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overland

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autumn 2000

ISSN 0030 7416

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

Subscriptions: \$36 a year posted to addresses within Australia; pensioners and students \$28; life subscription \$500; overseas \$80. Payment may be made by Mastercard, Visa or Bankcard.

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Home page: <http://dingovu.edu.au/~arts/cals/overland/>

overlandexpress: <http://www.overlandexpress.org>

Manuscripts are welcome, but will be returned only if stamped and addressed envelopes are provided. Material accepted for publication must also be submitted on disk. All care will be taken, but no responsibility can be accepted for lost manuscripts.

Minimum rates of payment: stories and features: \$100; poems and 'shorts': \$50; reviews: \$60.

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

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DESIGN: Vane Lindesay, Alex Skutenko & Ian Syson

PUBLISHER: O L Society Limited, 9 David Street, Footscray 3011, incorporated in Victoria, ACN 007 402 673

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TYPESET BY **Vulgar Enterprises of North Carlton**

PRINTING: Australian Print Group, Maryborough. ISSN 0030 7416

This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. *overland* is supported by 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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**ARTS
VICTORIA**



Three strikes?

Ian Syson

NOT LONG AGO all it seemed to take was for Les Murray to remember seeing a trinket on Manning Clark's lapel and there you had it: *The Courier Mail's* Chris Mitchell frothing at the mouth and a fully-blown theory that Clark was a Soviet 'agent of influence'.

More recently, Clark's publisher Peter Ryan is revealed by Stuart Macintyre in *overland* 155 to have given information to ASIO about Melbourne University lecturer, Max Crawford. He denies this but confesses to Tony Stephens in the *Sydney Morning Herald* to having discussed someone else, Kelson J. Arnold. What sort of media frenzy does this produce? Zip. No froth, no response, no nothing. A story without legs, as they say. (The more you think about this the more the good old double standard flutters into view. Why the bash Clark campaign; why the conspiracy of silence on Ryan?)

We can now compound this information with the fact (recently to hand via Ryan's newly-released ASIO file) that Ryan also had an interview with an ASIO Senior Field Officer on 6 October 1960, six years after informing on Crawford. The notes made by an ASIO agent state that "Ryan was helpful and cooperative and appreciated the necessity for the vetting action."

What makes this all the more intriguing is Ryan's comment at the time of last year's revelations. Stephens wrote: "Mr Ryan denied having any other contact with ASIO . . . 'It could by innuendo be used to suggest I was a pimp for ASIO,' Mr Ryan said. 'I won't lose any sleep over it but I would deny commenting on more than one person.'" However, the facts seem to indicate Ryan spoke to ASIO on at least three occasions. Who was being vetted, how many other times Ryan spoke to ASIO and about what he might have spoken have now become legitimate and urgent matters for speculation and investigation.

THE POSTHUMOUS HARASSMENT of Manning Clark is probably one of the more intellectually cowardly movements of our time. A number of influential publishers and editors have facilitated it by either allowing loose argument and unsubstantiated gossip to flourish in their domains or subscribing to the (admittedly less cowardly) go-for-the-throat school of political journalism. Over the past five years endless letters, reviews and articles about Clark's supposed treachery have been published around Australia.

Funnily enough, the present anti-Clark campaign was launched by our ASIO informer himself. In 1993, Robert Manne's *Quadrant* published an article by Ryan which took Clark's moral and intellectual capacities to task. The stories of Clark's 'agency of influence' were to follow at regular intervals, most notably via *The Courier Mail*. Despite his criticisms of some of the extremists in the anti-Clark crowd, Manne has been a general in this campaign. As Peter Cochrane implied in *Eureka St* (November 1999), Manne's defences of Clark have usually been of the faint praise variety.

In a review of Mark Davis' *Gangland*, published in *overland* in 1997, I called Robert Manne an "agent of influence of American right-wing fundamentalism". I was trying to do two things: lampoon the very phrase used to describe Clark and make a serious point about Manne's role in establishing the American right-wing fundamentalist anti-PC brigade in Australia. Whatever his recent recantations, Manne shoulders responsibility for giving two slightly hysterical and nonsensical campaigns a deal of intellectual credibility.

Yet it has become a bit of a habit in Australian intellectual circles to refer to Manne's 'shift to the left'. He has made reasoned interventions in many of the important contemporary debates. He says nothing that is grotesquely right-wing, even if his overt politics tend towards moral and economic conservatism. As

Cath Ellis shows in this issue, his recently adopted arguments on the Stolen Generations and reconciliation can sometimes be seen as exemplary. Perhaps they are. But they are also ignorant of previous arguments and campaigns.

