the dogs sits beside a barrel of water lilies. We come to the chook house, and then we are in Grace's garden. Grace is Jenni's mother whose house, lower down the hill, is filled with her large serene carvings in wood or stone of such subjects as Noah's Ark, and filled also with her quilts, embroideries and soft sculptures. This day Grace is working on a collection of thirty giant golliwogs.

Speaking of Grace brings me to the time when Jenni did the portrait of Alec Hope. The portrait of the poet, the Professor, in his suit is quite formal. When it was finished, Grace arrived wearing a red sunhat which the poet removed from her head and put on his own. On a small canvas Jenni quickly painted a portrait sketch of him in the hat, a free, light picture which is quite a contrast to the other one. There is a third portrait of Alec Hope, painted in 1989 at the poet's home in Canberra shortly after his wife had died. This portrait, framed in gold, often hangs in the entrance to Jenni's house, a large and moving picture of the poet in a bright blue shirt, his eyes steady, wise and sad, looking straight at you. The golden brown chest of drawers behind him suggests to me a coffin, although in fact it really looks nothing like one. There is an air of solemnity and solitude in this portrait, as if the artist has caught something present in the air.

Over time, as other poets came to stay, Jenni would paint their portraits, and gradually she saw that she had embarked on a particular kind of series. She began to look for poets she didn't already know, and in some cases she visited them to do the work. Judith Wright is pictured out of doors in her beloved landscape at Half Moon. Many of the portraits show poets who have been Jenni's friends for many years, and others are poets she had never met before, but whom she sought out.

Hanging in the studio – a light room in the garden filled with a huge number of canvasses in racks – is the portrait of Shelton Lea. There is a burning stillness in the poet's gaze, a deep doe-like softness in his dark, dark eyes. The face emerges from an abstract flurry of intense reds and blues which suggest explosions of flowers and fireworks. Applied to the canvas is a cloud of gold



Shelton Lea, 1989

leaf, parts of which fleck and speckle the whole picture. The story is that Jenni was in the process of doing a painting of a storm at the time when she was working on her portrait of Shelton. As she set about her work on the portrait, she now says that the storm painting kept "screaming out at her" and finally she left the more orthodox portrait of Shelton, and imported his image into the storm. It's fabulous.

Contrast this with the powerful picture of Judith Rodriguez who sits squarely in the centre of the canvas, her white shirt buttoned up to the throat,

her gaze steady, challenging, faintly ironic. And again, consider the portrait of Dorothy Porter who emerges from a blotchy scarlet background, arms crossed. In an almost pixie-like fashion Dorothy speaks from her sketchy features, the picture deliberately left in an unfinished state. There is something of the Alec Hope portrait in the red hat here, a likeness produced with speed and the sure touch of inspiration.

IN ALL THE PORTRAITS we can see the eyes, except for two, the portraits of Gig Ryan and Emma Lew. The picture of



Alan Wearne, 1993

Emma Lew whose partner, the poet John Anderson, had died suddenly not long before the painting was done. Emma, backed by a profound darkness, is seated in a chair, a book open on her lap, her eyes downcast. Is she reading? Is she sleeping? Meditating? She is very, very still and the viewer is drawn again and again to the soft lids of her closed eyes. The portrait of John Anderson was painted at night and is full of dark shadows so that the gentleness of the poet merges with the deep green all around him.

JENNI SPEAKS OF HER TASK as a portrait painter as one in which she tries to make the viewer feel as well as see, in

which there is a visual likeness to the subject, but also an insight into the spirit. And she speaks too of the pleasure she has in having her pre-conceived ideas about a subject sometimes confirmed and sometimes altered by the reality of the person who sits for her. Then things happen, like the storm picture and Shelton Lea. And Fay Zwicky, who was at first reluctant to sit. Jenni decided to give Fay a background of turquoise and cerulean blue, and learnt in the course of painting, that these were colours Fay would have chosen herself.

Jenni said she often paints in the background and the clothing of the subject very swiftly at first, and doesn't necessarily work on them again, al-

though sometimes she is moved to change the colour of the background completely after getting to know the subject better. On the second and third sitting she will work on the face. When she painted Clem Christensen she began with a background of deep alizarin and burnt sienna, and later she loosely covered this with ultramarine and cobalt blue so that there was produced an electric glow that was the right effect.

Blue eyes, blue chair, blue trousers, blue pendant on white shirt, Geoff Goodfellow sits as if about to lean forward and speak out very loud. The wall behind him is rich red; one hand has the fingers curled under, the other has them splayed, long, pale fingers trac-



Geoff Goodfellow, 1998

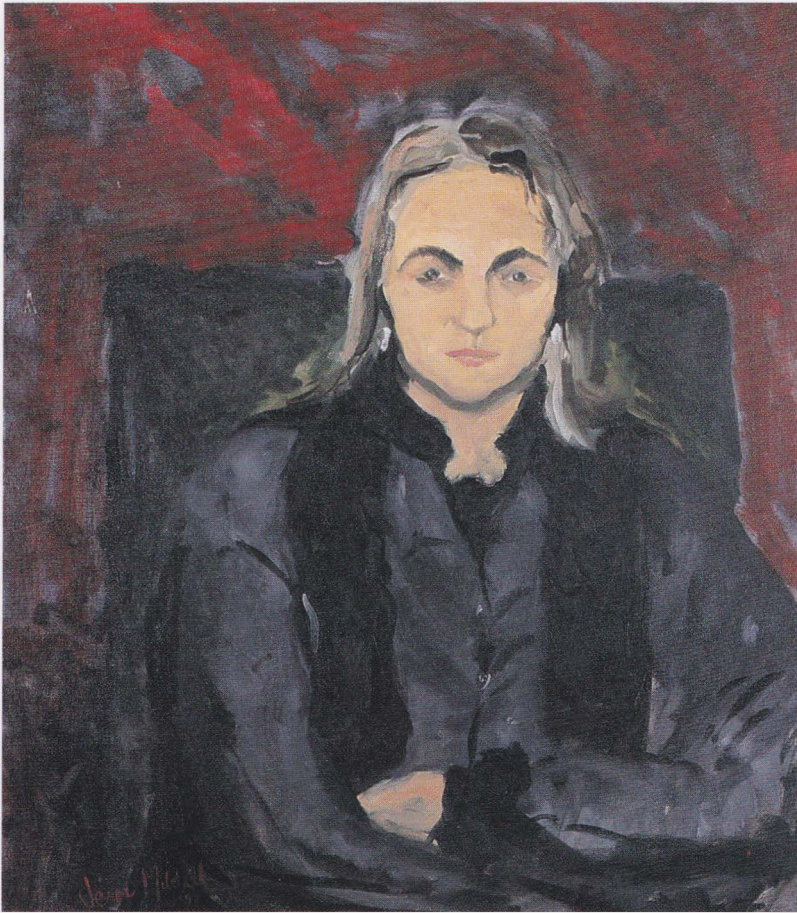
ing the parallel lines on his pants. Alan Wearne in his red and black football jumper is pensive and almost glowering, his dark eyes seeming to look inward on himself. Jennifer Strauss is alert and sweet, poised in the sand-coloured armchair, her shadow on a wall of deep, warm apricot. A bunch of daffodils lightly held in Graeme Rowlands' hand is detailed, and seems to be something he has plucked from the flat yellow world behind him. A small black book open in the hands of Alex Skovron, its pages a mirror image of the poet's white collar. Alex frowns a little; he is thinking. Michael Sharkey in profile, characteristic ironic smile visible, a green book cradled in his hand. Books,

shelves of red and blue and white and grey and pink books, form a vivid background for the solid presence of Tom Shapcott who looks almost sleepy, lulled by the wisdom on the shelves behind him.

There are three portraits of Ken Taylor, who, as well as being a poet, is a film-maker and a painter. One picture shows him with the deeply sorrowful look of a man who has recently lost his house in the Ash Wednesday fires at Mount Macedon in 1983. Then there is the painter at work on a watercolour by the window of his studio; and the third is the poet, full of quiet optimism, wearing a shirt of horizontal blue and white stripes. As with the three por-

traits of Alec Hope, the three portraits of Ken Taylor reveal a man in three very different moods.

Geoffrey Dutton, his eyes dreamy, his mouth gentle but firm, fills the canvas and seems to float before a background of silky blues, his own shadow a strong presence on the left, a perky red shirt collar hooked over his dark grey sweater. Although his hands are not completely visible, they hang loosely in front of him, creating a kind of reflection of his face. This portrait was painted in the year of Geoffrey Dutton's death, 1998, reminding me that this series of a hundred portraits is a record of passing time. There are other sitters who have died before the



Dorothy Porter, 1997

hundred portraits were done: Gwen Harwood, Bob Brissenden, John Rowland, Lance Loughrey, John Anderson. And it is very sad that John Forbes died before Jenni had painted him.

This is an enormous project, and Jenni says that if she had realized what she was starting, she might never have begun. Clem Christesen said he thought she was brave; he was right about that. But it is clear that in a sense she was truly meant to do this, was uniquely placed to do it. There she was, growing up in Eltham, a painter, the lives of the poets at Montsalvat entwined with hers. Even before she painted A.D. Hope's portrait, she had done portraits

of Geoffrey Eggleston and Pete Spence and Cornelis Vleeskens. One of these, a picture of Pete and Cornelis, is humorous – most of the portraits are more serious than this. Jordie Albiston is a poet who lives near Jenni in Eltham, and hers is a recent portrait, a face whose gaze is penetrating, whose demeanour is almost severe. Jordie sits with a kind of determination in the wicker chair, her arms resting on the arms of the chair, her simple black dress scooped at the neck, revealing her smooth creamy throat. There is no shadow on the almost white wall behind her. She is a presence.

So the portraits sit in Eltham as the

project gets closer to the end. By mid-January 1999 there were eighty. Jenni will soon travel to the Blue Mountains to paint Dorothy Hewett and Kate Llewellyn and others. Some of the pictures hang on the walls of the studio, some are in the racks, and some are stacked against the walls. Selections of them have been hung for a time at the Victorian Writers' Centre and at Latrobe University. But what do you do with a hundred portraits of Australian poets?

Jenni is working on a book which will contain a poem by each poet, with biographical notes, and colour prints of all the portraits as well as an introduction by Gary Catalano and a narrative



Jordie Albiston, 1998

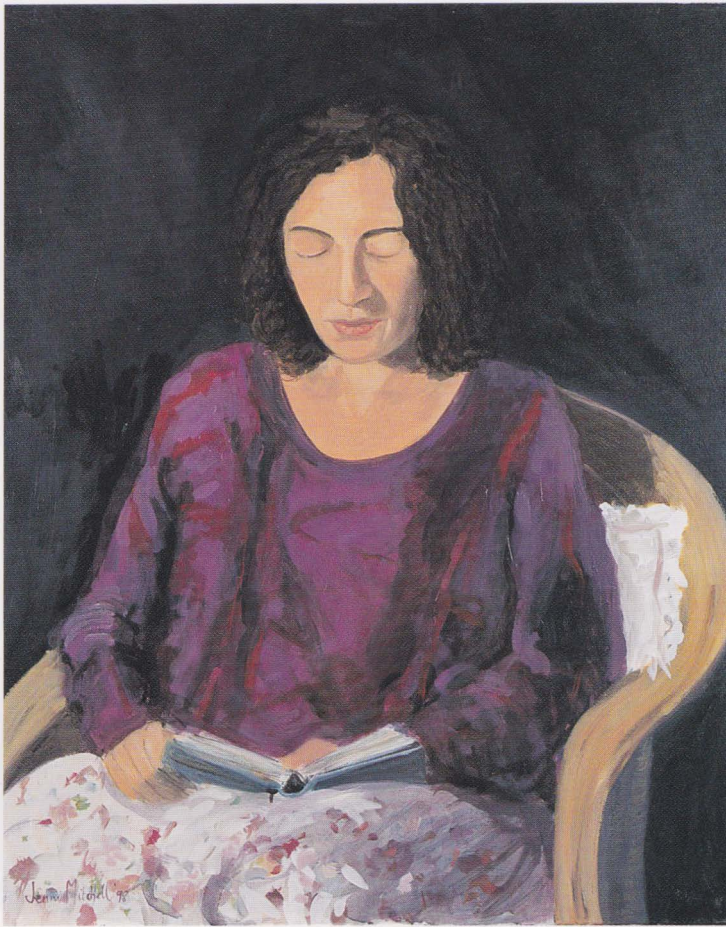
by Jenni. She also nurtures the hope that perhaps funding will be found so that a gallery, ideally the National Portrait Gallery, can house the pictures. This is a curious project, but a most imaginative and important one. It is not only a matter of cultural history and document, but is also a chapter in Australian poetry, and an artistic enterprise of great significance. The State Library of Victoria has expressed interest in publishing the book of the project, but, as always, funding has to be found before this can happen. So far Jenni has met all the expenses of the project herself. The collection is a painter's diary of her response to and friendships with

the poets, and when I spent time with Jenni it became clear to me that this project could probably only have happened here, in this rich and vibrant centre of artistic life.

I speak of the vitality and of the serenity about the house and garden and studio, of the trees and the warmth and the sunlight. Yet as I sat for my portrait, my eye kept returning to a creamy white death-mask hanging on the window frame. Surely it was *L'Inconnue de la Seine*? The death-mask of an unknown girl who drowned in the Seine early last century. Is it? I say. Yes, Jenni says, that's right. There would be thousands of these through-

out the world, and the idea of them has fascinated me for a long time, but it was a surprise to see *L'Inconnue* hanging there, backed by the treetops outside the window. A crow sits in one of the trees, and an occasional bright parrot flashes past. I became so excited about it that next time I sat for the portrait, Jenni gave me the mask to keep. A strange memento of the sittings.

The other thing that drew my eye constantly was Jenni's palette which is a large rectangle of board, polished to a glassy finish in the middle, but decorated around three edges with blobs of oil paints in varying states of solidity. All the colours there ever were, like the



Emma Lew, 1998

petals of weird flowers or underwater plants, glowing with sharp and rounded surfaces. Some part of every portrait is there on the edge of the palette, some little scrap of the soul of every sitter.

And the driving force behind all this is the artist herself. She is small, bright, vivacious, determined, with bouncing brown curls, large grey-green eyes and a beautiful wide smile. And painting has been her life. The number of canvases stored on the property is quite astounding to me, and I realize that there are also works in galleries and private collections in Australia and overseas. So much energy. So much vision. So much paint. In a shed which Mervyn

has recently renovated and fitted with racks are pictures Jenni painted when she was a child, and on the easel in the studio is the latest portrait, this time of a politician. The artist's whole life documented in her works.

There's a painting she did when she was recovering from an illness. This is a picture which particularly attracted me. The joy and vitality in it sing. It's the mandarin tree, mythic, mysterious, heavy with dark gold fruit. The grasses in the foreground are golden and filled with a whispering movement. White moths flit, one, two, three, four. And in the heart of the picture a sacred blue kingfisher sits in the mandarin

tree. It was the only time, Jenni said, that a kingfisher had ever been seen in the garden. The picture has a strange incandescence, a spiritual lightness.

A deep spirituality inhabits many of the desert and wheatfield landscapes, and the portraits of the poets, particularly as a collection, suggest the vast realms of inspiration that have moved these people to write the millions of poems they have written.

The poets whose portraits have been done so far are: Robert Adamson, Jordie Albiston, John Anderson, Eric Beach, Barbara Blackman, Ken Bolton, Bob Brissenden, Gary Catalano, Clem Christesen, Rosemary Dobson, Geoffrey Dutton, Rebecca Edwards, Ann Edgeworth, Geoffrey Eggleston, Barbara Giles, Terry Gilmore, Peter Goldsworthy, Geoffrey Goodfellow, Alan Gould, Maggie Gray, Tom Grant, Jennifer Harrison, Kevin Hart, Gwen Harwood, Kris Hemensley, Kristen Henry, A.D. Hope, Coral Hull, Evan Jones, Robert Kenny, Lance Loughrey, Shelton Lea, Joyce Lee, Emma Lew, Ern Malley, Chris Mansell, Ian McBryde, Peter McFarlane, Mal Morgan, Les Murray, Mark O'Connor, Geoff Page, Dorothy Porter, Adrian Rawlins, Bev Roberts, Nigel Roberts, Judith Rodriguez, Peter Rose, John Rowlands, Graham Rowlands, Gig Ryan, Philip Salom, Tom Shapcott, Michael Sharkey, Alex Skovron, Pete Spence, Jennifer Strauss, Ken Taylor, Tim Thorne, Cornelis Vleeskens, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Alan Wearne, Lauren Williams, Judith Wright, Fay Zwicky.

Carmel Bird's most recent novel is Red Shoes, produced on CD-Rom and in hard copy. Her web address is: www.carmelbird.com

Christopher Wray

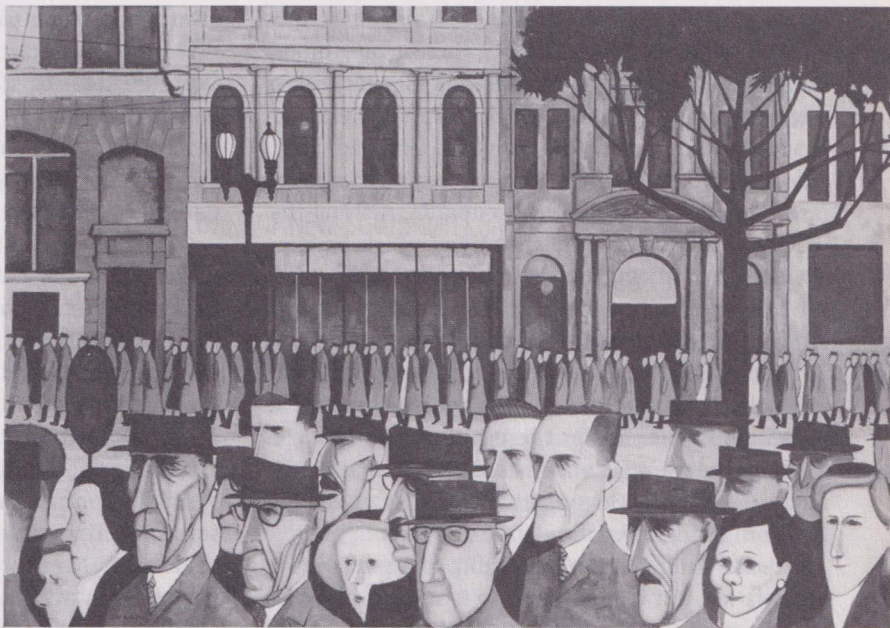
Meditations on John Brack's *Collins St., 5p.m.*

John Brack 1920–1999 Australia
Collins St., 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.8 x 162.8 cm
Purchased, 1956
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

WHenever I see John Brack's painting *Collins St., 5p.m.*, I look for my father. I never find him, but I know that he is there, perhaps just out of frame, one more figure in the parade of commuters all marching at an even pace toward the intersection with Elizabeth Street where the great majority of them will perform a right wheel and tramp down Elizabeth Street to the entrance of Flinders Street Station. My father, Harry Wray, should be among them, fifty-one years old but with a curiously youthful and unlined face beneath his thinning, prematurely white

hair. Not that much of his hair would be visible to the casual viewer for like most men of the era he wore a dark grey felt hat which complemented his dark grey suit, white shirt and sober tie. The only hint of an ornament would be the dully gleaming badge in his left buttonhole which denoted that he had returned from active wartime service overseas.

I can be sure that father would have been another figure in the concourse that evening in 1955, making his way to Flinders Street Station in time to catch the 5.15 train on the hour-long journey home to outer suburban Boronia where my mother would be busy at the wood stove in our kitchen preparing the evening meal while I sat at the kitchen table drawing or reading while half listening to the radio serials, for the part of Collins Street depicted by Brack



was his place of work, the place where he spent his weekday hours and which provided him not only with the income to sustain his family but with his very status and identity.