It seems strange that someone who writes and teaches on Australian history and politics should have been so oblivious to Australian racism and its manifestations. Our history seeps with them.

Then again, maybe it's not that strange. After all, Manne seemed sincerely baffled and surprised by the racism revealed during the Demidenko saga. And I remember listening to Manne on Radio National shortly after John Howard's election in 1996 (of which he was an advocate) saying without a touch of irony or embarrassment that he was surprised how insensitive, aggressive and economically rationalist the Liberals were. Whatever politics he teaches at La Trobe University it is not *realpolitik*.

One of the reasons Manne knew nothing of the Stolen Generations seems to be that in his ideological myopia he has failed until very recently to look at the writings of the left in Australia as sources of positive and useful information. His every review of books related to communism involves insistent negation of all Australian communists and all their works. His visits to communist and left-wing writings have been as ransacker and headkicker; whereas Katharine Prichard, Frank Hardy, Fred Hollows, Dorothy Hewett, magazines like *Arena*, *Hecate*, *Labour History*, even *Communist Review*, could have revealed to him decades ago something of the history of our national disgrace.

While Manne has become something of a darling of the left and a progenitor of sweetness and light, it only took a review last year of Cassandra Pybus' *The Devil in James McAuley* in *Australian Book Review* both to reveal his true colours and show that those claws sharpened in the Cold War can still scratch and tear when the occasion demands. He takes the book to task because it doesn't refer enough to Stalin, didn't bash enough commos and didn't point out the supreme justice and decency of Australian anticommunists.

For those under the illusion that Robert is a new Manne, this is a repeated pattern in his writings and those of his cohort. For example, Peter Coleman, Paddy McGuinness and Gerard Henderson each made similar noises during the course of 1999, repelling in advance unspecified attacks on their anticommunist

buddies and CIA toadies and reminding everybody *again* just how evil Stalin was.

Having made a few criticisms of the Cold War right in *overland* over the past two years and having foreshadowed our ongoing revelations of ASIO informing, I am paranoid enough to see these actions (along with Pybus's then forthcoming book) as the targets for these vague attacks. One side-effect of these attacks is to have smoothed the way for Ryan not to have to defend himself at all.

I DON'T ENJOY SAYING THIS because what I'm admitting is that the left is making little impact in mainstream intellectual debate in this country. But I'm not going to take Barry Jones' position and point to a supposed quietism on the left – especially the academic left. Every time *The Australian* or *The Courier Mail* publishes a criticism of Clark or an attack on a Pybus or an *overland* there seems to be no response allowed. Indeed, when I requested equal space in the *Australian* for a reply to a Frank Devine column in which he criticised an *overland* editorial, I received this gobbledegook answering-machine response from the opinion page editor, Stephen Romei: "I'm not interested in the issue. Some people are interested in things; and other people are interested in things that other people aren't."

Unfortunately, *The Age* too seems to have become a bastion of some of the most spineless editorial policy in Australia. Victorian readers will remember the grovelling to Kennett in the two years leading up to the recent state election. Closer to *overland*, when an article substantially based on this editorial was submitted to *The Age*, it was initially accepted by opinion page editor, Paul Austin, only to be rejected nine weeks later by editor Michael Gawenda *after* it had been typeset and layed out ready for publication. Apparently, Gawenda felt it was factually inaccurate – and I thought I'd written an opinion piece!

It is in this context (or is it vacuum?) that Robert Manne is able to seize the middle ground of broadsheet (and Radio National) intellectual debate. We are foolish if we accept this kind of distortion. When such a right-wing thinker and others like him can appear to be the voices of moderate reason in Australia then we are living in bizarre times.

Now, can someone ask Peter Ryan what the hell he was doing talking to ASIO? . . . The first time might have been unlucky; the second time careless; but the third time . . . ?

Russell Daine Wright

Accounting for Our Souls

Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.

Foucault

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir – peremptorily Thomas – Thomas Gradgrind. With rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to.