The section of Collins Street which John Brack depicts, in the block between Elizabeth and Queen Streets, was the commercial hub of Melbourne, where banks and insurance houses drew in their myriad armies of clerks each morning and ejected them to their suburban dwelling places each evening. From the time that he left his first post-war employment with the Department of Air in 1948 until his retirement in 1969, my father was a soldier in that army of commercial enterprise, commencing as a clerk and ultimately retiring as a manager with Western Mining Corporation in Collins House, 360 Collins

Street. Collins House was home to mining companies and interests associated with the Baillieu family, whose reputation and power in Melbourne of the first half of this century was similar to that of the Medicis in medieval Florence. The very name of Collins House was redolent of venerable (and therefore respectable) Melbourne wealth and power.

It can be no coincidence that John Brack chose as the vantage point for his painting of the evening rush hour crowd a spot some ten to twenty metres to the east of Collins House, closer to the Elizabeth Street intersection, where the ornate pile of the Colonial Mutual Insurance building stood. Brack's painting appears to speak of twentieth century conformity and the pressures of city life, but there is one important element missing from the work. Brack's Collins Street is empty of motor vehicles. Marshall Berman has suggested that it is the conversion of roads from places where people meet and interact to thoroughfares for vehicles and their occupants, rushing implacably to some new destination, which typifies modernism. But while Brack's vision of Collins Street is of a modern city with its spaces carefully ordered and protected, with pedestrians confined to footpaths in what Berman has described as "a spatially and socially segmented world – people here, traffic there; work here, homes there;"¹ the important element of motor traffic, which even by the 1950s was a form of cholesterol clogging the city's arteries, is missing from Brack's evocation of Collins Street.

Brack's vision is then a carefully constructed one; what is left out of the painting is as important as what is included. The section depicted by Brack has been carefully chosen to show Collins Street in its commercial incarnation, while ignoring other parts with their vastly different symbolic messages, like the section between Elizabeth and Swanston Streets typified by the fashion and urbanity of the 'Block', or the leafy eastern end, overlooked by the graceful Treasury Building, where the consulting rooms of medical practitioners in the late nineteenth century chambers retained a *fin de siècle* elegance which was in 1955 just beginning to be disturbed by the first eruptions of glass and steel modernist construction.

Symbolic of the old Collins Street which was soon to disappear and just to the east of Brack's viewing point, out of frame to the right of his painted image, stood Scott's Hotel, a famous Melbourne hostelry

which by the late 1960s had been razed and replaced by offices. One day in the late 1970s, when I had, like my father, become a denizen of Collins Street, I was walking during my lunch hour along the southern side returning to the office when outside the Embank building, which had replaced Scott's, I noticed an old man dressed in a 1940s style 'zoot suit' all broad shoulders and wide, bold, unfashionable pinstripes, standing looking lost and baffled on the pavement near the place where Scott's had once stood. I didn't speak to him, but as I walked back to the office I wondered about that figure who appeared so dislocated from the time and place. Perhaps he was a convict released after a long stretch in Pentridge prison searching for his lost past, perhaps nothing more than an old man from the suburbs seeking the 'watering hole' of his youth. That old man, lost and disoriented in the busy lunchtime crowd, has remained for me a figure from an earlier and more cosmopolitan incarnation of Collins Street.

While much can be read into Brack's depiction of urban humanity trudging grimly from their workplaces to the transport which would carry them to their dormitory suburbs, there is a risk that the symbols may be misread by generations unfamiliar with Melbourne of the 1950s. As a mature age student of visual art history I took part in a discussion of this work. Several younger students made much of the symbolism of all the pedestrians marching in the same direction as a statement by the artist on urban conformity. No doubt it was, but it was also a truthful representation of the patterns of movement in Collins Street before the underground rail loop opened during the 1980s. In the early 1960s as an undergraduate at Melbourne University I took part in the last 'Prosh' to be held in the city. Mine was a minor role, as vendor of *The Hairoid*, a take off of the evening *Herald* newspaper. I stood at the south western corner of Collins and Elizabeth Streets offering the paper to the morning commuters. I soon noticed that as workers from the distant suburbs flowed out of the Elizabeth Street entrance to Flinders Street Station they swarmed toward me in successive human waves, as unstoppable as the Chinese infantry were said to have been during the Korean War, their movements governed only by the arrival time of the trains and the cycle of traffic lights; just as in the evening the great sombre toned phalanx would with

one accord march back to the station, and suburbia.

But there was always more to Collins Street than the great grey army of office clerks and bank tellers. The shopkeepers and tradespeople who serviced their needs were a part of the warp and weft of Collins Street. My father often spoke of 'old' Taft, the pen man. Whenever my father's Parker fountain pen required a new nib, or the rubber insert which carried the ink required replacement, my father would visit old Taft in his cramped Collins Street pen shop. When in 1959 I turned fourteen my father sought old Taft's advice on my birthday present, a blue and gold Parker pen with a plunger to draw up the ink. Then there was Mr Lipschutz the optician, whom my father would call upon if an emergency arose with his glasses. For very special occasions a visit to Farren-Price the jeweller would produce a gift for my mother. Taft's shop remains but old Taft like Mr Lipschutz, my father, my mother and many of those who were observed by John Brack on Collins Street one evening more than forty years ago, have long gone.

As the figures of one generation pass from Collins Street others take their place, intermingling and interacting with one another. In 1968 Collins Street became my workaday home when I became an articled clerk in the small but old and stately law firm of McCay & Thwaites. Although the firm had been founded in Castlemaine in 1898, it had moved to Melbourne in the first years of the twentieth century and became a tenant of Collins House when that building opened its doors, circa 1912. In 1968 McCay & Thwaites occupied the fifth floor, just one floor below the office in which my father was seeing out his last year with Western Mining. Our paths seldom crossed during the day and we occasionally but infrequently would meet at the lifts when returning from lunch. While most of the lifts were automatic, there was one which was hand operated. The driver was a squat maltese nicknamed 'the Admiral'. I never knew his name. He was always immaculately turned out in the dark blue uniform of the Corps of Commissioners, his left breast covered with rows of service medal ribbons, the first of which was the salmon pink and white striped ribbon of the MBE. I was told that he had spent many years in the Royal Navy as an Admiral's servant before migrating to Australia,

and he was an impressive although never forbidding figure as he cheerfully steered the lift on its preordained course between the floors of Collins House.

Over the succeeding decades Collins Street became my beat as career changes and office relocations took me from Collins House to the National Mutual Building, on the site of the old Fish Market, then to the T&G Building at the eastern or 'Paris end', then to an office amid the Land Boom Gothic turrets of what was then Goode House on the corner of Collins and Queen Streets and later to the City Mutual Building on the Collins and William Streets' intersection. Through the years Collins Street became my second home, in all its varied moods and phases. One weekday afternoon in 1970 I walked along the section depicted by Brack some fifteen years before. The street was almost deserted, a few who like me had business to transact were hurrying along the street spooked by its emptiness and silence. Police paddy wagons were drawn up at the Elizabeth Street intersection and groups of uniformed police stood by them, silently watching the few passers by. The Vietnam Moratorium March was due to begin and although the marchers were to proceed along Bourke Street, the police were taking no chances. Collins Street, Melbourne's commercial and financial heartland would be protected from the massed band of students, workers and middle class parents marching beneath banners and flags in an orderly procession of protest. The times were changing and the police understood that Collins Street had to be protected from the potential anarchy which, in the eyes of conservative Melburnians, the massed marchers represented. What they failed to recognize was that those marchers, while superficially so unlike those whom John Brack had depicted only fifteen years before, were drawn from the same Melbourne suburbs, and lived similar lives to those who were to be seen in *Collins St. 5p.m.*

ENDNOTE

1. Berman Marshall, *All that is solid melts into air; The experience of modernity*, Verso, London, 1983, p. 168.

Christopher Wray is a Melbourne-born lawyer and writer who now lives in Perth.

Boots

Judith Milne

“DO YOU REMEMBER . . . ?”

“No I don’t remember that.” “I’m sure you were there. You stank like a small child who’s been out in the sun too long. You were in brown with green checks. With boots too big that cadankered when you walked and were a heartbeat too late when we ran. You complained but I wouldn’t listen. I didn’t care for your troubles then.” I smile. “Do you remember that day and the smell of the rain, cold and sharp against our lips when they were licked? Big drops that stung our bare heads and shivered our spines as it oozed amongst our hair and dripped down inside our collars. We could hear the indigestion rumblings of distant thunder. Surrounded by it all in that bare paddock place.”

He shakes his head. “No not then. I don’t remember your *when*, of all of this.”

I plead with him silently, help me out of this. I take a deep breath. “Do you remember, we were stopped by a vivid flash of forked lightning that cut the sky almost to the ground and we stood in awe before fear took its place? Me pulling the cuff of your sleeve as we ran till your arm disappeared inside it?”

He stares and thinks.

“I shouted against the rain and the pain of my fingernails cutting into the palm of my hand, ‘This way’ and pointed to an old burnt-out gumtree up ahead. You’d have followed me to hell then I’m sure. But halfway there I

changed my mind and dragged you as you slipped in your cadanker boots to another burnt-out gum further away. I don’t know why. Maybe I enjoyed the fear and having you near. You trusted me then.”

He smiles.

“We squeezed ourselves into the hollow base and let the rain chill our kneecaps that jutted out and flicked skims of water from the backs of our hands. We felt safe. Around us the world was a vibrating thunderous grey upon black pierced by brilliant jagged lightning that made us hold our breaths. Remember that first tree we headed for? We saw it fall, so slowly, so gracefully to the ground when lightning struck its base. You let out a wow but I began to shake and without a word to each other we seemed to pop out of the old tree and ran for home, careless of the thunder and the lightning and the rain. You must remember that if nothing else. That brush with stupid disaster. And how we never told anyone when we got home and dripped upon Mum’s clean floor.” He shifted awkwardly in his seat. “You’re not my little brother, are you?” I asked. “My little shadow?”

“No,” he said. “I have never met you before. But I do remember the boots.”

“Ah,” I sighed with final relief, “You wore those boots as well.”

Whitlaw

Richard Endzins

I WAS WARNED TO BE cautious. He was an elusive character. I had seen his Thai wife from a distance; no-one ever met her closer. What took me to ‘The Marina’ Cafe in

Sienna was an article in the *Herald-Tribune* which mentioned his work-in-progress. I could do a profile on Whitlaw if he was the right aspiring author. The overseas correspondent who wrote the article for the *Herald-Tribune* said he greeted everyone who entered 'The Marina' with a wave of his hand and the cry, "America, America" and he was allowed to drink wine with his coffee until midnight every night. Whitlaw was the only man allowed to read James Joyce's *Ulysses* backwards according to the Rector of Ispwich. No window or doorway of 'The Marina' Cafe revealed a view worth consideration. The tables and adornments bore signs of a grim sensitivity. "Whitlaw?" I asked. Mine host was wiping glasses. "He has gone. How much does he owe you?" I said I had only just arrived in Sienna. "Lucky fellow," said the Italian.

The Goose

Lisa Greenaway

THEY SENT HIM OUT to drift, in the cold, cold bay. They bound his arms and his legs with heavy wet rope. They tied him to a thick light plank of wood, a concave piece cut out to fit it around the back of his neck, resting on his shoulders. On the shiny pebbled beach the men placed his cap on his head, and to the cap they tied, with a length of fishing line, a small silver trinket, a small silver fish.

Two of the men heaved him, in his heavy sleep, into a row boat, and, with only a cursory nod to their silent companions on the beach, began to row to the middle of the

cold, cold bay, the sluggish but heavy swell making them strain on their oars. When they reached the middle of the bay they put down their oars, and heaved him over.

They watched his head bobbing around in the water, the silver fish glinting in the soft winter sun. And his eyes slowly opened, as the sea swelled around him, the weight of their drug on his eyelids, as they gripped their oars to row away. One of them saw him, gasped, grabbed at his companion. For a long moment they regarded each other, the men in the boat, the man in the sea. Each eye spoke the same silence, the same understanding, a burden of recriminations. The men in the boat turned to their oars, and the man in the sea rose and fell with the swell, the plank buoying him up, the drug and the ropes resigning him to his fate.

Back at the beach the two men joined their companions, who had gathered on the rocks to watch, and they searched the sky, and waited, until the goose they required to finish the job flew over the hill and across the bay. The silver fish glinted in the sun and caught the bird's eye. The goose dived.

A goose's beak is very hard, and easily cracks the skull of a man.

The watchers on the rocks lowered their heads, silent, still, hands in their pockets or clenched at their waists. For some time they remained thus, some shivering in the warm sun, as the goose shrieked angrily in the sky.

If you do not directly act, then you are not responsible.

Two of the men broke away, rowed out to the body, with its crown of blood spreading out across the water, and they untied the ropes binding the body to the plank. The wet rope twisted about their frozen fingers, pulling them with the tide. He slowly sank through the icy clear waters, to the rocky bay floor. And the goose flew away, angry, its beak smarting, dripping with the man's blood. It rested on the rock's edge, dipped its beak into the waves, and searched the beach with an angry small eye.

And the body came to rest on a flat smooth rock on the sand, and its lungs flattened, and its blank eye searched the sea bed, and the hand waved with the current, listlessly, dead. Inquisitive fish nosed the silver trinket into the coral, and the men on the rocks turned away.

Melbourne, November Daydreaming

Ross Davy

CLEAR SKY. Pinkish red sunset-scratched sky. Cirrus. Metal scratches. Bathroom door handle. My bathroom.

Today I was in my sister's new bathroom, having a little look. I wish I had a bathroom like that. One side those glass bricks – pale green-white light blobs around imagining.

I'd seen the young brown builders up the hill.

Sunlit dirt, outer suburb. Wheelbarrow. Music leaking out of their van's radio.

I was looking at him in the bathroom

You'd want to wash him in a shower like that, have his genitals sit in your palm like a wet frog

Jumping away, playfully

Washing the frog

Until the white stuff was coming out, a frog's tongue catching your thumbnail

Sticky business, eating lips

Suds, turning down his body

Young builder,

Just lying dreaming in his jeans on the back seat, slowly getting a hard-on. He's getting up tranced, as if there's a handle in his pants, and something has a nice hold of it. Tight as reverie

Deep candy pink of the red in the shower curtain, reflected in the wriggling water on his stomach

He's sitting on the beige carpet, knee drawn up, cut-

ting his shower-softened toenails. A muscle climbs up his arm.

In the summer night he has woken, hair spread flat. He is leaning across the sheet, fixing it, trying not to wake up too far. His lips are numb and groggy.

He is sitting on the carpet, taking a loose pubic hair away from under his foreskin. The end of his penis is a kind of firm mush. His knee is all white hard.

He's lying naked on a secluded white beach, looking at the sand on his hip. The sand stretching away under his elbow looks like all his pores, fallen out.

Bodies in long grass. Green pools, branches. Body soft long grass. Plum dark. Plum tight, a little split, freeing. Musk pear saliva, vinegar smell, taking his fingers up, down. Eye slits, turning. Slow seeing slow sky, night clouded sky. White softening clouds. Long grass, a kind of small moaning. Pools widening, ripples across the mouth, open, still. Heart in the mouth.

The curly blond builder with nothing on except some talc between his legs is looking at the shiny magazine page –

Moussed long black ringlets, Renaissance prince face, twentieth-century smiling. Dream boat. Gorgeous perfect lips. Seagull-white eye-whites. Two, three-day beard, each little black hair clearly separate. You know – Italian boy. The lips are incredible. His eyes have just stopped flying, or are about to. In the next picture he's half on his back, bum open, looking steamy, and smiling at once, mostly smiling. Mouth lips, anus lips, cock lips, everywhere. Arse lips like a little nibble, inside out.

It's suction. Curly blond suction

You keep looking at the dry pink scratched sky. Thinking of the sunsets, the clouds, the roses and stars and honey business.

You keep seeing all these nice-shaped boys falling back on the lyric things, like people onto a trampoline bouncing off and never going through, like falling onto a quilt made of all the nice things pillow-fighting with clouds – special tough ones for pillow-fighting which won't burst, dropping cold stars down each other's back after a hot day of secrets.

Pumpkin Wolf

Outside, the wind whistled like a cave
The woman whistled up her pet wolf

Who bounded in, more bear than dog
And gave off pure light, one hell of a beautiful animal

So intelligent and gentle
It was shaming.

She said, "Meet Pumpkin, my baby,"
He was a bloody big baby.

I pounced and grabbed the wolf
In a headlock, found immovable rock,

Lifted the grey lips, tapped the fangs
Tried to get him off balance

Wrassling but Pumpkin Wolf didn't shift.
"You're mad," a laughing Californian said.

I was too far gone to give a damn
Besides, it reminded me

Of the time I caught a spiny anteater
Trying to burrow in a clay siding

I stopped the car, got out
Grabbed it by the hind legs

Its claws just wouldn't
Let go the ground.

And waves of anger shook Echidna's soft spikes.
Here in maple syrup country

I tugged the wolf's ears and tail
Testing a cool that did not fail

This pet wolf was unflappable
He sure wouldn't get cold

In that Eskimo suit. It would be great
To see him go after a bull red kangaroo.

Panting a machine-driven dog laugh
Pumpkin Wolf glowed like essence

With deep gold eyes
Looked straight through me.

A full moon tonight,
And the lady of the house laughed

Pumpkin Wolf'll be out on the town
Bringing wolf genes to suburban bitches.

Wolf eyes transport all over Los Angeles
Crazy fir trees outside, a gun in every home.

S. K. Kelen

Homecoming

*You can never go back,
only onwards into the world
leaving behind all the loved things...*

Dorothy Hewett

The place we leave behind is vivid, Chagall-like:
drawn by fairy-floss sentiment to the burst
and lustre of the circus tent, we shuffle
through sawdust and mud for a handout of
sloppy dream –

to where mother dazzles like a firefly on the
invisible trapeze embroidering the sky with
silken threads of her body's flight, and father
rides through the hoop of fire, a winged Zephyr
throwing handfuls, gusts of laughter like
petals into the glass bowl of our mouths.

If Chagall painted the place we leave behind
Brueghel depicted it upon return: Icarus,
in his mess of wax and feathers, a speck
in the ocean behind the ploughed brown
the every day.

The circus packed up now, but for the fat
lady, her ankles swollen as clouds, she
watches a feather held by the wind float
still, resist the pull of blue beneath.

Lidija Cvetkovic

Meteorology

He had always feared them
the white-nose rowdies their zinc-cream plastered faces
intensified the glare
& they splashed down the turquoise pool
self-righteously
sprang bullying from the water
& gave the impression
it was all 'for his own good'

Out of eyeshot he filled his desk:
climate figures & rainfall graphs
daily temperature readings
first for his city – palm trees & heat-lightning –
then the whole world

Several times in a booth at the Weather Bureau
& later in his room
the thought occurred:
they could be sabotaged

He could cook the books
by adjusting numbers

It was hard exhausting work
& the new Ice Age arrived so discreetly
the white-noses barely noticed
Decades passed before sun-&-heat deprivation
turned them quiet

Kerry Leves

Magic Pizza

every home should have
this spin
this little in the way of making
makes itself sufficiency

every hearth spirits
the hive of plenty
that all souls intersect
within

the pudding sets sail
to be with its kin
but the sea is as endless as love

and it's luck that holds the horse-shoe up
not the other way around

Christopher Kelen

telok tempoyak

At the road's elbow, low houses
languished by deep drains and,
under the usual fruit and palm trees,
the blurring neon light

diminished by frilled curtains
shadowed louvred windows.
My eye roamed the footways
sighting ferns and flowering

tendrils tracing breezy night.
Telok Tempoyak, like
batik, a fussy screaming
silence, its mystery

flattened. Then, round the bend,
men and women, seated
at long trestles, fingered
fish and rice, their dining

habits just that. Food.
At a fishermen's co-
operative. Thoughtfully.
That's all there is to it.