SO BEGINS CHAPTER TWO, 'Murdering the Innocents', of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*.¹ Among other things, *Hard Times* is a commentary upon the spread of quantification and statistical measurement in the nineteenth century and the creation of numericized ways of thinking and doing. Gradgrind attaches great moral significance to precise measurement and insists on the incessant counting and weighing of all social and natural facts. Gradgrind was truly a man of the times. Benthamite utilitarianism and the growth of the 'moral sciences' was inextricably entwined with the consequences of industrialization and population shifts from the country to the city. The excrescences of early capitalist industrial development, wage labour and the growth of cities produced new problems concerning the governability of markets, populations, families and children, which demanded practical responses. Statistics pertaining to epidemics, suicide, workers' illness, crime, electoral districts, factories and so on were regularly and widely produced. Classifications multiplied and new categories of persons were produced. Ian Hacking refers to an "avalanche of numbers" in the period between 1820 and 1905.² During this time various social arenas and populations were

classified, analyzed and categorized within processes of statistical mathematicization. Dickens forges the souls of Thomas Gradgrind and his compatriots Mr and Mrs Chokemchild and Mr Bounderby within this crucible. *Hard Times* is, in many ways, a trenchant critique of statistical utilitarianism. Such processes were in Dickens' eyes, not only consonant with capital accumulation but also irredeemably hostile to family forms and childhood. He thus ties the emergence and spread of processes of numericization to questions concerning the form of rule of early liberalism and forms of social subjectivity.

Go and be somethingological directly.

Dickens

THE NOTION OF NATURAL LIBERTY (and its system) is central to liberal conceptions of government and forms of political rule. The 'problem' of how to govern 'natural liberty' has been an enduring concern of liberal thinkers from the early modern, especially eighteenth-century political thought, through to the late twentieth century. Natural liberty requires disciplined subjectivity of citizens. As a rationality of rule it aims to constrain the scope of political authority, limit its exercise and marry self rule to political rule. The alignment of political rule with self governance in the development of liberal democratic forms and mechanisms of rule in this period required "numerate calculating citizens, numericized civic discourse and a numericized programmatics of government".³ As Nikolas Rose argues, and Dickens illustrates, nineteenth-century liberalism demanded prudent, rational citizens with a

“calculative relation to life”. Public and private improvement required the moralization of the family and the fabrication of civilized subjectivity.⁴ The emergence of a “new way of talking and doing”⁵ indeed being, meant that political rule required and depended on numbers while at the same time modes of social classification became politicized.

When Dickens was being buried beneath “the avalanche of numbers” he could not have anticipated the full extent to which statistical and calculative regimes were to shape the formation of the so-called human sciences and governmental programs. As statistics were collected, collated, classified and systematized a curious thing happened. Determinism collapsed and knowledge was relativized. Hacking refers to this as the “erosion of determinism and the taming of chance”. The impulse to quantities and statistics is paradoxical, for, “in a quantitative universe, exactness becomes impossible, deviation from the mean became the norm. Indeterminism was about to arrive”⁶.

It could be said that the nineteenth and twentieth-century ambition to appropriate ‘the real’ central to the “veridical calculating quest”⁷ of positivist epistemology and universalistic general theories would predictably produce relativistic outcomes. However, this would be to miss the more important point, which is the role played by particular forms of calculation, statistical procedures and modes of classification in governing social domains, private lives and social identities. It is here that a practical relation emerges between the collection of data, practical problem solving and the ‘art of government’. During the period of Dickens’ life, systematization and the application of new forms of reasoning within specific institutional arrangements, organizations and settings became important constitutive modes of social governance.

It would be a mistake to believe that the overcoming of determinism and the ‘taming of chance’ called forth a flowering of ‘natural liberty’. As Hacking points out:

The erosion of determinancy and the taming of chance by statistics does not introduce a new liberty. The argument that indeterminancy creates a space for free will is a hollow mockery. The bureaucracy of statistics imposes not just by creating administrative rulings but by determining classifications within which people must think of themselves and of the actions that are open to them.⁸

‘Natural liberty’ is deeply social. It is deeply social as a construct and as a basis upon which social life is governed, policies and programs imagined, fabricated, implemented and evaluated.

Today social governance is becoming entrepreneurial. We live as citizens in a liberal democracy which is undergoing profound changes. The rise of the so-called ‘new managerialism’, the spread of contracts to an ever-increasing number of social arenas and institutional settings, the ‘businessing’ of state enterprises and the devolution and decentralization of state services, deregulatory initiatives and increasing reliance on ‘private’ regulatory authority are all part of the so-called re-invention of government along entrepreneurial lines. A high degree of uncertainty is associated with these changes. Current restructuring processes in both the private and public sector raise major questions about the kind of society likely to emerge in the future, and the types of citizenship and forms of personhood possible in this society. Neo-Gradgrinds, neo-Bounderbys and neo-Chokemchilds abound!