Carolyn van Langenberg

A Hole

Men lined up in front of a wall.
In it there's a hole, round, about as big as a fist
When it's my turn a voice behind the wall says: "Two rupees."
Now I know where I am – India.
I pass two rupees through the hole.
A moment later a small parcel is passed out.
It's food – dhal & a chapatti.
It's lukewarm, stale, uneatable.
This hole could surely be put to a better use.
For light? Why not? – for a beam of light
as though from a lighthouse. Sweeping, it illuminates,
unexpectedly, just for a moment, a ship at sea.
I could be on that ship, one of the crew.
I could be having dinner – roast chicken, delicious.
But I'm not really a sailor, am feeling seasick.
Must rush outside, throw up over a railing.
This hole could be used for something more worthwhile.
To pass a cinema ticket through? Why not? – a film
I've wanted to see for some time – *The Boat*, starring
Jurgen Prochnow, Herbert Gronemeyer & Klaus Wenneman –
& a box of popcorn to munch on while I watch it.

Philip Hammial

A Death

The fact of death and not its manner
is one clear spasm of knowledge,
while raucous music may be blaring
or a loaded train passes by.

Your children out in the fog
their location imprecise,
your death will come
whether by time or by machination.

Loss has taught you this
if nothing else in hindsight,
stunned to stillness in the kitchen
the windows rattling to bass,
while greasy dishes beckon
and, as an omen, grow cold.

Mark O'Flynn

Vicki Viidikas – Spare Angel

Shelton Lea

VICKI VIIDIKAS was for many years my spare angel.

I was always aware that while she was alive and writing a real poet was wandering the earth, ever at the littoral and the edge of a thrilling heart. She courted danger for the sake of poetry, the experience of india, drugs, rock and roll and men was her everyday and she lived an extraordinary life that was itself dedicated to poetry.

I first met her in 1964. Wendy lea, my partner at the time had found vicki living in the same block of apartments at the lower end of macleay street, kings cross. She was living with a painter who oiled crucifixes with her as the nude model. She was sixteen, drop-dead gorgeous and played a wonderful christ. Wendy had told her that i was a poet who had just published a book called *the asmodean poems* under the tutelage of sandor berger. She had rather coyly showed me some of her poems. She had been writing outside of herself, about the streets, their people and the early sixties madness. I remember a line from one of those poems to this day – “revved heads twisted like torn dolls”. Her poems from the start were never adolescent – she had come to poetry shall we say ‘well blown’.

I took her to meet the poet gavin greenlees at rosaleen (roe) norton’s joint, the appolyon bar. It was

opposite the fire station on darlinghurst rd and you descended stairs to be confronted by a fabulous painting of a panther making love to a voluptuous woman. At the bottom of the stairs was a room inhabited by darkness and the only light was candles whose luminosity bled to a ferocious painting of demons and sex. This was before the *kings cross whisper* and the yellow house and the poets like bob adamson, michael dransfield, nigel roberts, les murray eric beach, john tranter and others were still just beyond the literary horizon. Gwen harwood and joyce lee had almost had enough of their kids. They began to emerge, chrysalis from chrysalis. I took vicki to meet sandor berger at his fruitbox in the clothing shop front with his books of poems, declamative strut and long winter’s beard. He and greenlees were the only poets I could find at the time except for slessor, for whom she had a slight infatuation. I had met slessor on some of my frequent perambulations around the cross with gavin. A tall laconic bugger. We would meet in william street by the old bridge where the old abc now stands which had a magnificent view over all of woolloomooloo. Vicki and I, much to slessor’s horror said that keats had died a ponce and that if rimbaud sold guns it was alright for us to explore the inner world. We new that LSD

was king, that we could be amazed by hashish in the cake or in the cone, that opium was a lovely substitute for dreams. Speed we could buy across the chemist-shop counter, heroin and THC was in every child’s cough mixture.

This was to be the time she became hooked on the dreams that opiates gave her and became her bane. For, like de quincy, coleridge, dransfield and others she found in the opiates the unleashing of her poetic force. Her poem to dura devi, the female warrior who rides a tiger and carries many weapons to fight demons, reconnects the warrior to her mother:

*mother, I watched
The ants work in Your stone crypt
high above the town,
You beamed a salvation smile
Your pagoda hairstyle flew.*

I didn’t see her for long stretches of time, years would pass and she’d be behind the jump at the london hotel in balmain, or somewhere equally exotic. we never really lost touch. Last verse of the ‘duro devi’ from *India Ink*.

*I see a light
and go in
take me
to your nursery*

Website – or Tea on the Straddie Pub Terrace with Marcus Clarke

... but Australia has strong and marked features in her young civilization which have never been touched upon by writers of fiction ... Some day, perhaps, some author ... will make use of material that lies ready to hand ...

(Marcus Clarke, review of Bret Harte's
The Luck of Roaring Camp, 1871)

WHY NOT GO TO North Stradbroke Island for a few days – after all I was unemployed at last. If you take a car you go by barge, recently updated to ferry, crossing Moreton Bay's generous expanse, and sighting some of its many islands. Its foreshore is only built up in places – like “beautiful Raby Bay”, Moreton remaining pretty much itself, with its aromatic mudbanks and mangroves at low tide, and its openness inviting unpredictable and gusty winds, sometimes near-gales.

At Point Lookout my early morning ritual is tea on the terrace of the “pub with no peer”, certainly true of its view, the best sea view in the world. You sit and look over a strip of bush, with a dome-shaped pandanus, across Shag Rock, directly into and across the Pacific towards South America. Whales returning to Antarctica can be seen, close-in, from here. Ships on the horizon move toward mysterious ends, serene and self-contained. The sea is so close you can lose yourself in it, or fish things up. Or, with Joseph Brodsky in his celebration of the sea and Venice, you can drink another cupful of time.

On one side of where I sit is Home Beach, then Adder Rock, separating the long curve of Flinders Beach around to Amity Point, once a pilot and quarantine station where Thomas Welsby, the loving historian of the bay, worked for a time. Here, too, some passing seamen caught Moreton Bay fever: jumped ship to become beachcombers, like the Spaniard Gonzales who lived with Aborigines. He has a street

named after him at Amity, and is buried at Dunwich where the barge lands, leaving descendants, including an increasing number of fictional counterparts.

Kath Walker – Oodgeroo – celebrator of Stradbroke Dreamtime, claimed some kinship with Gonzales. On what has become her land near Dunwich she created a centre for visiting young Aborigines. I remember seeing her on video with a band of children she took to the sea side of the island at Adder Rock. Here they jumped into the sea and laughed, their faces lit with delight. I've heard stories of Kath in sterner mood confronting encroaching sandminers. From her Stradbroke base she roamed Australia and the world on missions as activist and writer. A plane she was travelling on was hijacked in North Africa, but she was a survivor. Once when Bernard visited from Venice, a beachhead for Australian literature in Europe, he announced that he just *had* to meet her. We ate oysters picked from her own mangroves and cooked on a portable barbecue. Only a few years ago she was laid to rest on her land, so that she is now forever part of Stradbroke – or Quandamooka, as one of the new barges is called.

On the other side of the terrace several beaches – Cylinder, Deadmans, Frenchmans – scallop around to the point itself, named from out at sea by Captain Cook. While Cook is currently out of favour for his misnaming, this one showed an ability to put himself in future people's places – at the other end of the telescope – as they look for whales, or down to the

surf on beaches and rocks below, or simply stare out to sea into infinity. This Point inspired David Malouf to celebrate the sheer edge where a precarious moment of touching may flower into a poem. After watching dolphins from this point one day, and thinking of Gwen Harwood's description of pianist, Rex Hobcroft's dolphin hands, I heard her voice, recognizable from Hobart days, on the radio.

As I drank my tea it wasn't long before Marcus Clarke arrived, out of the blue. It was tea that summoned him up, not the green variety that, if we can believe Michael Wilding, he imbibed in Melbourne and that brought him weird visions. It was the title of a conference paper, 'Tea in the Piazza with Mrs Campbell Praed', by his biographer, Brian Elliott. What a title for Godssake Brian, I thought when I first saw it in print – I've never read the essay itself – but he was probably thumbing his nose, as Clarke so often did. And fancy anticipating the Praed revival as well as Clarke's! Brian could certainly be quirky – spiky, as someone said. Clarke introduced us, because I so admired and depended on Elliott's biography, wrote to tell him so and began a lifelong friendship. I think he was surprised but quietly pleased to find someone taking such an interest. His dedicated biography is curiously restrained for one so fascinated by Clarke's writings and generally prepared to risk his arm, as when he startled a conference crowd by saying something which cut across the grain – it jolted like an electric current.

The biography helped me and others to track Clarke through post gold-rush Melbourne, glimpsing him but never seeing him plain, amidst the thickets of respectability, Bohemia and the underworld on his downward slide, paralleling those of new chums he wrote about. I caught traces of him in Melbourne newspapers and magazines when I crossed the Strait from Hobart to spend the first leg of my first study leave in 1968, to the amusement of Melbourne colleagues. And how is your – should I say research? – on Marcus Clarke getting on, inquired one. At the Public Library where he had been employed, and often absented himself from, Manning Clark, bent on researches for his History, spied one of Clarke's empties in an obscure part of the stacks, so a story went.

In his last letter to me Manning took me to task for adding an 'e' to his name. I used Clarke as my distraction, wondering whether Manning would be mollified, as I knew he was an admirer.

I first met Clarke after a blow inside my head landed me in Hobart General Hospital where I lay like a stunned mullet. Here, in a cavernous ward of an old sandstone building which seemed like the original hospital, readily summoning up convict days and worthy of the weird Dore engravings Clarke so

admired, I first read *His Natural Life*. James McAuley, then my boss at the Uni (How can you work with that fascist? friends in Sydney used to ask), showed the remarkable sympathetic understanding he was capable of, but raised an eyebrow at the suitability for the occasion of my reading matter. The Gothic power of the novel must have answered my buried panic in some obscurely reassuring way. Better than reading Hal Porter's *The Tilted Cross*

which like most convict novels followed Clarke's path, at a distance. In it, as I read much later, the scapegoat hero's leg is severed in the same hospital and thrown to the blowflies in the rivulet outside. The message was clear: beginning in the pure snows of Mt Wellington the stream had become polluted once it reached the corrupt town. And yet critics and followers like Robert Hughes have called Clarke's work melodramatic.

I recall that after a riding accident, in his own words Clarke lay for some weeks senseless – for many more weeks helpless. But his journalist friend, Alfred Telo, otherwise forgotten but for the obituary Clarke wrote, nursed him to recovery by reading him Russian and German novels, translating as he went. Like Telo Clarke knew French as well, and as he gracefully remarked: "In addition to this Telo had an extensive knowledge of the world and had been familiar with men and manners of many countries . . . his life a wonder to many . . . and his mind a storehouse of entertaining anecdote". And Telo was only one of Clarke's chance colonial acquaintances, echoing his own adventurousness in ranging the world by making the most of cosmopolitan Melbourne. Not for Clarke the liver cleansing diet.

Clarke opened up for me Van Diemen's Land's –

***As I drank my tea
it wasn't long
before Marcus
Clarke arrived, out
of the blue.***

and Australia's – dark yet heroic history, lurking behind its romantic Georgian houses and the beauty of its landscape. Honey-coloured, visiting poet John Betjeman called its stone buildings. He had seen Tasmania billed as "heart-shaped island of allure", at Tasmania House in the Strand in the 1960s. "This other England", was the billing when I visited there earlier to prepare myself for migration back home. "The only inbred apples in the world", mocked the first Hobart student revue I attended. And a well meaning Professor of English, concerned for my moral welfare, tried to persuade me to jump ship at Perth, though he didn't offer me a job. Having lived in country NSW, Sydney and London, Tasmania seemed foreign in anticipation but recognizable, if different, once I arrived.

On weekend drives out of Hobart, on topping Newtown Hill we looked into the blue distance of the interior where the gracious facades of mansions or of whole villages developed overtones of Clarke's *Old Tales of a Young Country*. It was just out of Hobart Town at Bridgewater that the stalwart pioneer, Dr Ross, was stopped in his tracks by a party bearing the severed head of Michael Howe, the demon bush-ranger.

One day, with AD Hope I visited one of the decaying Georgian Homes in what looked like an unchanged wilderness, miles off even a side road. It was deserted, though a pegged-out fox skin in one bare room suggested a trapper camped there. Yet the house, 'Sherwood', was still solid, beautiful – and incongruous. From a terrace some sweeping steps, flanked by two huge holly trees, led down to a dry creek bed. (They'd have to be male and female, commented Alec characteristically; on the way back from Bothwell he pointed out two hills as being like advertisements for Berlei.) At dusk, as if on cue, screeching cockatoos in the distance did seem demoniac, as Clarke claimed in his keynote to Australian scenery. Weird melancholy indeed.

Once we visited Oatlands, a village of congealed Georgiana on the Midlands Highway, between Launceston and Hobart. Here Jorgen Jorgensen, "a human comet", and probably Clarke's most colourful real-life character, ended up as a convict. He had been alternately seaman, explorer, spy, man of letters, man of fortune, political prisoner, dispensing chemist and King of Iceland, and was transported for illegally pawning the property of a lodging-house keeper in

Tottenham Court Road. Indeed, his life of web-like associations reeks of the romance of reality Clarke found so compelling.

When my decade in Tasmania was up, I went with Graeme to visit what remained its wild west coast. Graeme, an expatriate poet, presently writing from central Europe, grew up in that "remote corner", and is shadowed for life by his experiences there and its convict history. At Strahan no local fishermen would take us out across Macquarie Harbour to its entrance, Hell's Gates, not because it was far or dangerous but because it did not seem worth their time. Some modernization, if not tourism, was setting in. Crayfish tails were being exported to the US. Miners from nearby Queenstown, refugees at weekends, went to Strahan to drink and tune in to the Melbourne dogs on Saturday nights. There was a tourist boat, lined with Huon Pine, honey-coloured timber the convicts used to gather at great cost to themselves along the Gordon River. We sailed across the huge harbour but the convict settlement and the island rock of solitary confinement were not on the itinerary, though they were visible, and like Clarke, they were featured in the guide's spiel.

There were stories of attempts to erase the convict stain literally by the destruction of some buildings on Sarah Island. The only stain visible during our trip was not a convict one but a huge, spreading grey shadow in the water, like thick grey paint – pollution from Queenstown. We drove along the river banks where trees had been eaten off at the base, leaving remains looking like stumps of decayed teeth. Queenstown crouches like a Wild West town at the foot of denuded hills, reminiscent of others Vivian Smith has described as "corroded, with madness in their monotone and emptiness . . ." This is the sinister side of a landscape which elsewhere can be fertile and beautiful. James McAuley, thinking of the now vanishing orchards of the Huon Valley, hoped that something is gathered in.

In *His Natural Life* decaying vegetable matter, washed into the Gordon River by rains, poisoned fish (as has happened on a larger scale in the Black Sea), a detail Clarke borrowed from historical sources he used so effectively that one reviewer claimed that readers would know he had actually trodden the marshy areas he so vividly described. But Clarke did not have to visit. Port Arthur was enough, even when it was virtu-

ally out of use. But "the smell of it remained".

Determined to get to Hell's Gates we walked along the main beach from Strahan. A mist of sea-spray enveloped us as we peered out to sea, with its uninterrupted expanse of oceans reaching below Africa right across to South America, a vast and desolate stretch. The Gates are a treacherously narrow entry, with white breakers, into the harbour. Yet it was not a one-way ticket for all the condemned who entered here. Clarke twice told a celebrated story of escapees who seized a ship and sailed across the Pacific, to Valdivia in Chile, half way around the world. If they did not all reach freedom, it was an heroic feat of human hope. Some ironically ended up back where they started, or thereabouts, at Port Arthur actually, after reaching London. The fate of others is unknown. He concluded: "Whether they were wrecked on that stormy coast, killed by Indians, picked up by a stray ship, and returned to civilization, or striking on some savage island colonized another Pitcairn, who can tell. Despite their treachery, their romantic story makes one hope they got their longed for liberty at last." Was Clarke hoping that he might get back to London one day?

From where I'm sitting now, at Stradbroke, that mist-shrouded walk to the Gates seems to belong to another world, the inverse of this place. But as Clarke realized, other worlds are always part of this one, like the nether world he exposed as being only a stone's throw from respectable Melbourne. Last time I was at Stradbroke I went along the bush track from here for a swim at Cylinder Beach, enjoying the tidal flow rather than feeling the long isolation of the heart to which AD Hope in one of his austere moods condemned his wandering islands. But an innocent-looking wave picked me up and dumped me, thumping my forehead on the sand. Nothing like a dumper to toll you back to your sole self. But contra Hope, the rescue did take place. The GP up the hill proved my reflexes were in order when she dabbed alcohol on my grazed forehead.

Well, I must leave this view for today. It's good to know, though, that Clarke will be around.

Laurie Hergenhan, editor of Australian Literary Studies, has written and edited a number of books and articles on Australian literature, including A Colonial City, a collection of Marcus Clarke's Melbourne journalism.

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Letter to my Torturer

I DON'T LONG FOR YOU, I never have and I never will, but I have often wondered what has happened to you. Maybe you are old by now, perhaps a proud grandfather playing with your grandchildren, maybe you take them to the town square on a Sunday to listen to the local band. Have you ever wondered how many children never got to know their parents because you killed them? I do not think so, because you were a raging animal when you savagely beat me up and forced me to take my blindfold off. "Look at my face, look at it!" you said angrily. "Don't you ever forget my face, for I'm the one who is going to kill you!"

And I did, I looked you straight in the eyes, black, dark, piercing eyes full of hatred. I have never forgotten you, because torturers like you have names; assassins like you have names; rapists like you have names. They lead normal lives; they marry and have children. They go home after raping defenceless men and women. You impose your will; you impose your sick sperm, for you are a coward, the son of a thousand bitches. That's why you must be dead worried now that your General has been arrested in London, because for the first time in twenty-five years you find yourself on the defensive. You may burn British flags and beat up Spanish citizens, threaten with killing people and planting bombs if

the General is not released before Christmas, but everything is to no avail. Or are you going to invade England? No, it is not the same to fight against another army as to fight against an unarmed people. You've proven your bravery against defenceless people; you've been awarded medals for crushing bones and testicles, for burning arms and chests, for terrorizing children.

I never imagined a human being could be capable of such cruelty. It never crossed my mind that a Chilean could inflict such pain on another Chilean. How little did we know about our own army, how little did we know about the School of the Americas where our officers received training from the United States army. They were taught that the prisoner should be dehumanized, treated as scum. And we were: that was the aim of the heat, the lights, the blows, the noise, the submersion in filthy water, the shouting, the screaming all day and all night long. I never thought people could scream so loud, I never thought I could shiver in the middle of a hot night. But I did: it was the dreaded electricity. The explosion of colours blinds you, then you only see shadows and silhouettes. Will there be anybody when I return from this long and shiny tunnel? Will there be anybody when I finally reunite with my body amidst the dark hole of a thousand death rattles?

You asked questions I could not

answer; you wanted names and places, phone numbers and weapons. I could only give you long screams in return. They weren't mine; they were a form of protection behind the dirty and smelly hood that covered my head. Some cried out of impotence, some cried out of pride, some out of fear. Some because they knew they were going to be executed. That's why I hate you, I despise you, and will despise you forever. Not only for me, not only for my constant headaches, blackouts, aching bones and horror memories, but for my sisters and brothers, for those you beat up so badly they could not walk, those you raped so violently they could hardly breathe.

How many people did you kidnap and kill, how many did you throw into the ocean, their abdomens ripped open so that they would never resurface?

Where do the disappeared go; do they smile, do they cry, do they dance, do they plant trees so that they can enjoy their shade in the summer? Where are they?

I don't really expect any answers from you, I do not expect the military to answer, they haven't done it for twenty-five years, so those who believe that they are about to have a change of heart are profoundly mistaken. General Pinochet, the same apparently fragile elderly man who demands to be released on humanitarian

grounds, once said that prisoners were buried two to a coffin in order to save space and money.

His son has just expressed with utter contempt that those killed were simply beasts. Yes, as beasts we were treated on 11 September 1973, when forced to get on state trucks and fill the vehicles' floors with row after row of prisoners. At the very bottom of the truck's floor, with my arms behind my neck and dozens of people piled on top of me, I could hardly breathe. You, of course, were on top of us, crushing our desperate bodies and hearts with your shiny boots. Taken to the city's pier, we thought we were going to be thrown into the oily water. Instead, amidst an array of blows and kicks we found ourselves thrown into the huge hull of a ship anchored on the bay. A floating concentration camp, the first of a series of camps and prisons I would be held in over a number of years. Barbed wire, watchtowers, minefields, exile and more torture, because you were everywhere, because the dictatorship couldn't live without you and you couldn't live without the dictatorship.

And you lived well indeed with all the money and belongings stolen from your victims. It wasn't enough for you to hurt their flesh, you had to steal what little they had, offend their memory by wearing their clothes or hanging their paintings on your walls. You stole their colours, their flowers and their lives, but you could never, ever steal their dreams. Our dreams belong only to us; they are our most precious possession, our almighty sword to wage the war against ignorance and fear. Especially now when we live in a surrealist country with socialist ministers defending dictators, with

the Right and the Armed Forces defending socialist ministers and the Socialist Party attacking their own socialist minister. Lost? Well, not if you live in Chile, where for a significant part of the political class, the dictator's human rights are more important than millions of humans without rights. Or, as Pinochet himself once said: "What's 2000 missing people in a country of fourteen million?"

As for the victims of the repression, well, they should be content with some sort of archaeological justice: the finding of a few skulls and bones is all the justice they should aspire to. Former president Patricio Aylwin called it "Justice as far as possible". We simply call it impunity.

We do not want to identify the remains of the disappeared, we know who they are; we want to identify the culprits. We want to know who you are, my despicable torturer, we want to know your name and bring you to justice, because the problem does not end with Pinochet, he gave the orders but hundreds of others carried them out. They too must pay for their crimes. You must pay for what you did.

There is a beautiful Nicaraguan song where a victim of the repression tells his torturer: "My personal revenge will be your children's right to school and flowers. When you find it impossible to stare at people out of utter shame, my personal revenge will be to offer you these hands that you once ill-treated."

Me? I'm afraid I can't sing.

Tito Tricot
December 1998
Chile

On being remaindered

Jenny Stewart

IN MAY 1997 my book on industry policy was remaindered. The firm to whom the rights had been transferred (not the original publisher) had given up on selling the copies that were left. These days, a book sells virtually all the copies it is going to sell in the first few months of its existence. Cost-conscious publishers do not like unsold inventory cluttering up the place.

Being remaindered is a not uncommon experience, especially for Australian authors. We have a small reading public, which is inundated each year with a dizzying number of new local and imported titles. There is a great deal of competition for a limited amount of attention. I was, nevertheless, upset – it is a bit like learning one of your children has ended up on the streets. Where had I gone wrong?

When *The lie of the level playing field: industry policy and Australia's future* first appeared in May, 1994, I had high hopes. If it did not change the way industry policy was thought about, it would, at least, engender some controversy. In an era of non-interventionist orthodoxy, I was proposing something different. The book was written in a lively style, contained a few graphs and other figures, but was not heavy going.

The first few weeks were encouraging. I was interviewed a number of times on the ABC (God bless what's left of it). But I could not get my book reviewed in any paper other than the *Canberra Times* (and even that took some doing). The editors of the book review pages of the major national and metropolitan

newspapers thought it too technical to interest their readers, because it contained a few graphs (or at least, that's what they told me).

Because it was a non-literary book, the editors of literary journals and reviews were not interested. Every book of poems, no matter how slight, gets a review, but so-called 'non-fiction' (the very category says it all) has a much tougher time. With some exceptions, biography and history are about as far from the literary mainstream as newspaper review editors are prepared to go in selecting books to send out.

Journalists and commentators are the (often unacknowledged) gatekeepers of ideas in our society. I sent copies of my book, with covering letters, to all the major commentators on economic policy matters. Not one bothered to acknowledge the copy I had sent, let alone reply to my letter.

Their reaction was predictable, I suppose, given that I was proposing a form of government involvement in industry development. In their minds, such a course of action amounted to a return to protectionism, which they abominated.

We are not good, in this country, at rationally debating the important issues. Those with power simply push the views they do not agree with off the agenda. If they cannot do that, they label you. If you want to talk about race, you are a racist. If you want to discuss industry policy, you are a protectionist. In fact, I had not advocated a return to protectionism but then again, I had not endorsed the market forces approach so beloved of economists.

But the 'pick-a-winner' industry policy people on the left did not go for my book either. In arguing for what the Japanese call 'soft-handed'

methods, I had not toed their party line. Nor was a co-operative approach between business and government well-regarded. The deep mistrust of business (which the Left shares, oddly enough, with most economists) meant that my recommendations attracted little interest from that quarter.

The reactions of family and friends were puzzling. Most did not mention the book at all, as if I had done something slightly shameful. I lacked the nerve to raise the subject. Perhaps they did not like it? On a visit to my sister's I noticed my book sitting in a magazine stand. She had put it there when she received her copy, she explained, but had not had the time to read it.

I had to accept, as all authors must, that the world reaches its own conclusion about what you write. People will buy your book – some might even read it – if you say what they have already been thinking, or would like to find a way of thinking. Michael Pusey's *Economic rationalism in Australia*, Tim Flannery's *The future eaters* were such books. With timeliness and luck, you might even ride the tide of public opinion to a sort of fame. But being right, or even coming close to it, will not be enough. Whatever the verdict, you have no alternative but to accept it, and move on to the next thing.

Exercising influence is even more difficult than being noticed. While a book may prove to be influential, it cannot be written with influence in mind. It was something Virginia Woolf expressly warned against. "Do not dream of influencing other people", she wrote in *A Room of One's Own*. "Think of things in themselves."

If you insist on being influential, arrange first to be well-known.

Because making up one's own mind is such hard work, most people – and certainly the media – take less notice of what is being said than who is saying it. The comments of someone people have 'heard of' are more worthy of consideration than the same things said by an unknown.

It seems a bit of a cop-out, to ascribe one's difficulties to being a woman. But in this country, women have only a limited licence to become involved in a debate outside the usual issues. Had I been writing about eco-feminism, post-modernism, the problems of working women, etc, I might have been taken seriously. But I was presuming to have something to say about industry, and industry in our society is blokes' business.

I did get a number of speaking engagements, for which I was grateful. But the gloss came off somewhat when, on one such occasion, one of the organizers told me how hard he had striven for 'gender balance' on the program. I suppose he thought I would be pleased at this enlightened approach. But like any woman who has wondered whether she was promoted because she was female, rather than on her merits, I started to think that my ideas – important as I believed them to be – were not the main reason I was there.

I rang Humphrey McQueen for some advice. Humphrey had published any number of unorthodox books, and become quite well-known in the process. His response was not exactly encouraging. "You have to hit the cottage speaking circuit", he said. "What's that?" I asked. "It's the Rotary Clubs, Historical Societies, Professional Associations, that kind of thing. They're often looking for speakers. You take along your books

in a plastic bag, and sell them after the talk.”

“But I’ve just written the bloody thing”, I said. “I don’t have the energy for all of that.” “Once you’ve published the book, you’ve done about half the work you need to do”, said Humphrey sternly. “It’s the promotion and the selling that’s the really hard part.”

Speaking engagements of any kind require, however, that you have a message that people are ready to hear. I am still not sure how important Australians believe industrial development to be. It is never an election issue, although unemployment certainly is. Yet without investment, there can be no growth in jobs – and few people are prepared to invest their money in a policy environment which is equivocal about most forms of business activity, with the possible exception of tourism.

People who read will buy books about the environment, about maltreatment of Aborigines, about the Anzacs, about writers whose lives, in the hands of a skilful biographer, are often more interesting than their books. But readers are not interested in, or are simply not encouraged to buy books on economic issues. Perhaps it’s the lucky country syndrome – there will always be a mine, somewhere.

Dr Jenny Stewart is a Canberra writer and academic.

Whitlam’s Warriors

Tony Cunneen

POLITICAL VIOLENCE and tolerance is in the news again. It used to be mentioned as a possibility when Kerr

pulled the plug on Gough. Our particular revolutionary cell were too busy playing squash on the day of the Dismissal to take to the streets. It was worse when Fraser of Nareen was voted into office. It was the election which should have activated our secret Spartacist cell in Lindfield on the North Shore, deep in Liberal territory. We’d been preparing ourselves for action in a rented Federation style house in Bent Street mainly through a strict regime of parties and Frank Zappa which continued throughout Gough’s reign. We were twenty-two years old, just the right age to have avoided conscription and enjoy the big man’s sense of humour. We were his loyal army. Why didn’t we revolt? Why wasn’t there violence in the streets?

We were too polite. We respected our elders. We were easily scared by women who looked like our mothers. Despite the depths of despair which every true believer felt on the warm election night, we did nothing.

We did nothing when Johannes Bjelke-Petersen visited us in the lead-up to the election either. We’d seen his visit mentioned on the ABC – the usual source of our orders, which should satisfy a number of conspiracy theorists. He was speaking in a church hall in Waitara, or Warrabee or some other North Shore suburb with a musical name, inhabited by people who we considered to be fascist gardeners who’d got their wealth by ripping off the peasants. When we’d booed a bit someone told us to stop. “Sorry,” I said, and when the Ultimate Peanut walked right by me down the steps he reminded so much of my father I wanted to offer him some fruit. Revolutionaries should be made of sterner stuff. The conservatives certainly were. We consoled

ourselves by going back to our dirt-cheap rented home in Lindfield, and threatened the neighbourhood by playing ‘Chunga’s Revenge’ so that it was distorted. We’d get him next time.

We plotted revolution through fancy dress parties. We tried to recruit supporters to Labor by sitting on the front verandah and drinking lots of beer while bankers, accountants, lawyers and police officers hurried by from the station. They ignored our subtle hints. Our milkman, about the same age as ourselves, was less obscure in his response to our urgings. He put an obscene note in our letterbox which left no doubt that he hated the great man. Our crew-cutted real estate agent had said that the Labor Party hated the small businessman. From the content of the note we could sense that the feeling was mutual. We bought our milk from the shop in protest.

We contented ourselves by pasting up pictures of the local Liberal candidate, John Connolly, in the toilet, and looking hard at it while we did things. That’d show’em. Connolly lasted another twenty years from the election-night Armageddon we were planning. Our voodoo tactics were not successful.

The election had gone well for us, until the results came through. A clear swing to the conservatives. Our election-night party rapidly subsided into a wake. The lights went out, literally and metaphorically. People arrived at our house, peered through the open door (all property is theft, and besides we’d lost the key), came down the long hall to a dim womb, lit only by the contorted black and white images on the television squawking bad karma in the corner. The members of the household, or

cadres as we were called, were all sprawled about the darkened room shrieking abuse at the television. Phil Lynch, the CIA, John Kerr, Tirath Khemlani, resident psephologists, all got their blast. The odd thing was that most of our guests were natty young Liberal supporters come armed with bottles of fizzy grog to celebrate the destruction of god. They all left for more sympathetic surrounds. We took to the streets, or at least those of us without girlfriends did. Those with girlfriends sensibly retired to darkened rooms to plot revolution. In the phantasms of emotions I thought it would be a good idea to paint anti-Fraser slogans on my VW Fastback and drive around enemy territory.

The next morning the slogans did not seem such a good idea. They advertised failure as well as reducing the value of the car to around ten per cent of what it had been before the paint job. The whole suburb of Lindfield looked smugly triumphant. Even the magnificent purple jacarandas looked malignant to me as I tried to remove the paint and preserve the duco. Revolution would have to wait, but a trigger was nearly supplied by a lady who looked like my mother.

"Do you live in there?" She accused. She seemed to be leading a gang of similarly aged citizens, clutching their shopping bags and staring in disapproval. Her question was a declaration of war. The thought police were starting to round up the suspects. I expected to be taken to the football pitch in Bannockburn Road for re-education.

I'd often wondered what the bakers, accountants, business people and professional had thought of the four young hairies who'd rented the fine old house at the top of the

street, blasting music, huge parties, pyramids of beer cans and soccer in the front yard in the middle of the night. Before our occupation, an old lady had lived and died there in quiet isolation. Now the accusation of living there came from what was clearly a Liberal supporter, the previous night's victory having given her courage. She let fly. We were, in her eyes, trouble makers, riff-raff, lowering property values and scaring the wildlife. Flowers had died because of us. Our music was disgustingly loud, we were everything she abhorred and should be cast down with the other demons. In short – we were Labor supporters. The disapproval on the faces of her gang members grew to thundercloud proportions. It could have been the spark for revolution, a sort of unprovoked Cossack charge into peaceful demonstrators in front of the Winter Palace. We were clearly trapped in enemy territory, unarmed as well.

But there was no violence. "Sorry," I said regularly throughout the tirade of abuse and slunk inside to turn down 'Bongo Fury' or whatever it was we were playing. "It's the end," I announced to the emerging members of the household. We shut down operations and hid. The front verandah was left empty for the first time in twelve months. A troupe of elder citizens had stopped us with a few words. I was glad she hadn't given me a good clip around the ear. It was year zero. There were shock troops on the street. Conscription would be in again. We'd probably try to re-invade Vietnam. Traditional values had triumphed. That night we were raided. The Lindfield ladies came back.

A delegation of women, some of whom had been there in the

morning, returning to gloat, no doubt. Their actual words are lost in the mists of time, but broadly speaking they said that they knew what had been said to me that morning, that they totally disagreed with it, that it was nice to see young people enjoying themselves, that there was more light, colour and noise in the street than ever before, and that they felt safer with us there, running about in gorilla suits and scoring own goals at midnight than when dark shadows shrouded the huge lawns, and everyone looked suspicious, and that whatever our political eccentricities, we were polite. As for the music, they couldn't hear too well anyway. They knew we must be grieving the loss of our hero, so they gave us a bottle of wine to say 'no hard feelings'. It was a nice speech. We were open for business again. We played 'Hot Rats' at force ten to celebrate.

IT IS YEARS LATER. The Bent Street household are all stout professionals who'd call the police if yahoos like us started acting up next door. The ladies we encountered would be even quieter than before. But they taught us a lesson in tolerance which is still important today. The true Australian spirit may be that tolerance, that and the fact that revolutionaries could be stopped when they were asked to turn down the music. Gough and Mal share forums on television now. The house in Bent Street has been renovated and is impossibly expensive to rent. The old VW was stolen and stripped from outside the Hordern Pavilion while we were at a Frank Zappa concert, oddly enough. Even Frank's dead of prostate cancer now. Hopefully the tolerance remains.

Report from the West

Susan Hayes

THE END OF 1998 found me involved in one of those long debates we delight in over here, on the isolation of Western Australia and its artistic community ("Isolated from where?" Elizabeth Jolley once asked). I was told by one of our more successful writers that it's all happening in Melbourne and Sydney, that no-one has ever heard of a West Australian writer and the best way of promoting our talent would be to send it away. I entertained dismal visions of the Indian Pacific train crossing the Nullarbor, loaded with writers, perhaps with the Australia Council logo painted on selected carriages; perhaps with one of those Thomas the Tank Engine faces cheerfully smiling in an easterly direction. Writers' Centres would close down and I would be out of a job, forced to look for work in a bank or one of those other economically rational establishments so loved by our Premier.

A coffee at Gino's, on the cappuccino strip of Fremantle, with my colleague Clive Newman from Fremantle Arts Centre Press soon sorted me out. Clive, with Ray Coffey and Helen Kirkbride, one of the founders of this wonderful publishing house, is far and away the most optimistic person I know and usually turns up for coffee dates brandishing brilliant book reviews for his authors or amazing details of the Press's latest successes at some international Book Fair.

He reassures me that it's all a nonsense. Western Australia has its own writing community and Fremantle Arts Centre Press (he reminds me again) is widely

recognized as the most successful regional publishing house in the country. Elizabeth Jolley and Tim Winton still manage to scrape a living and in 1998 our writers, despite clinging to the western coast, managed to win a respectable number of national awards. Deborah Robertson's short story collection *Proudflesh* took the Steele Rudd, Morgan Yasbincek's poetry book, *Night Reversing* won the Mary Gilmour Award for the best first book of poetry and then the Anne Elder Prize. Elaine Forrestal wrote the National Book Council's Children's Book of the Year and John Kinsella (OK, he does live in Cambridge most of the time, but he still publishes in WA) won more prizes than you can shake a stick at. John is also a marvellous ambassador for Australian writers in the UK, working tirelessly and unselfishly to bring new writers to the attention of British readers.

"You're right Clive." I sigh with relief and order another couple of coffees: "Decaf for my friend".

This, of course, is a bit smug and only part of the picture. Sensibly, we do acknowledge the need to take our writers out into the world, particularly the newer names. From my own position as WA's State Literature Officer, the past two years have been more concerned with looking north and west than east. I was the fortunate recipient of three consecutive years' funding from the British Council, British Airways and ArtsWA to set up an exchange program between Edith Cowan University and the University of East Anglia where we swap one young, talented writer each year. In 1998 Morgan Yasbincek went to the UK, while Edith Cowan University was pleased to host Esther Morgan, a

gifted English poet who made friends and impressed people wherever she went. Selection is currently underway for the 1999 program.

We have also commenced negotiations with the National Book Council of Singapore and publishing organizations in South Africa to take an Expo of West Australian publishing to Singapore and Durban. ArtsWA already runs a writer exchange program with South Africa and we hope it won't be too long before an exchange with Singapore can be established. These are challenging new markets and from our geographical location it makes good sense for our writers to cross cultures in this way. When we do look east, Varuna is a favoured destination for WA writers and I would be delighted to hear of similar opportunities in other parts of Australia.

At the same time, it would be absurd not to acknowledge and foster a strong, local writing community. To see Western Australia as a 'literary suburb' of Sydney is patently absurd to those of us who live here. It is certainly difficult for our writers to make contact with the larger publishing houses and literary agencies who operate out of Sydney and Melbourne and, to a certain extent, to keep up with new trends and styles in writing. However, new writers in this State are helped considerably by the presence of Fremantle Arts Centre Press and the University of Western Australia Press, who have a policy of publishing WA writers. Other artforms over here do not have this advantage. Despite the presence of the WA Academy of Performing Arts, more and more actors, dancers and singers are heading east to find

work, as a stasis in State government funding to local companies makes it more economically viable for our theatres to host blockbuster interstate productions. Whatever happened to Margaret Seares' vision for 'West Coast Arts' and the promotion of a West Australian artistic identity? Black Swan Theatre and the WA Ballet have both been through funding crises in the past twelve months and neither is yet out of the woods.

Within the bounds of an equally precarious funding situation, our writing community does its best. Three suburban writers' centres: Peter Cowan House in the northern suburbs, Katharine Susannah Prichard House in the hills and Tom Collins House on the coast, are working together to provide both emerging and established writers, both local and visitors from interstate, with a location for meetings, workshops and residencies. Unlike the other States and Territories we have found that in Western Australia it works better to spread these resources, rather than rely on one mid-town writers' centre. My own position of State Literature Officer centralizes the advocacy and promotional side of things and we meet together on a regular basis to coordinate our various programs. Regional Literature Officer, Jacqui Wright, works out of Broome to cover the vast Kimberley and Pilbara regions up north. The Perth Writers' Festival grows each year and the lively new 'Down South' Festival in Busselton's wine-growing area has now reached the stage where writers from the East beg to be invited.

So perhaps we won't charter the train just yet.

The launch of *The Katherine's Comin' Down*

Australia Day 1999, Katherine NT

Marian Devitt

I BEGAN MY WORKING YEAR ON Australia Day with a trip to Katherine for the launch of *The Katherine's Comin' Down*, a collection of personal accounts from survivors of the devastating Australia Day flood in 1998. This project and the resulting publication is an excellent example of the value of an appropriately motivated community writing project. The local Katherine writers' group, the Katherine Region of Writers (known as KROW) decided that a collection of personal accounts from survivors of the flood would be an important historical document. It would also be an opportunity for survivors to have their extraordinary stories heard beyond the confines of this relatively remote region. The process of recording and writing these stories became a therapeutic one for the town of Katherine and the region, a significant means of bearing witness to the complete devastation of the town and the down-river communities and the months of valiant endeavour to reassemble a life out of the mud and slime and loss after one of the biggest floods in the region in recorded history.

The project coordinator and then President of KROW, Lori Martin, had an unshakeable belief in the worth and success of the project. Lori was spared the full brunt of the flood as she works at Barunga, an Aboriginal community some distance from Katherine that remained relatively untouched. The fact that she was spared the trauma convinced her

that she had a mission to contribute in some tangible way to her community. She had the resources (and the support of her employer at Barunga Community Education Centre) and most certainly the will to see the project through within a very tight timeframe. Her vision was shared by the membership of KROW who helped wherever they could in the process, despite the ongoing difficulty of Lori being at a distance from Katherine and most KROW members having been personally affected by the flood.

The book is a compelling read. One hundred and five stories are told, with contributions from local people, RAAF staff, Emergency Services and medical personnel, children and many others. It is not a glossy 'heroic' account of the flood. The stories encompass a range of reactions, attitudes and points of view about the experience. The stories and poetry have been lightly edited and this gives the book a tone of authenticity that would not have come through had the writing been more closely edited. Many contributors have found a new enjoyment in writing and it will be interesting to see how many continue to pursue this interest after seeing their work in print.

Whenever I look at the cover of the book showing the flooded main street I am astonished to think how far over my head the water would have been at the very spot where I stepped off the bus at the BP Service Station on Australia Day '99. It is hard to comprehend that there could have been so much water engulfing the town. A local cafe has tide marks on the walls with photos of the interior when the water receded. It is an astonishing achievement that one can now do something as normal

as order a coffee and read the local paper. The clean-up and refurbishment of the town has been undertaken in record time and, on a superficial level, many people are approaching 1999 with a sense of life being back to some semblance of normalcy. However a number of people I spoke to were very anxious about the Wet Season. The shower that finally broke the overwhelming heat that afternoon was viewed with some ambivalence and trepidation. As with any trauma, the imprint of the experience will last a lifetime but one thing the Katherine people have in abundance is resilience, even though many are still battling with insurance claims and are still displaced. As we sweltered under the tin roof of the pavilion at the Katherine Showground the sales figures soared; 333 books in three hours with a brief respite for the actual speeches and acknowledgements of the launch. Lori has already distributed a significant number of books around the Territory and a second and possibly third print-run is planned. For those who would like to order a copy the collection sells for \$20 plus postage. Orders can be placed by contacting the Katherine Region of Writers, PO Box 2155 Katherine NT 0851.

Magazine Wrack

Nathan Hollier

I'M SURE PAUL JAMES spoke for many people when he described a reluctance to listen to news reports on the morning after the election of 3 October 1998 (Editorial, *Arena* 37). I couldn't bear to watch that morally bankrupt trumped-up schoolboy

deliver his victory speech. But as Channel Ten's screening of *Don's Party* was interrupted I found myself unable to turn away, mesmerized with revulsion, as he began to talk about the significance of the result in terms diametrically opposed to all he stood for during the campaign, all he stands for now, all he has ever stood for. As James put it, "With all the charisma of a tax collector trying to look like an economist, Mr Howard spoke of values such as egalitarianism, tolerance, benefit to others and reconciliation, values that had barely been mentioned over the previous five weeks". This election, wrote James, exemplified the reduction of politics in Australia to a "mediated battle between spin doctors and party machines". Perhaps I was imagining it, but I could not remember a campaign, or a time, when the gap between truth and public statement was stretched so much by politicians and accommodated so fully by the mainstream media.

Howard's 'shareholders' democracy' is an oxymoron. The top 10 per cent of Australian income units hold 90 per cent of the shares of private investors. Almost two thirds of that is held by the top one per cent (*The Age*, 15 October 1998). Wealth in Australia is drastically stratified and rapidly becoming more so, a process directly assisted by federal government policies. While it moves in to kill off publicly funded universities and schools, a recent study confirms that class remains the biggest single factor in gaining access to university (*The Australian*, 23 September 1998). The remnants of the CES network are soon to disappear it seems, and Howard has called for business to bear more of the burden of community welfare,

part of his continuing and depressingly successful effort to link social opportunity to wealth. Now the young unemployed are to have their payments cut if they 'refuse' to pass a literacy test. This structural and ideological element of the Liberal Party platform is apparently lost on the great majority of highly paid and supposedly informed political commentators.

A number of the small magazines seek to interpret and engage with deeper motivations and effects of public discourse, daring to consider different terms of reference to the depoliticized managerialisms of the politicians themselves and their media handmaidens. Ted Wheelwright has long been of the opinion that the most pressing need in Australian society is for a greater understanding of economic issues and analysis. One of the places where Wheelwright continues to publish is the *Journal of Australian Political Economy*. Edited by Frank Stilwell, *JAPE* provides cogent and accessible theoretical analysis of current policy issues. Similar in some ways but having a broader cultural agenda is the *Australian Rationalist*, journal of a society that "prefers reason to prejudice, science to superstition, evidence to faith; promotes secular ethics and education; holds lectures, conferences and social activities".

The *Australian Rationalist* until recently edited by Kenneth Davidson, one of the few media commentators who, while not left-wing, is nevertheless highly critical of economic rationalism. So there is a currency between the language of and perspectives on political economy promoted in these two journals, as well as a desire to reach an audience that is not necessarily

technically trained but is interested in the terminology that invariably accompanies social policy.

Was it Samuel Johnson who said the only thing nobody feels short-changed in is common-sense? One problem with a Society of rational people is that what is self-evident to one person may be less clear-cut to others. Beatrice Faust's assessment of Paul Sheehan's *Among the Barbarians* (*Australian Rationalist* 47) as "assisting democracy by providing the sorts of criticisms that can lead to fine tuning", fails to analyze Sheehan's argument in the context of Australia's highly unrepresentative public sphere. Sheehan's arguments contribute to the present re-positioning of certain intolerant Anglo-Australian values at the centre of social discussion. David Carter assessed Peter Coleman's recent *Courier Mail* 'exposé' of communist Australian writers as one of the fronts of this struggle: "the same contemporary issue that drove along the anti-Manning Clark campaign . . . the arts and history faculties dominated by left-wingers, apologists for the communists of an earlier generation, and now, no doubt, in favour of feminism, multiculturalism, post-modernism . . ." (*overland* 153). Paddy McGuinness makes this claim even more explicitly, arguing that "red diaper babies", children of former members of the Communist Party, were amongst those members of "political elites . . . actively involved" in a "wave of propaganda and media sympathy" for the wharfies during last year's dispute (December *Quadrant*). In the same editorial he falsely claims that Coleman and Donald Horne did not know that *Quadrant* was funded indirectly by the CIA – but then what else is there

to say about McGuinness that is not actionable.

Various authors in the little magazines have sought to explain the reappearance of public racism in connection with Pauline Hanson. Vera Butler provides a useful international context for understanding this process and makes the point that racism is not peculiar to particular cultures but rather appears, or may appear, at moments of stress and insecurity: "Economic hardships make people everywhere receptive to fear-mongering and incitement to violence, and neo-fascist agitators foster popular perceptions of outsiders as the culprits, whereas critical systemic fault-lines pass unnoticed and remain unchallenged" (*Australian Rationalist* 47). A local example is given by Peter Pierce, in a review of Bill Metcalfe's study of three 1890s Queensland communes: "Some who came to Gayndah out of a communalist idealism of the left in politics, stayed on to become the ancestors – in fact and in principle – of parties of the right" (*ABR* 206). The connection Butler draws between the culture of individualism, inseparable from the economic rationalism of the past fifteen years, and the fear of outsiders, the 'competition', is echoed by Angela Mitropoulos in *overland* 153. Colin Richardson provides an explanation for the continuing dominance of this ideology against the material interests of the majority of Australians. Richardson discusses the work of Fred Argy, who "identifies a loose coalition of powerful interests pushing this policy agenda: traditional free-market business groups (in commerce, mining, farming), powerfully reinforced by the surging

finance industries; the Howard Government, its minders and favoured think-tanks; senior econocrats in Treasury, Finance and the Reserve Bank; and international bodies like the Bank for International Settlements, IMF, OECD, and World Trade Organization. The more their hard-line message is spin-doctored to the 'political journalists, journalists reporting economic news and the talk-show hosts' in the popular media by this coalition of economic rationalists, the better can public opinion be moulded to perceive a high degree of 'economic correctness' in their extremist economic policies" (*Australian Rationalist* 47).

Vincent Matthews, former political editor of the Melbourne *Herald*, argues that the media is comprised of many individuals struggling to meet work commitments, so that it merely "represents by and large what the community is thinking, doing and believing" (*Eureka Street* 8:8). His partial defence of the media as a relatively open space finds some common ground with the analyses of Catherine Lumby. In October's *AQ*, Lumby suggests that the tendency of the postmodern media to make public issues of private actions (referring particularly to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal) derives from the relative success of left-wing efforts to politicize personal actions. To what extent victims of familial abuse benefit from media scandals about the private lives of celebrities is not clear, but Lumby is not troubled by what she believes is the disappearance of distinctions between what happens and what the media represents: "It's a time when media no longer simply reports on politics but has come to

define the shape and substance of politics itself . . . The popular media doesn't encourage sustained argument, logical progressions or respect for expertise. It's a rapidly changing montage of images and ideas in which attractive, lively and charismatic people are given far more space than measured and verbose experts." Lumby does not examine whether particular groups may be over-represented in the ranks of the attractive, lively and charismatic, or what part the structure of media ownership might play in this situation, or indeed whether or not a media commentator such as herself could play an active part in disseminating an alternative discourse.

These questions are, however, taken up by Mark Davis in the same issue: "As media ownership has concentrated, the media has increasingly served the interests of economic globalization and become increasingly conservative at the same time . . . If the media is so full of its own populist spectacle that newspapers are surprised to discover things are different, then this is a sick, wicked culture in both the contemporary and more conventional sense of the words" (AQ 70:5). Davis goes on to emphasize the capacity of people, and not only those in the 'intellectual sphere', to change themselves and their society: "All the things I've spoken about are things that can be overcome because they are things 'we' as a wider community have in some way consented to." In contrast, McGuinness, and, here, his *Quadrant* editorial predecessor Robert Manne, see Hansonism simply as the inevitable dissatisfaction of "the ordinary people" with the intellectuals, the cultural "elites"

(AQ 70:5). In line with the approach of the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* and the *Australian Rationalist*, Davis is interested in encouraging discussion between and a recognition of mutual interests amongst the many groups victimized by "the global politics of division, with its tendency to progressively disenfranchise and demonize people on the basis of how far they are from the notional ethnic, cultural, economic and political centres".

Ian Turner, a founder of *overland*, once wrote that after leaving the Communist Party, he ceased attempting to act as a "host" to the Australian left, and was instead "invited to become a member of a united front". Turner was also instrumental in the founding of *Arena*, but there seems a tendency in that journal of late to seek to reclaim the host's role. The often referred to but rarely articulated *Arena* thesis holds that the intellectual work found within the university is the prototype of the network, the true or most likely basis of political resistance in a post-industrial era (E. Aarons and Geoff Sharpe, 'Dialogue: Globalization and the Left', *Arena Journal*, no.9, 1997; Sharpe and Doug White, 'Features of the Intellectually Trained', *Arena* no.15, 1967). To what extent this is true may be debated, and has been in specialist journals of sociology and social theory. In recent issues of the magazine however, Davis, Davidson, and Stuart Macintyre in an *overland* piece on the 1998 wharf disputes, have been construed as 'the enemy'. Similarly, Alison Caddick takes a swipe at the "self-conscious 'class' allegiances" of academics (*Arena Magazine* 37). At a time of massively increasing income inequality, where institutions of education, as others,

face an unsure future, the absence of public discourse on class would appear to indicate the strength of class structures as means of ordering society. As Wendy Lowenstein writes: "Class is not just about income, it's not just about education either, or where you live, or what your parents did. It's about what you believe, where your loyalties are, who you identify with. Above all, it's about where you line up when the chips are down . . ." Though you might not find this particular mode of expression in a journal of social theory, it remains no less valuable.

Poets Overboard, Again

Duncan Richardson

CARS LINED THE STREETS on the first day of the second Queensland Poetry Festival in August 1998 and some of the drivers/passengers were inside the South Brisbane Sailing Club to hear or read poetry. The rowing regatta upstream may have added to the swell but let fools get hooked on numbers. Even the Water Police cruised by at regular intervals.

Publicity for and coverage of the event was increased greatly in 1998, with a substantial piece in the *Courier Mail*, items on local radio and ABC Radio National using selected readings for a 'Poetica' program the following week. This resulted from approaches made by Festival organizer Brett Dionysius to the ABC and gave the event national exposure.

This year saw more panel discussions and proportionately fewer readings, borrowing from the recent format at Adelaide Writers Week, with several In the Flesh sessions, focused on the work of one

or two guests. In the nature of the panel beast, some of these worked well while others, hosted by chairs with less preparation behind them, fell rather flat and the poets in question looked distinctly uncomfortable.

There were more interstate readers this year, with Anthony Lawrence making a return visit, plus Dorothy Porter, Peter Bakowski, Bev Braune and Tom Shapcott among others. Poets from the rest of Queensland also featured prominently again. Of the voices new to me, Colin Campbell and Lilian Tait were most impressive, both with work unadorned by pretence and strongly based in the grit of daily life.

The spread of venues was productive, with the State Library, Art Gallery and Boundary Street pubs hosting fringe events and attracting different audiences. This also spread the festival over two weeks, which put strains on resources and made the impact of the overall program too diffuse. On the positive side, more local writing groups were able to take part and some of these performed combinations of music and poetry. An increase in funding made the expansion possible with support coming from the Brisbane City Council, the Queensland Arts Office and the Australia Council. As a souvenir of the occasion, the latest edition of *Small Packages* included a poem from most of the poets participating. *Small Packages* is a locally published pocket-sized poetry magazine, produced by Rob Morris and Francis Boyle and available for \$6 from PO Box 244, Carina, Q 4152.

Since the Festival, various stories have percolated back over the Tweed about similar events in Sydney and Newcastle, which, even allowing for

parochial perspectives, suggest the Queensland Festival compares very well and is getting a lot of things right. Not least is the main venue, which doesn't close up on people before readings are over. Despite the perennial poets-going-over-time problem or occasional ticket hassles, the program generally runs smoothly and drunken debauchery is kept to a bare minimum.

One of the indirect achievements of the Festival is its influence on the Brisbane Writers Festival, which in 1997 almost ignored poetry. Last year, several sessions of readings, discussions and launches were included, though a prominent poet such as Tom Petsinis appeared only as a prose writer and Merlinda Bobis was billed more as an unspecified performer, with no mention of her work as poetry on the published program. Anyone would think 'poetry' was a dirty word. This impression was reinforced by the final reading being programmed at the same time as the BWF party and sausage sizzle, including loud music to drown out the readers. The din was turned down, after complaints.

After two years, the QPF looks set to become a regular landmark on the literary landscape and not only on the local level. This year, events will be held across a spread of venues, mostly in the Valley. Let's hope the early closing problems don't arise. In their own way, the organizers, a small group of volunteers, are making a considerable contribution to the fight against economic rationalism, as represented by the slick glibness of the big festivals and the current push against poetry or anything else that involves thought.

Since the festival, the *Courier Mail* has dropped poetry from its review pages, after a long period of

sporadic publication. This is a significant loss in terms of widening readership and lifting the profile of poetry in Queensland.

Another loss has been the Queensland Arts Council's Writing Officer, a position recently dissolved after several years of work to develop regional networks, publications and events such as the Writers Safari. Local writer Eluned Lloyd achieved a great deal in the job, starting from scratch, giving the QAC a presence in writing. A statement from QAC claims that literature will still be represented but it is now part of a shared portfolio. The lack of a specialist, involved coordinator is bound to mean that writing will, once again, be largely ignored by this major, state-funded arts body.

On the credit side, the poetry venues continue to flourish and the small presses are keeping the new books coming, titles by Michael Sariban, Ross Clark and Rob Morris among them.

Dear Editor,

I HAVE HAD SOME valuable response from readers of my essay on Eric Lambert in the September 1998 issue. It contained which I should like to correct:

1) Vane Lindesay tells me that Lambert's 'local' where he drank with Brian Fitzpatrick was definitely the Swanston Family Hotel and *not* Mitre Tavern as cited by Zoe O'Leary in her biography of Lambert (*The Desolate Market*, 1974).

2) In regard to Lambert's friendship with Fitzpatrick, it seems that they were nowhere near as close as O'Leary implied. In Canberra

I searched Fitzpatrick's correspondence at the ANL, which is extensive, and found nothing at all between them. Both were prolific letter writers and it is reasonable to presume that there would have been some correspondence between them had they been at all close. Since there is just one, and that from Joyce Lambert thanking Fitzpatrick for helping with her 1955 visa, one can only suppose that they were friendly acquaintances at most.

Conversely, there is evidence of an extensive and friendly exchange between Lambert and Stephen Murray-Smith (Latrobe MS) over the period of what I call Lambert's English exile. In this correspondence, Murray-Smith attempted both to placate Lambert's wrath at his perceived mistreatment by his Australian peers and to cajole him into returning home, where SMS believed his contribution could be put to best effect. I have read much of SMS's correspondence (with Lambert and others) now and have quite fallen in love with the man for his enormous patience, loyalty and humanity. His care for writers and his concern and support for the welfare of Australian literature, including his wholehearted support of Clem Christesen and *Meanjin* during its most difficult days, is impressive in both its depth and integrity. His legacy lives on in *overland*.

I am particularly interested in any information that may shed light on the relationship between Lambert and Frank Hardy, especially the acrimony that developed. If any readers can assist I would be most grateful. I can be contacted via *overland*.

Teri Merlyn

Floating Fund

overland is, as ever, reliant on its loyal supporters for its continued viability. We would like to thank the following:

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carnival: new poetry

Kerry Leves

Lucy Dougan: *Memory Shell* (fip, \$8) Quite an experience. These poems handle their material – memory, the elusive ‘life of the mind’ – like no others. The sensibility is richly-toned. “There’s a door in the day/ and I’m knee deep in growing time.” The intellect is sinewy and rejects false comforts. “What ceases to be is not . . . / No act, no pilgrimage/ will ever bring it back/ and only imagination,/ that sly politician, would dupe you.”

John Bennett: *Albion/Australia: Field Notes* (fip, \$12.95) “Still legible to divers, the luminous dunes/ lie submerged as if held down by stones.” Topographical poetry as impassioned argument, informed by scientific knowledge and a love of the earth’s surface. Distinguished by ‘Surviving History’, about the quarantine station at the mouth of Sydney Harbour, and by vision constructed as lapidary tropes – the sea is “bevelled blue music”. But relentless; positions the reader as recipient more than participant.

M.T.C. Cronin: *The World Beyond The Fig* (fip, \$12.95) Writes the senses with a surrealist’s panache – “fat pigeon; laid on/ rich blue dish/ of a mazarine sky” – and the (female) body as both an inscription-site and a connotative language: “Her body unforgettably stopping/ only where bordered by my hands;/ under my lips everbearing strawberries and below,/ glossy in my fingers, vegetable silk”. Argues stylishly with its (constructed) Freud and Wittgenstein and if it leaves the faint sense that ‘She’ can do no wrong, reading this is a bit like going to a night carnival of masks and mazy dances and scented flesh – a good time, a scrappy, sensuous fable.

Peter Bakowski: *The Heart at 3 a.m.* (Hale & Iremonger, \$14.95) The poet as dharma bum? Mild, country-&-western type poems which, when “the heart” isn’t communing with itself, achieve some plangent, painterly social description. “Tugboats bully the river/ that will never reflect them as swans.” The inferred humanity may come to seem a bit narrowly-based.

Deborah Staines: *Now Millennium*; Sandy Jeffs: *Poems from the Madhouse* (Spinifex Press, \$16.95) Deborah Staines writes feet-on-the-ground-feminist pre-utopias: “the sit-with-women and talk business . . . / . . . we broke open living/ with the butt of our blades”. Sandy Jeffs powerfully creates madness as cultural institution and social inscape. Her vivid, cogent poetry fully conveys the harsh peremptoriness of insanity and is at the same time empoweringly sane. “. . . madwoman that I am,/ who scorns our history of abuse and misunderstanding,/ I wish to declare us the curators of our own psyches.” Her ‘On Looking at Millais’ Ophelia’ excavates the famous painting; her argument is at once ravishingly intimate and brilliantly convincing. She then recasts the work as a ‘language’ poem, finding in its lucidities a syntax and lexis of madness – this tour-de-force is a standout in a compelling book.

R.A. Simpson: *The Impossible* (fip, \$12.95) Fine production; cover features a woodcut by Simpson himself, and its quiet elegance cues us to the minimalism, which can evoke memory with startling precision – see ‘Kids: 1939’, ‘School Photo: 1941’, ‘The Bag and the Photo’. On occasion, time itself seems condensed – amusingly (‘The Duck’, ‘The Zoo’) or more poignantly: “Here he sees all that he feels/ as the moon is swallowed by darkness/ and the sweeping stormclouds drown the stars.”

Marjorie Pizer: *Await the Spring* (Pinchgut Press, \$14) Poetry of statement. The plainness seems to come from a created silence, and the poems deliver, calmly and modestly – “listen to the water lapping on the rocks./ The tall city buildings are softened in the summer mist . . .” – or with a certain antic charm: “I have filled a flower pot with earth/ And planted in it seeds of the Gynea lily . . . / I have watered them carefully/ And put them in the sun/ But all that has grown so far/ Is a tiny tomato plant”. Fourteenth book by veteran poet with a wide following.

Helen Horton: *All the Days of the World* (Boolarong Press, \$12.95) The opening seascapes are enviable – intense, near-tactile; you can just about smell the brine. Equally good on textures, colours of a land infinitely older than its human cultures. Less successful about people, who are often used as emblems – the romanticism becomes tendentious.

Adam Ford: *Not Quite the Man for the Job* (Allen & Unwin, \$12.95) Short-listed though. Stylish balladeer, occasional troubadour makes light of urban grunge, has some blokey fun breaking rules, and has-les on, into some nicely-underplayed mimesis (e.g. ‘Velocipede’). Cheerful, very competent, sometimes funny.

Gary Catalano: *Jigsaw* (Paper Bark Press, \$18.95) Gamely sets off into one of Zbigniew Herbert’s ballparks – the tight, allegorical prosepoem. “In talking to each other without fear of disturbance, these photographs are simply acknowledging the darkness out of which they were born.” Anti-modernist (see ‘Gallery Days’) book discusses notional representation – “a piece of wood in the shape of a whale”, a map of Africa which is/ isn’t “the real thing”. Constructs a fastidious, fossicking, rather preciously anomic sensibility.

‘The scythe honed fine’, A.D. Hope: *A Celebration for his 90th birthday* (National Library of Australia, \$12.95) Staggeringly good. Twelve key poems demonstrate Hope’s steely virtuosity, which never obtrudes. Instead the erudite, richly thoughtful poetry seems only apt – to be valued less as a national monument than a lively, percipient friend. David Brooks provides lucid biography and critique; photographs show the young poet’s physical handsomeness, and

the character and humour etched in the nonagenarian’s face.

Jane Williams: *Outside Temple Boundaries* (fip, \$8) Religiously-themed poems spark, develop a feminist argument in a Roman Catholic context. Strong enough to induce interest in more. The rest is not very imaginative, though redeemed by some spirited lines, e.g. “on Saturday/ I am made impossible/ by confession/ my soul a blank/ sandwich board/ advertising free space”.

Alistair Stewart: *Frankston 281* (fip, \$8) Positions us as media-heads and TV addicts by installing in our brains a multi-invocation of a suitably gruesome murder. Rumour-millers grind out sly, prurient conjecture; journalists beat it up, police tamp it down, amid “random interrogations/ of mainly the young/ for standing/ outside the cinema/ or/ walking/ or/ anything”. An adroit mix of registers gives this original an epic sweep. Who are we when we watch, read, listen to ‘the news’?

Jane Gibian: *The Body’s Navigation* (fip, \$8) “In the arms of the storm we inhale/ the heady smell of release . . .” Gibian’s people inhabit recognizable cities, but their relationship to the social formation – and each other – is not stable or predictable. The poet creates these neo-romantic lives with surprising wit and tact, and works her language to dissolve boundaries between private and public spaces. The wordsapes give the reader great associative freedom, and they shimmer: “unsentimental she buries/ the past daily, scattering/ photographs like read papers/ leaves of print layered/ indiscriminate . . .”

Peter Rose: *Donatello in Wangaratta* (Hale & Iremonger, \$16.95) Donatello? More like Watteau – the melancholy refinement, the wire-drawn concentration. “Something could have shattered in that hour,/ annunciations of an epoch/ in its glamorous cloister . . . / The oils, sensing something/ more transgressive than catalogue prose,/ thickened, intensified,/ two strangers were tantalised/ in that temple of exposure,/ impatient for the license of lobby,/ approbation of a red dot . . .” Not surprising that one of the most moving poems is an elegy for James Merrill. Like the American’s, this poetry has the feel of a hyper-civilized game played by aristocrats – played not to

win, but for its own sake. The delicate ingenuity of the language is a gift to a reader; the art makes bearable the book's deepening sadness. And the poem 'Mitternacht', with its fiercely mannered diction and arch rhymes, reverses the sombre tone. It's a destabilizing metaphysical joke, and it resonates.

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet.

Marxism? Stay Tuned

P.O.

Brad Evans (ed.): *RED LAMP* (self-published, \$5,
5 Kahana Court, Mountain Creek Q 4557).

ALMOST ALL THE CURRENT theories of literature being practiced today, have collectively stomped on the head of emotion in the name of modernism, or avant-gardeism, or progress, or (even) revolution. Their tone is almost universally 'cool'; their manner: 'careful', and above all 'analytically designed' to make its critic (not the poem, or its audience) the hero (or heroic). If you're sick of all those angst-ridden 'umms + arrs' surrounded by meaningful (and knowing) pauses intended to reach into the very essence of truth, then *RED LAMP* "A Journal of Realist, Socialist and Humanitarian Poetry" is for you (and me ✓). It is perhaps one of the bravest ventures in Australian poetry, running counter-clockwise to the present trend. It isn't interested in deconstructing but rather, in re-constructing a left-wing dialogue, that has had its fingers stomped on. The quality of the poetry in *RED LAMP* is literally 'moving!'; with poems by Jas H. Duke, Ashley Brown, M.T.C. Cronin, B.R. Dionysius, thalia, Lisa Greenaway, Denis Kevans, Jeltje, Caitlin Clarke, Denis Woodley to name a few (over the past four issues). Too often ventures like *RED LAMP* suffer from too much flag-waving; not so this! Brad Evans is a great editor; his selection is solidly chosen and he understands how to couch a poem before one. The poets being featured are almost always introduced to the audience (us) with a few thumbnail remarks, while any 'obscure', 'unusual', 'relevant' or 'irrelevant' references within the poem, authoritatively footnoted, to ease the cultural ignorance we may be all heir to, so that even an usually boring ballad-form can jump up off the page. Not



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that there are lots of ballads in it. The range is really quite broad! Contextualizing a poet, their poem, and its audience has literally by-passed many of the problems that have beset a lot of the magazines and journals today. The editorial process in *RED LAMP* certainly demands more of the editor's time and energy, making the editor a more active (and important) element in the rubric of poet/poem/transmitter/audience (with the critic residing in the audience itself). This is a magazine that is seriously fighting back! And all power to it! Too much Marxism is boring! Ditto Derrida! Foucault etc. and too much editorializing! Which this mag doesn't do. I imagine Brad Evans being capable of doing a fabulous anthology of Socialist, or Left-wing poetry. This is a magazine that deserves a lot of support. Its fruits are worth it! I know i sound like an 'ad', but i feel *RED LAMP* is at the forefront of a left-wing revival of sorts, assaulting all those boring theories that use the sign, signifiers and signifieds to mute any pleasure you may derive from the poem 'directly', it's a kind of propaganda by example if you like; the proof being in the eating. Stay tuned! Marxism was the first avant-garde; there's more spirit in it than we have been led to believe.

π.α. is a Melbourne poet and anarchist.

Critical Integrity & Political Frustration

Nathan Hollier

Veronica Brady: *South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright* (A&R, \$45).

Judith Wright: *Tales of a Great Aunt: A Memoir* (ETT Imprint, \$14.95).

JUDITH WRIGHT IS ONE of the very few household names of Australian poetry. When I was growing up I recall being aware of her, Banjo and Henry. I'd heard of C.J. Dennis because he was on a series of stamps but didn't encounter A.D. Hope or Les Murray until the final year of high school, Gwen Harwood before my first year at university. Like Paterson, Lawson, Hope and Murray, Wright has always sought a place for her writing within public discourse. She has written for a wide range of audiences in a number of genres and has fought with more than

words alone for enlightened and progressive social change. As Veronica Brady notes, Wright has always been "the champion not of things as they are but as they might be". In this sense she may be described as an idealist though one whose hopes for change derive from a profoundly sane view of the world. A great strength of Brady's work is that it gradually builds a picture of this body of belief, its spirit or ethos as well as its detail, and in so doing offers real insight into the character of Wright. For it is this personal and world view that helps to explain Wright's unflinching belief in and commitment to principles of social and ecological preservation.

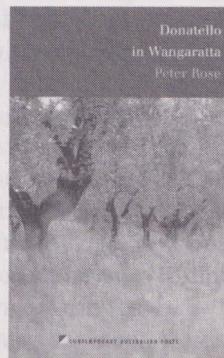
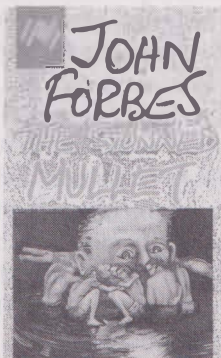
By the time this review appears, Brady's text will have been analyzed in the broadsheet press and most of the other places it is likely to gain attention. Reviewers have drawn attention to minor typographical errors, instances of repetition and an inconvenient, even annoying reference system. John Manifold is also erroneously referred to as "founder of the Realist Writers". Manifold's Brisbane group followed the establishment of the original Melbourne Realist Writers. Personally, I felt that though few sections offered self-evident examples of superfluous material, a larger portrait could have been drawn of Judith Wright's world. One of the challenges faced by Brady was to draw out the complex process by which Wright and her writings have occupied such a prominent role in Australian society and culture, how she became a household name. A text can't do everything however and as a biography rather than a social history this one provides invaluable material for further historical and literary study. If it is ultimately a little too dependent on Wright's own sources, the narrative remains illuminating and, particularly via the last chapter, full of Wright's inspiring passion and pathos.

Born in 1915 to a long-established family of New England graziers, Wright developed a love of the environment, her "blood's country", from an early age. As a young woman she had rare opportunities to live independently, to gain qualifications at university and to travel overseas. During the Second World War she obtained experience and further confidence through a central position with Sydney's Air Raid Precautions Centre, through managing three stations on her father's property and from 1943 as a clerk with the Australian Universities Commission in Brisbane. The call of the new journal *Meanjin* for an "economically just,

democratically free, educationally wide and morally strong" Australia fitted her own developing sensibility. Her poetry began to appear regularly in this journal and after writing in 1943 to the editor, Clem Christesen, praising *Meanjin* and its staff (Christesen in fact had none), she became the unpaid secretary. Though Christesen reputedly found it difficult to accept that Wright's creative input was of greater value than her secretarial duties, through the magazine Wright met a number of stimulating literary, artistic and other intellectual groups and individuals. Among these was Jack McKinney, with whom she was later to have a child, Meredith, and to marry. A First World War veteran with obligatory physiological and psychological scars, McKinney was somewhat unconventional in personal life as well as in his courageous attempt to re-imagine the basis of Western philosophy. Brady stresses throughout her biography the extent to which Wright's life and work were influenced and given meaning by McKinney's personal and intellectual independence. Though a highly personable and likeable man, McKinney was not controlled by what other people thought. He strongly believed, and Wright has never lost faith in his contention, that Western society must find a new and harmonious way of relating to humankind and the natural environment, must cease the exploitative and competitive drives that ultimately threaten human existence itself. Like many people who lived through or with the effects of the two world wars, the presence of the atomic bomb seemed to Wright and McKinney the conclusive argument against the capitalist imperatives to compete and conquer. Moreover, in the face of the problems of Western society, the rewards of the new, postwar consumerism seemed to Wright, as to Dorothy Hewett in her 1958 novel *Bobbin Up*, to be illusory, a "fairytale". Wright's realistic idealism remains evident in her recent criticism of Prime Minister John Howard as incapable of facing "reality and the problems thereof".

The generations that grew up unable to remember a world before the atomic bomb made everything relative, may not immediately grasp Wright's heightened sense of the vulnerability and fragility of physical, social and political systems. Her developing political awareness led her into environmental and Aboriginal causes. There were some spectacular early successes, on the environmental front at least, in particular the saving of the Barrier Reef from

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mining despite Joh Bjelke-Petersen's familiar description of those involved as "Communists", working "to overthrow the Australian way of life". Public feeling was developing behind her causes and newspapers like *The Australian* and *The Canberra Times* provided significant support, hard as this may be to believe today. Wright formed valuable friendships and support networks with the public servant H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs and environmentalists like John Busst, Arthur Fenton and Len Webb, as well as with Aboriginal writers and activists such as Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo Noonuccal), Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis. She was a founding member, with her good friend Kathleen McArthur and David Fleay, of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. The Society merged with the Australian Conservation Foundation in 1966, the year of McKinney's death. With the help of Coombs and others the Aboriginal Treaty Committee was formed in 1978. In the meantime her writing moved from the relatively celebratory depiction of white settlement in *The Generations of Men* (1959) to the highly critical *Cry for the Dead* (1981).

In the late 1930s she met Gough Whitlam on a train and made a bet with him that he would become Prime Minister. Like Manning Clark and other intellectuals of their generation, Wright was initially very optimistic about the Whitlam government. Its promised social changes were in accord with the egalitarianism, respect for cultural difference and interest in social justice that Brady makes clear were to Wright and her circle central planks, and not mere add-ons, 'if we've got the money', of appropriate social and economic policy.

The hopes of this period were dashed by forces within and outside the Whitlam government and Brady traces Wright's increasing bitterness with processes of public policy and change after this time. The picture that emerges of Wright the person is of a not overtly happy and engaging soul, irritated at times by others' personal weakness or hypocrisy and distrusting of gushing displays of affection, extravagant promises of support. Wright was an early critic of a 'spin-doctored' world and culture, backing her own professed care with hard cash where possible and careful to judge governments and other supposedly benign groups and organizations on a similar basis. Separated from mainstream society in part by choice (she has lived mainly on rural properties in New South Wales, Queensland and the ACT) and in

part by circumstance (including her deteriorating hearing), Wright's life seems to have been characterized by critical integrity and political frustration.

Recently, a documentary on the Waco incident in the United States has received a deal of attention for its revelation of the ways that powerful organizations are able to enforce the consequences of their version of reality on others, partly through force and partly through the shallowness of the news media. If I recall correctly an Australian journalist was given an award for his portrayal of the 'weirdos and sickos' of Waco, when the more significant impetus for the tragedy has been identified within arms of the US government. The fact that the popular impression bears no relation to reality makes little difference however, since the media is only concerned with the immediate and government is able to enforce its version of history so long as it can win the public relations war in the short term. Fortunately Wright did not meet the fate of the people in the Waco compound, though she has suspected surveillance by ASIO and/or other right-wing bodies for many years. But sitting in the quiet of her country residence she must have been infuriated witnessing the innumerable times that governments, multinationals and other organizations capable of accessing public speech, have sold their explicitly and consciously untrue version of reality to the Australian people. As Brady narrates of just one example:

Judith was 'driven and despondent' about the political situation . . . One of the first acts of the new Howard Government had been to attack [the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission] ATSIC, accusing its members of irregularities in its financial dealings and setting up an extended investigation. The investigation's report, when it appeared, found that ATSIC was better run and more financially responsible than most other government departments but the damage had been done in the public's mind – the report was not publicized nearly as widely as the allegations. To add to her worries she believed that mining and pastoral interests were gearing up for a new attack on Aboriginal rights.

How right she was of course, for unlike groups such as the Wilderness Society, Wright had developed an historical sense of the fact that conservative social

forces never accept that their own behaviour may play a part in creating social inequality. The problem always belongs to the group doing the complaining.

During the 1980s and after, Wright distanced herself from a number of organizations with which she had played a crucial early role, among them the WPSQ. As Brady relates, such decisions were never, or never purely made for personal reasons. Rather, the concern of Wright, Coombs and others of their generation for broad-based social change did not fit with prevailing modes of political and environmental activism within and outside of the university, still less with the individualist materialism of those she termed the "Conrats", the economic rationalists. In 1995, when Coombs was sick and in hospital for the last time, Wright attempted "to compile a list of all the organizations and programs in which she had been involved with Coombs, not only as a tribute but also because it seemed important to her to keep alive the vision of public service by which he had lived". The 'inclusive' approach to intellectual and grassroots campaigns, in which the perspectives of all people are supposedly equally valid, was identified by Wright as an insufficient means of redressing social injustices that have their roots in history. She argued for example that in the case of the environment, non-Aboriginal Australians needed not only to include the local Aborigines in discussion (the 'add-on social justice' idea) but to take their perspective as the starting point of discussion, because they actually know the most about the environment and the problems it faces. Where New Age impulses tended to lead to an occlusion of Aboriginal voices from political campaigns, and trends within the university to a separation of the academic from the active political struggle, Wright consciously adopted the perspective (though not the identity) of Aboriginal people in many of her campaigns and writings.

The present period is a bad time for Judith Wright to have to live in her old age. As her friend Dorothy Green said, "old age is no place for cissies". A measure of her courage is her capacity to look to the future. Wright's *Tales of a Great Aunt* was apparently written for her grandchildren but would be of interest to most kids between about eight and twelve, I would think. With characteristic seriousness she confides near the beginning of the book: "War has been a horror of my life, and I don't know if I've ever really recovered from that. Why should I after all?" It is an

interesting memoir that conveys the attraction of a rural upbringing and demonstrates, as Wright hoped, "how different it is today" for children growing up. According to Brady, Wright feels that the wheel has swung so forcefully back to ignorance and injustice that all people of good conscience must live with a kind of "heart pain, world pain". For this same reason *South of My Days* is a particularly important work.

Nathan Hollier is overland's associate editor.

Love in Blue?

Leigh Dale

Coral Hull: *How Do Detectives Make Love* (Penguin, \$19.95).

HOW DO DETECTIVES MAKE LOVE is about animals, urban landscapes, and human cruelties, a world of work, death and torture. The poet has identified herself as the speaker of a suite of poems about her life and attitudes – the back cover announces the contents as "fiercely autobiographical". This is a life fractured by memories of violence, anguish and conflict, the dominating human presence being the speaker's father, a detective. The shadow of "gary robert hull" hangs over family rituals and experiences just like the slop of his carnivorous pleasures stains his face and clothing. In the title poem the focus is on the relationship between mother and father, as the speaker wonders

*was my mother's body the autopsy or the
imitation pornography from his blue movie/ & was
his penis the .38 automatic or the black baton that
he used to strike out with/ was their martial bed
[sic]
like the cold river bottom churning with un-
founded
death/ how do detectives make love/ did he talk
code
into her soft earlobe or whisper sweet double talk
into her lips/ did he tape record her nocturnal
sighs & her vulnerable words/ taking them down
into
his notepad heart to be withheld/ & used in a court
of law as evidence against her/ did he keep her*

"our rock music's shit
 but we invented sexual attraction
 didn't you know? In the 12th Century –
 I mean they had it before
 but not
 as a central, defining principle
 in the Subject's relation to the Other"
 I looked across at her –

*Her fine boned face
 & deep serious eyes –
 Thanks, I said*

Thanks a lot.

The slippery surface created by the tone allows meaning to be suggested and contradicted. Pop art and painterly images meld easily into rock 'n' roll and the language of public relations, while a core of content teases the reader with elusive humour.

The bitter last poems in the book come as a shock. About culture, politics, love and art, the poems are scathing. The poem 'Troubadour' begins: "Where the heart burns / like an old tyre / filling the air / with flecks of carbon". As I read, I expected the well timed shift in perspective to deflation and self mockery. Instead the poem moves through bleak unironical imagery to a place "where fun will consist / of smoking crack / on the edge of a garbage dump / you've just spent / 15 hours rooting in / because you're in debt / for the price of a bed / & the suburbs have disappeared into the hush, / ecologically sustainable / estates of the rich . . ."

Other poems are as blunt and realistic as this one. Although 'Warm Snipers' contains the shifts of tone of the earlier verse, the direction is precise and clear: "a Sarajevo professor of Comparative Lit / knits trigger-fingered mittens / & they're a hit! / – 20 deutschmarks each – so she'll survive / The Four Horsemen & the freezing skies . . ."

These poems lose some silvery charm, but they gain weight and power. The abrasive pointedness suggests that John Forbes was changing at the time of his death. These poems might not be as finished or complete as earlier ones, but they evolve towards unvarnished unambiguous statement.

Forbes disliked any suggestion of sentimentality and posturing, and was suspicious of works that did not treat emotion with irony. Rhyme is present in some of these poems, but anger overrides the irony: ". . . Europe's just a high-brow joke – / they invented causation in place of hope / but all their culture is really worth / is its potential for embittered mirth . . ."

If John Forbes was a poet who was at his best when most

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divided, the later poems may not be regarded as his best. The earlier poems are excellent in the way that John Forbes' poetry always has been excellent. In such poems as 'On Tiepolo's Banquet Of Cleopatra', he may have perfected that style of poetry. In the later poems, I surmise that he may have been becoming a different sort of poet altogether. Ambiguity remains, but there is evidence in *Damaged Glamour* that he was attempting something quite new while retaining the extraordinary referential range of his earlier poetry.

Rae Desmond Jones is a poet and novelist currently searching for a publisher. His last book was the novel Wisdom, published in 1995 by Blackwattle Press.

Pressing Ahead

Carolyn Leslie

Craig Munro (ed.): *UQP: The Writer's Press* (UQP, \$29.95).

PUBLISHED TO CELEBRATE the fiftieth year of the University of Queensland Press, *The Writer's Press* is both a history of one of Australia's most influential publishing houses; and a celebration of the many and various cultural processes and practices that are involved in getting a book into the hands of a reader. Edited by Craig Munro, the Press's long-time general manager, this collection is part-essay, part-memoir and part-historical document.

The formal establishment of the Press took place in 1948, when it was gazetted as a department of the University. Originally mostly publishing scientific documents, under the general management of Frank Thompson it was transformed into an innovative, challenging and risk-taking publishing house. The challenge, as Thompson saw it, was to encourage "cultural initiatives, and that one way of doing this was to publish in areas neglected by commercial publishers". Ironically, UQP developed a list of fiction and non-fiction writers and titles that many of those commercial publishers would kill for; with authors such as Peter Carey, Olga Masters, David Malouf and Janet Turner Hospital.

The core of *The Writer's Press* consists of a number of essays, each discussing a different aspect of the Press's history and/or its publishing methods. The

range of contributors – including David Malouf on poetry, Barbara Ker Wilson on books for children and young adults, D'arcy Randall on fiction and Sandra Phillips on indigenous writing – is striking in its breadth and range.

Some of the essays, such as Frank Thompson's *Creating a Press of National Value*, are scene-setters and place UQP in the context of the Australian literary and publishing landscape. Others, such as Pearl Bowman's *West 85th Street, New York*, discuss particular concerns faced by the Press – in this case, taking books to the American market-place at a time when very little was being done by Australian publishers to take their works to an overseas audience. Bowman discusses her role as UQP's New York-based representative, outlining such far-reaching implications as being able to catalogue your books with the Library of Congress and coming to grips with the American publication schedules "where seasonality was (and still is) everything".

Occasionally, the essays cross over into each other, and you begin to realize that you've read this before, only from a slightly altered viewpoint. The story of Thompson's involvement in the Press is told in the introduction, his own essay, and in most of the essays that deal with events occurring pre-1983 (when Thompson left "to take on new publishing challenges"). Yet, while this level of repetition would normally prove to be frustrating, in this context it is more like hearing a core story fleshed out by a multitude of voices.

The other substantial features of *The Writer's Press* are the chronology that gives highlights from each year of publication (and a quick browse reveals the major turning points in the direction of the Press); while every book published by the Press appears in the checklist at the back. The formality and the stark presentation of these lists give the book the stamp of an historical document, one which almost palpably invites scholars to further research its history and the impact the Press has made on the Australian publishing landscape.

The book itself is a beautiful object. The matt art paper is lovely to touch (and it even smells like a good book should). The typography is crisp and clear, as are the photographs and the reproductions of various pieces of cover art. All add up to a book exuding an aura of both permanence and pleasure.

The Writer's Press shows how a press originating

out of a regional university can make a significant difference to the cultural landscape of a country like Australia. It explores the notion that the various processes of book production – from editing, to design, to sales and marketing – are vital in the transmission of ideas from the author to the reader. And it serves as a cogent reminder that working within the publishing industry is to perform cultural work of the most significant type.

Carolyn Leslie is an editor of trade books.

Shifting Ground

Carolyn Tétaz

Roger McDonald: *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (Knopf, \$35).

Anson Cameron: *Silences Long Gone* (Macmillan, \$17.95).

THE MAJORITY OF AUSTRALIANS are not God-fearing people, and while numerous religious and spiritual communities thrive in Australia, most of our efforts at contemporary worship and ritual are lavished on secular icons and activities. This, however, doesn't preclude us from dealing regularly with the sacred, which as the following two novels attest, is intrinsic to our sense of self and to our sense of community.

Roger McDonald opens up the title of his novel, which sounds like an affectionate term for a quaint piece of machinery, to reveal and recreate the life of Syms Covington, Darwin's shooter and manservant on the *Beagle*. Covington is a deeply spiritual man, whose strong and constant faith embraces adventure and travel. He has no questions about the way of the world, only an urge to better his place in it and experience more of it. McDonald's Darwin longs for the stability and comfort of a wife and a parish back home, and has nothing but questions for the world. McDonald presents these two characters as opposites, and also as complementary parts of a social system. Covington's physicality, his real love of God, his desire to please and to prove himself are a contrast and also a support to Darwin's insular character, his acceptance of religion as a social and financial tool and his complete confidence in his role as superior master to Covington's willing servant.

Mr Darwin's Shooter is a melodious book, its writing is a skilled mixture of poetry and sharp description, and the vast amount of research that supports and strengthens the novel is always subservient to the humanity of

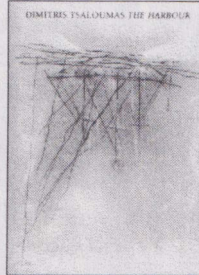
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the tale. The novel is written in the style of the day and makes no apologies for the beliefs and assumptions of nineteenth-century England. McDonald's control and consistency of tone is one of the strengths of the book; we are contained, but not constrained by the language, much like sailing on a boat in the open sea, and better able to appreciate both the extraordinary optimism and brutality of that era. This combination of style and content draws us into a complex and unsettling position: we are attracted to Covington, yet he is a man of his times, who considers sex with a black woman less of a sin than sex with a white woman, and has no qualms about the removal of fossils from South America to England. Darwin is a more shadowy and less likeable figure, presented as generally patronising and condescending, yet it is his work that has shaped so much of our thinking in this century.

Whilst the jacket of the book quite rightly asserts that *Mr Darwin's Shooter* is a novel of "scientific discovery, religious faith, masters and servants, ambition and adventure, and the endless wonders of the natural world", it is also a novel set at the beginning of an era of great change. When Covington eventually receives his copy of *The Origin of the Species*, his first concern is not the contents, but the index, searching for Darwin's recognition of his assistance. McDonald suggests that although Darwin's work created great and ongoing rifts in religious thinking and beliefs, Covington's faith remained unchallenged; he may have believed he had sinned, but he didn't doubt God. Rather, it was Covington's belief in the sanctity of the relationship between master and servant that was shaken, and in this fictionalized portrait of an Australian settler, we are able to discern the beginnings of one of our particularly Australian definitions of the sacred.

ANSON CAMERON'S FIRST NOVEL, *Silences Long Gone*, moves between the fictional outback town of Hannah and the fictionalized seaside town of Lorne. The central dilemma of the novel is one of landrights, and the definition and value of the sacred in contemporary Australia. Hannah is a temporary mining town, built on Aboriginal land, due for relocation. Belle Furphy, an English immigrant, has broken the rules of occupation, fertilizing her roses with the ashes of her daughter and husband. Her refusal to leave Hannah creates a storm of persuasion driven by a

multinational company that seems both ludicrous and horribly believable.

With Belle Furphy at the centre of the novel, *Silences Long Gone* is also a tale of rumours and stories, beautiful or otherwise. A book that takes on landrights, euthanasia and DNA testing, and is peopled with real estate agents, journalists, multinational representatives, lawyers, art dealers, police and novelists deals heavily in half-truths, ambiguities, deception and lies. It is a novel of tricks and turns, and the reader, as much as the characters, must position and reposition themselves through each development and revelation of the plot.

Silences Long Gone is a violent and humorous book, at times simultaneously funny and violent. The tone of the novel is the cynical tone of Cameron's short stories. While at times some of the stylistic touches are heavy handed, and the writing isn't consistently strong, when it is good, such as Jack's father's diagnosis of cancer and subsequent death, Cameron's writing is very powerful indeed. It is a novel that nudges you toward examining your own inadequacies and values whilst reading about the struggle and failings of others; and if it doesn't begin to loosen them, at least points out the knots of contemporary life, from the selling of Lorne real estate to the definition of what we call 'home' and what we think is 'best'.

Both novelists illuminate and challenge the assumptions of the eras they write of, and when read in comparison, reveal that sacred ground is shifting ground, most obvious when the constancy of human nature pulls against the push of progress.

Carolyn Tétaz is a co-editor of *Nocturnal Submissions*.

Gum Tree Fantasy

Ray Verrills

Murray Bail: *Eucalyptus* (Text Publishing, \$17.95).

MURRAY BAIL'S *Eucalyptus* is by any standard, other than his own, an unusual novel, and for that reason alone may not appeal to all tastes. Very little of the work he has had published to date would satisfy the latter criterion. His writings have been assiduously promoted by publishers, academics and critics, and there is no doubt that

they have a strong attraction for a significantly large group of enthusiastic readers who would regard themselves as having very discerning tastes, different from the vulgar preferences of the mass of ordinary readers.

Bail is a writer with a powerful imagination. He doesn't create to a pattern, as many best-selling popular authors tend to do. His method, style and approach are very individual, though other writers may manifest similar characteristics to some degree.

A casual reader glancing at the first couple of pages of *Eucalyptus* might be easily beguiled into thinking he has picked up a botanical treatise on the Eucalyptus genus. After all, the title itself is suggestive in this way, and though it can hardly be the author's intention to deceive the reader, there can be little doubt that the distribution of scientific names of eucalypt species throughout the book, together with a good deal of descriptive material is calculated to intrigue the reader and sustain his interest.

We are introduced to the theme of the novel in two brief sentences on the third page. Here they are: "There was once a man on a property outside a one-horse town, in New South Wales, who couldn't come to a decision about his daughter. He then made an unexpected decision." What are we to make of this? It sounds like the beginning of a fairy story, and in a sense it is.

The man's name is Holland. When he married, he took out a heavy insurance against his wife having twins, and when she had a boy and a girl from her first and only pregnancy, he received an enormous cheque from the insurance company. The boy died soon after birth, and the wife a little later.

Apparently Holland now has enough money to live for the rest of his life without working. He buys an old farm across the mountains west of Sydney, and after leaving his daughter for a few years with nuns in Sydney, he brings her to the property to live with him.

Without any plan at first, he begins planting eucalypts, many of them described in detail by the author, until it becomes his obsession to have at least one specimen of every known species. A second obsession is his daughter, about whom he is protective and possessive.

When she grows up to become beautiful and attractive, he conceives the idea of a competition to find a suitable husband for her. The man who can properly identify every species of eucalypt will have his daugh-

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ter, apparently regardless of her own inclinations.

From her habit of wandering around the property since early childhood, Ellen is familiar with every part of it and with all the trees. Like her father, she swims naked in the river and the dam.

Most of the suitors lose out quite early in the piece. Some, with greater botanical knowledge last longer.

From the beginning the father has been in the habit of telling the daughter stories, when he talks about his trees and points out to her examples of species he has planted. Two other characters in the novel do the same thing. One is a man called Cave, who eventually makes a correct identification of every eucalypt on the estate, and has seemingly won the competition.

Meanwhile Ellen has begun to hate both the trees and the suitors. She still wanders around the property, but makes sure she keeps out of the way of the competitors, Cave, naturally, most of all. She dreams of escaping to Sydney and becoming free, but never attempts it.

In her wanderings she meets a young man who knows about eucalypts, but doesn't seem to be taking part in the competition. She gradually falls deeply in love with him, without her father knowing, and listens eagerly to his stories. When towards the last he disappears, she pines, becomes ill and spends much of the time in bed, yet the doctor cannot discover the nature of her illness, or even if she is really sick at all.

In the end it is the man whom Ellen loves who wins her, and at the same time wins the competition. The surprising way in which this happens is best left to the reader to discover.

Eucalyptus is a romantic fantasy. Though its events are not absolutely impossible, their probability is so remote that they might as well be. Yet even those who have little taste for fantasy will find it worth reading. Bail's language flows smoothly, and it is often quite poetic. His skill is such that the reader is incited to keep reading in order to learn what will happen next. It is a skill essential for a good story teller. The stories interwoven with the main plot range from anecdotes to full-blown short stories. Their relevance may not always be apparent, but they add to the richness of the writing. Even the botanical descriptions are in no sense boring, but interesting, well written in a casual way, and informative. It is a novel well worth reading for anyone who loves good writing, and Australian writing in particular.

Ray Verrills edited the Sydney Realist Writer from 1962 until its demise in 1970.

Cultural Currency?

Michelle Arrow

Katherine Brisbane (ed.): *Plays of the 70s, volume 1* (Currency Press, \$24.95).

Phillip Parsons with Victoria Chance (eds): *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Currency Press, \$29.95).

CURRENCY PRESS HAS, since its inception amid the frenetic outburst of local theatrical activity in the early seventies, been Australia's foremost publisher of Australian plays. Currency acted as a stimulus to the youthful theatre scene and served as its chief archivist in the production of a body of published Australian theatre texts which, as John McCallum has noted, for better or worse, now form the canon of Australian drama. These are the Australian plays that are studied in schools and universities, the plays that are revived in theatres across the nation. In the absence of a 'national theatre' to regularly perform Australian plays written this century, Currency Press has assumed tremendous importance as custodian of our theatre and drama history.

The contents page of the elegantly designed new collection, *Plays of the 70s, volume 1*, reads like a 'Greatest Hits' of Currency's backlist. As someone researching Australian theatre history, the title of this collection promised much, yet on closer inspection, it merely puzzled me. Why republish a series of plays, all of which are undoubtedly important, but most of which are readily available in libraries, while some remain in print, with their own scholarly introductions and photographs? Do we really need another edition of David Williamson's *The Removalists*?

Katharine Brisbane's brief introductory notes give some sense of the tremendous energy of the era – the concentrated outburst in theatre which saw productions of Williamson's *The Removalists* at La Mama in Melbourne, of the debut of Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis' *The Legend of King O'Malley* at Jane Street in Sydney – yet these notes also point to absences from these collections. A pioneering work like *Betty Can*

Jump, for example, briefly mentioned by Brisbane, remains unpublished. This play was one of the first collectively devised pieces of women's theatre to emerge from the exuberantly blokey Australian Performing Group in 1972 and paved the way for much of the feminist theatre of the 1970s. There are probably good reasons, from a publisher's point of view, why it will remain unpublished – it was a strongly political, theatrical expression of 'women's liberation' based on the personal experiences and improvisations of its performers. Yet an examination of *Betty Can Jump* has the potential to change our entire perspective of the Australian Performing Group and the New Wave of Australian drama in the seventies – a shake of the kaleidoscope, and the accepted historical view of a masculine, playwright-driven theatre movement is displaced from its pre-eminence, and a new understanding of the role of performer-created theatre with a commitment to new ideals of gender relations in the seventies theatre boom begins to take shape. Until we gain access to some of these scripts through publication, however, the seventies theatre story, the dominant masculine narrative, will remain the same.

The *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia*, in contrast, is a thoroughly researched reference text that manages to give the reader a sense of the scale and depth of Australian theatre practice throughout our history, a perspective that is not always forthcoming from the published corpus of Australian drama. The *Companion to Australian Theatre* was an authoritative and much-needed text, from which the more affordable (and portable) concise companion is abridged. Entries are uniformly informative and engaging, and draw upon a wealth of experts from diverse fields. It deserves to become a standard reference text for the study of Australian theatre.

Intriguingly, the *Companion* suggests a myriad of theatre history avenues which have been explored by scholars, but have not yet been made accessible through publication. The New Theatre movement, for example – the longstanding leftist theatre which had branches throughout the nation and nurtured many playwrights across seven decades – has not yet been the subject of a published, book-length study, a study that is suggested by the relatively lengthy treatment it receives in the *Companion*.

New Theatre's many playwrights too, remain largely unpublished, by Currency or any other pub-

lisher – politically committed writers such as Mona Brand, Oriel Gray and Catherine Duncan were as important to the development of Australian theatre and drama as their better-known contemporary Betty Roland (who, incidentally, is more famous because her plays have been published by Currency, keeping her in the public and scholarly eye). However, Currency has published Oriel Gray's *The Torrents*, as part of the State Theatre Company of South Australia's Australian Playhouse experiment, and the forthcoming Currency publication *Plays of the 60s, volume 1* will include Gray's final stage play, *Burst of Summer*. This publication of hard-to-find manuscripts and forgotten plays by Currency is to be applauded. This work must continue if we are ever to have a sense of the diversity and vitality of our theatrical past in the period before the revolution of the seventies, a revolution that transformed both our theatre scene, and our perceptions of our theatrical past, forever.

REFERENCE

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Michelle Arrow is approaching completion of her PhD thesis, a cultural and social history of Australian women playwrights, at the Department of History at the University of Sydney.

Art History or Political History?

Bernard Smith

Elizabeth Findlay: *Arcadian Quest: William Westall's Australian Sketches* (National Library of Australia, \$34.95).

THIS IS A POPULAR, well-illustrated account of William Westall's work as landscape and figure painter on Flinders' circumnavigation of Australia in the *Investigator* (1801–1803) based upon the drawings he made on the voyage that are now in the possession of the National Library of Australia. Unfortunately, it reveals the weaknesses of the over-specialized monograph written without any deep knowledge of its relevant context, and a tendency to

impugn the past because it does not advocate our contemporary moral and political concerns – a nativity best described as ideological reductionism.

As the title implies, Findlay centres her account on Westall's hopes the voyage would provide him with an opportunity to depict the landscapes and peoples of a southern Arcadia comparable to that of the Otaheite constructed in the minds of Europeans by the voyages of Bougainville and Cook. But the desert coasts of New Holland crushed his ardent aspirations. He felt that he had been deceived by the British Admiralty and eventually shipped himself off to Canton in search of more colourful, exotic material after the *Investigator* foundered on Wreck Reef off the north Queensland coast in August 1803. Much of the book is given over to speculating about the reasons for Westall's modest achievements as an artist. But he was only nineteen when he took on the job, no more than a probationary student at the Royal Academy, and did not take kindly to the topographical emphasis that an artist on a scientific voyage was expected to accomplish. Given these limitations his achievements were quite considerable.

Westall's work was first studied in detail in my own *European Vision and the South Pacific* published in 1960. It was thoroughly documented by T.M. Perry and Donald Simpson in their splendid book on *Westall's Drawings* (then owned by the Royal Commonwealth Society) in 1962. It is much more than a catalogue. Then in 1963 Rex and Thea Reinitz published an excellent summary of Westall's life and work in their *Early Artists of Australia*.

Findlay's facts are based largely upon these sources. But her attempt to provide a 'revisionist' re-evaluation of them in the light of such books as John Barrell's *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, Simon Ryan's *The Cartographic Eye* (1996), Cosgrove and Daniel's *Iconography of Landscape* (1988), and Henry Reynolds' *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders* (1989), is not in the least convincing.

I have space here only to discuss two issues, but they are central to the appreciation and understanding of Westall's art: Findlay's critique of his coastal views and paintings he executed on his return for the British Admiralty. She writes: "Westall has written that the view of Cape Leeuwin was taken at 6.30 a.m. on 7 December". But the illustration, on the same page used to document this assertion, includes Westall's inscription that states categorically that it

"was taken at 7.30 a.m."! That regrettable error aside, Findlay then goes on to question the veracity of the drawing on the grounds that the "pencil working sketch" reveals that the "images were developed over some time and do not relate to an exact moment". But this does not in any way refute the claim that Westall's view provides a faithful account of what he saw when he looked at Cape Leeuwin at 7.30 a.m. on 7 December 1801 from a distance of from four to five leagues. Here Findlay is innocently invoking what might best be described as 'Monet's dilemma'; to paint what the eye sees in a moment of time. Out of that crisis the whole project of naturalistic art, that had been developing since the archaic Greek art of the seventh century BC, foundered on the shoals of formalist modernism. But all this does not entitle us to say that naturalism did not provide the best way, prior to the invention of photography, of visually describing the world.

It is perfectly true of course that 'coastal views' may be used to provide evidence for prior British claims to New Holland over the French. I should be interested to know if and when they were first used in that way. But there is no evidence, that I am aware of, that the young Westall was aware when he made the drawings that they might be used to assert such claims. He was working within an artistic tradition that goes back, as Andrew David makes clear, in the first volume of the *Charts and Coastal Views of Captain Cook's Voyages* (1988) to the Mediterranean portolan charts of the mid-fifteenth century. The essential purpose of such charts was to provide navigational aids to seamen. To interpret them as documents *designed* to establish claims to land is to place the cart of causation before its horse. (A favourite postmodern pastime.) In order to understand what young Westall was doing and give him his aesthetic due we must appreciate the fact that he was working within artistic *and* scientific practices that had achieved a high degree of autonomy from the overarching realms of politics and morality. To reduce his sketches to land claims is to indulge in the ideological reductionism that is a feature of the work of those so-called 'art' historians who are more interested in writing political history than art history. I stand by the view that I expressed about Westall's coastal views in 1960, judging them within the artistic context in which they must be judged. "More elaborate and more skilful than the profiles drawn

by either Hodges or Webber . . . Westall's profiles reach the high water mark of profile drawing so far as the Pacific is concerned. To accurate statement of detail and clarity of contour Westall has added a feeling for atmosphere and an aerial perspective that suggest the mass and depths of headlands and the relative distance of hinterland hills and mountains."

This is not to deny that coastal views played an essential role in the European imperial project. I make this abundantly clear myself in the last chapter of my recent book *Modernism's History* (1998). But to use our contemporary insights into the macro-history of imperialism in order to vilify young Westall's views reveals an alarming lack of historical understanding. Westall was doing a job for the British Admiralty in the nineteenth century not making a case for the Crown in the Mabo judgement of the twentieth.

Findlay's inability to understand the basic assumptions present in the naturalistic conventions of nineteenth-century pictorial practice becomes all too evident when she deals with Westall's "finished" paintings for the Admiralty based on the drawings he made in the *Investigator*. His oil painting of Port Lincoln we are told "bears little resemblance" to the "original sketches". In fact it bears a great deal of resemblance to his sketches having been put together from them. This is the way that artists worked and have always worked within the naturalistic tradition of drawing and painting. To argue that "on one level" Westall was indulging "in some kind of historical deception and fraud" is ludicrous – unless we go the whole hog and accept Plato's view that poets and painters "are image makers whose images are phantoms far removed from reality".

When I read statements like "little work has been done on the significance of artists, such as Westall, using the picturesque to depict foreign lands", I wonder just what I have been doing for the greater part of my life. In my preface to the second edition of *European Vision* (1985) I pointed out that the second main theme of the book was "the contention that the predominant mode in nineteenth-century landscape painting arose from the need to discover and evoke what was typical". I advanced this as a universalizing concept that was applicable to all landscapes painted by European artists working beyond Europe. It emerged, as I make clear, as these artists sought to combine the scientific imperatives of topographic art with the aesthetics of the picturesque.

Artists had the problem of providing Europeans on the one hand with information about regions beyond Europe and on the other making them respectable as 'high' art in terms of the aesthetics of the picturesque. Since then the excellent books of Barrell and Bermingham have researched the ideological implications of the picturesque aesthetic as practised in Europe itself. But back in 1960 *European Vision* had already addressed itself to the imperial implications of the picturesque. As I said in the preface to the second edition, "this book was something of an anomaly since its main concern lay not with art masterpieces but with the visual images produced primarily for the purposes of information, and devoted itself not so much to explicating the creative role of artists in their societies (the central myth of art history) but to the use of visual documents for a clearer understanding of the European penetration of the Pacific".

I have come to the melancholy conclusion that 'revisionist' historians are not interested in carefully reading any texts published before 1980. Wasn't it Homer who first said that it's a good man who knows his own father?

Bernard Smith's most recent book Modernism's History was published by Yale University Press last year for the European and American market and by UNSW Press for the Australasian market.

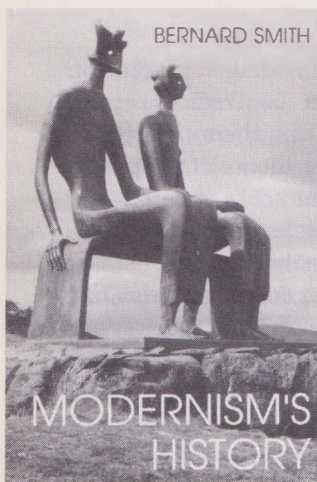
Closer to a Manifesto

kylie valentine

Bernard Smith: Modernism's History: a study in twentieth-century art and ideas (UNSW Press, \$29.95).

MODERNISM IS A GREAT and diverse corpus – corpse, some would have it – of works, one that crosses disciplines and continents. Under the modernist umbrella are included works by Picasso, Gropius, Joyce, Mayakovsky, Pollock, Woolf. Modernism is also a politically troubled and troublesome entity. *overland* is one of a number of journals that grew out of a direct opposition to the formal extravagances of modernism, out of a desire to return meaning to centre stage. At a time when postmodernism and its consorts are being regarded with suspicion in many quarters of the left, it is worth

BERNARD SMITH



remembering that its predecessor was not universally loved. Modernism, moreover, contains a paradox. The term itself is empty or contradictory. 'Modern' either obtains through its synonym of 'contemporary', in which case what we call modernist is not; or 'modern' is a way of denoting a period style, in which case it should lend itself to being bracketed off for discussion

and viewing from a historical perspective. All art is modern to those present at its production and not to those who come after. We can, though, find reasons as to why the notion of the modern dominated the early century, when so much was changing and the prospect of even greater change loomed on the horizon. This is also at the heart of the choice of name for modernism's successor. 'Postmodernism' signals the dominance of modernism's trace on contemporary art, or – if you like – our failure to escape completely the words and images of our fathers.

Bernard Smith has taken on the task of periodizing twentieth-century art, of bracketing off the era into period styles and explaining their emergence and experience. To do so, as has been discussed in heated terms in other reviews, he rejects the term 'modernism' for discussing the century's art and takes up instead his own term, the Formalesque. This move, though, is neither a random nor pejorative one. Modernism remains for Smith a useful term. It is *not* useful for discussion of a particular period style, because it describes a relationship with Modernity rather than those characteristics that mark one style off from others. Modernism is an art movement that is critical of Modernity, an attack on the society from which it emerges and the extant forms of art within it. This attack cannot be sustained, however, and modernism eventually becomes a part of Modernity, becomes, indeed, a celebration of it.

This is a novel and subtle way of describing modernism as a politics, poetics, and aesthetics. The thesis is even more complicated, however: modernism is not a unique phenomenon of the twentieth century. Instead modernisms can be traced back to the beginning of Modernity, which for Smith is born with

capitalism, industrialism and the nation-state around the sixteenth century. Modernisms emerge as critiques of society and the art accepted within it, become entrenched and dominant themselves, and are eventually supplanted by the next, generational, movement against it, which is to say the next modernism.

This then is why 'modernism' is replaced in Smith's history by the 'Formalesque'. The former is a recurring, dynamic cycle of relational processes, while the latter is a period style. Smith does not mean to be insulting when nominating 'Formalesque' as the word best evoking twentieth century art, signalling as it does the attributes and preoccupations of the style. These attributes are largely an emphasis of form over content, of perception over cognition, and they emerge in the context of cultural imperialism. Despite the critical baggage associated with labelling art as 'formalist' and the convention of contrasting such art to 'realism', Smith's categorizing of the Formalesque is among other things a tribute to its achievements, a gesture towards cementing its place in art history as a distinct style.

That said, neither do I mean to be disrespectful in suggesting that if a single word can encapsulate this text then that word is ambitious. *Modernism's History* stands closer to a manifesto than it does to a moderate and mannered contribution to an ongoing debate. This is so despite its impressive scholarship, its emphasis on dialectical relationships and fractured processes, its recognition of the messiness of periodizing history, and its account of the structures and forces that produce and sustain the field of art. This ambition is apparent in the project of renaming modernism, and hence, presumably, postmodernism. Smith is as aware as anyone of the importance of naming, as his survey of Saussure, Barthes and Derrida shows. Renaming modernism is a sign of the extent to which the text is a revision of contemporary history. Naming the emergence and trajectory of recurring modernisms as a crucial task of art history is a call for a revision of the discipline.

The text's ambition is also apparent in its structure. It begins with a survey of eighteenth and nineteenth century German aesthetic theory and closes with a detailed survey of the interaction between the Formalesque and two sites of periphery to Europe: Japan and South Africa. In between are examinations of, among other things, the 1920s in France,

the Soviet Union and fascist Italy in the thirties and forties, and the establishment and coming to dominance of the MOMA in New York. Integral to this comprehensive argument is an analysis of imperialism, undertaken deliberately through the view from the outpost. The twentieth century like every other era sees art finding inspiration in what it sees as the primitive, archaic and exotic. This century, though, inflects that tradition with the historical specificity of the massive imperialist project taking place from the mid-nineteenth century. It is from the antipodes, Smith insists, that we can see both the continuity and the novelty of twentieth-century art. Unless a broad view is taken, only the specificities of that art will be seen, and the imperialist project that during the era forms one of the most important components of the field of art will be invisible.

The scope of the text's reach leads to some of those tensions that inhere in it. There is a tension, for example, in the dual emphasis on the fractured and contested process of the Formalesque's coming to dominance and the insistence that it was dominant from as early as the 1920s. There are accounts throughout the text of the dialectical relationship between the Formalesque and twentieth-century modernism – Dada, Surrealism, the *Neue Sachlichkeit*; between the Formalesque and the nativist North American movement of Abstract Expressionism; between the Formalesque and art from the colony or outpost – Diego Rivera the most important example of the latter. These relationships all go towards constituting the Formalesque, yet the thesis of text is mobilized by the argument that the Formalesque is entrenched, dominant, hegemonic. Similarly, the undisputed politics of Picasso's *Guernica* and his collages present such an interruption to Smith's insistence that the Formalesque disregarded and disavowed meaning that his argument that they are the exception that proves the rule strikes a rare unconvincing note. It would not be difficult to write a history of twentieth-century art that pits an elitist, formalist, apolitical modernism against disregarded political artists and perplexed audiences. More than one person has written such a history, in fact. Smith is too honest and committed a historian to do that, but the scope of his ambition is not always at home with his detailed, respectful and eclectic reading of other scholarship.

Finally, a tension obtains through the concurrent

emphases on the continuity of tradition and the specificity of the twentieth century. As noted, Smith pays close attention to the particularities of twentieth-century cultural imperialism and the shifting of the cosmopolitan centre from Europe to the United States, but it seems to me there are unique aspects of what Smith calls nineteenth-century modernism that go unscrutinized. This could well be merely an over-privileging of the contemporary, but Smith needs to allow more time to convince his contemporary-minded readers. There is, after all, a considerable body of work on the Formalesque/modernism that argues that the turn of the century does present historically unique features, a uniqueness that contributes to an *unprecedented* politics and aesthetics. Perry Anderson, for instance, foregrounds the imagined immanence of social revolution and the essential novelty of a range of technologies in his mapping of modernism. Terry Eagleton argues that modernism represents an optimism about the possibilities of transforming the self and transforming the world, an optimism which has now passed away. Gayatri Spivak, among others, has made powerful arguments as to the profound importance of imperialism to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguments that suggest that the continuities of looking to the exotic and 'primitive' during that time are less important than the manifestations of their novelty. A large and increasing number of scholars are reconfiguring modernism in foregrounding the importance of feminism to the movement. Finally, the argument that postmodernism is the last of the twentieth-century modernisms and thus a critique of Modernity has been under scrutiny for some time, and consensus on its critical rather than celebratory function seems as distant as ever.

It seems, in short, that the Formalesque cannot be as readily subsumed into Smith's framework as his powerful and polemical thesis suggests, that scholarship on nineteenth-century modernism will continue to grow. It is impossible to figure at this stage whether the Formalesque will replace modernism as a way of discussing it, whether the manifesto for art history will succeed in its aims. However, the power of that manifesto, and its achievements besides, ensures that it deserves the wide readership that the controversy around it will surely generate.

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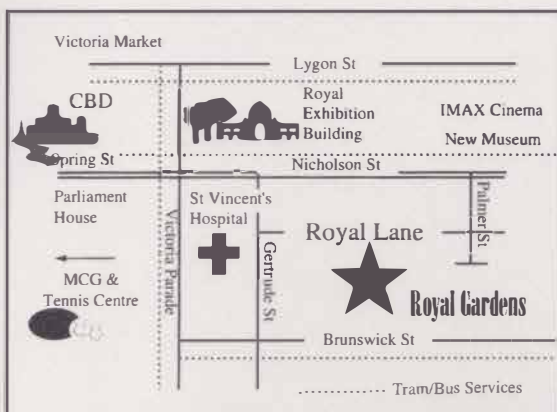
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well-known for her commitment to conservation. Many of her poems consider Australian attitudes & relations to nature and to indigenous people. Gig Ryan's trenchant essay places Judith Wright's poetry in a historical context of poetic traditions and the struggle for Aboriginal equal rights and land. Whilst acknowledging that "her poetry and prose writings have been a thorn in the conscience of white Australia," Ryan also analyzes Judith Wright's poetic content from a current perspective. Judith Wright has broken her poetic silence especially for this issue and has written some pearls of advice.

To Younger Poets, a gesture by which everyone at *overland* is, frankly, chuffed. (Because of the special case that this silence represents, *overland* has broken one of its golden rules and has included some of Wright's previously published poems.) John Forbes was always examining the effects of colonization on Australia, including its Americanizations via slick media. John once said something along the lines of "Les Murry writes about the bush, we write about BHP", meaning, of course, corporatization and its extensive imagery altering the way people see & live with or on the land & in cities. John wrote "3 Songs for Charles Darwin" in 1997 - a poem which registers some anger at "our scabbed ancestors." John Forbes had a brilliant knack of tempering anger, sentiment, even intellectualism with a kind of staged bewilderment. This technique meant that he could be very funny. And in the letter/poem to Ken Bolton he attempts to write in Ken's style and while discovering something new about Ken's method, decides it's impossible for him, although the poem itself works. One of the least pretentious poets, John Forbes was deft. Adam Aitken continues the line of anti-colonial critique. He looks at Australians looking at Asia. Adam began what he calls his "narrative life" in Australia in 1968 when John Forbes and a few contemporaries were already practising, prototypically, a poetics later to be inventively mythologized by John Tranter as the "Generation of '68". Adam's focus is partly an informed & critical re-inscription of his personal background in that his mother is Thai, his father Scots-Anglo. Interviewing Adam, the Chinese poet Ouyang Yu asks some perceptive questions. Together they engage in a cogent discussion of Adam's writing and complexities that concern not only poets but also the people of the entire region. Asian countries have changed dramatically through the impact of capitalism. Adam Aitken also addresses the Australian terrain in poems like "Terra Nullius", seeing the absurdities and incongruities of people visiting the edges of outback landscapes - Australia's centre. Coral Hull locates much of her poetry and poetic prose in a similar place. One of her recent books is set in Brewarrina in outback New South Wales. Like Judith Wright, Coral is concerned with conservation and, more particularly, with fauna in the landscape and human treatment of and effect upon it. Her powerful descriptive style carries the intensity of her commitment to animal liberation. Essays, reviews, notes, poems and an interview amplify the featured poet work. The Sydney artist, Ken Searle, a friend of many poets, painted the cover image especially for this issue. These days poetry is unsupported by corporate publishers and in a kind of back-to-the-future (the seventies, at least) way, poets are having to collectivize and pub-



print post approved pp 328858/0003