The rise of entrepreneurial government is characterized by a shift away from direct provision towards regulatory oversight and rule setting. These developments are not confined to the boundaries of the state, nor are they easily explained by our existing political vocabularies concerning the role of government. Government in this sense refers to wider processes and logics of social governance as well as the specific logics guiding state action. Entrepreneurial government posits new and different relations between the government and the governed. Further, it seeks new ways of regulating the economy and individual behaviour which imply a different form of social citizenship to that envisioned by classical liberalism.

Entrepreneurial government must seek to reconcile the emphasis on autonomization, devolution and decentralization with the continuing need for social regulation of autonomized agencies. This in turn generates an increasing reliance on management by accounting and indirect external forms of regulation which are usually abstract, quantitative and financial. Audits are a prime example. Their application and deployment across widely divergent social and institutional settings has become commonplace within western liberal democracies. They have become vital political techniques of entrepreneurial governance.

Audits as methods of social accounting, assessment and evaluation are an *active* force changing the nature of community organizations, services, corporations, and

of government itself. They are a specific political rationality and technique of governance. The political saliency and political authority of audit, its role in redefining and reconfiguring institutional forms and ethical conduct, is an issue of considerable social significance.

Traditionally governments have drawn on and relied upon professional expertise and divergent knowledge forms when establishing and guiding social policy regimes in areas such as health, education and social welfare. The capacity and ability to govern has been dependent upon the nature of different forms of professional expertise working within specific institutional settings and policy fields. Audit effects a displacement from the professional expertise of practitioners (for example, social workers, police, teachers, academics, doctors, etc.) to that of accountants and managers. This is because audits focus on the quality of *control systems* rather than the specific activities of practitioners. Individuals as bearers of variable expertise and judgement are replaced by other forms of assessment, evaluation and judgement as the basis for policy formulation. Professionals, once the subject of social governance, now find themselves the object of the auditing 'gaze'.

It is this abstraction from first-order activities which in part explains why the general principles of quality control systems can appear to be the same despite the wide variability in both the nature of audits and the social arenas in which they are applied (medical, academic, environmental, financial, property, management etc.).⁹ Despite the variability in modes of audits, it is the purported sameness and standardization of measures of effectiveness and efficiency which permits their transportability across different organizations and institutional settings.

It is important that the proliferation of audits is not seen as a 'natural' response to organizational and administrative exigencies. Audits are not simply technical and neutral mechanisms of validation. Rather they need to be understood as political technologies through which specific rationales are produced, in particular rationales pertaining to cost and efficiency, competitiveness, productivity and flexibility. Audits *represent* and *re-present*. They actively make environments auditable and construct auditees through a rhetoric of accountability and organizational transparency.¹⁰ Entrepreneurial governance premised on a



Rick Amor

separation of steering (policy formulation) from rowing (policy implementation) and the so-called purchaser/provider, principle/agent split, thus calls into being the demand for new forms of accountability (regulation) and hence audit. In this sense, audit "expresses and reproduces a particular model of social relations".¹¹ Audits and managerial or cost accounting act upon the conduct of individuals and organizations in order to redress supposed deficits in rationality and responsibility. They act on the conduct of individuals by enclosing them within a particular set of calculative techniques and arrangements.

As Michael Power observes, "Auditing represents the auditee and thereby creates the condition of its own functioning. It does not passively observe the auditee but constructs and inscribes it with the material basis upon which audit can operate".¹² In other words individuals and the social spaces they occupy are *made* calculable in particular ways. Accounting's authority and ability to provide 'transparency' to organizational arrangements resides in its capacity to quantify and subject other forms of calculation to particular financial logics and calculative regimes. Here my argument is not with quantification *per se* or with any presumed conflict between quantitative and qualitative forms of analysis. Such oppositions are misleading as guides to political assessment. Nor am I suggesting that such practices are devoid of value and

essentially socially regressive. I am arguing it is important to understand the role played by such calculations in terms of power, and to recognize *how* they are able to transform organizational settings and fabricate new forms of economic citizenship. Acknowledging the transformative capacities of accounting Peter Miller comments,

For to calculate and record the costs of an activity is to alter the ways in which it can be thought and acted upon. To reconfigure an organization into profit centres, cost centres, investment centres, strategic business units or whatever is to change the lines of responsibility and the possibilities of action by a change in the form of visibility. To evaluate performance by normalized returns on investment, or by benchmarking costs against those of competitors, is to change incentive structures and impose the requirement that actions conform to the calculations that will be made of them.¹³

The imperative of monitoring and the extension and intensification of accounting practices and the audit function in the current period clearly reveals how important calculative techniques are as principles for economic and social organization.

"You are in all things to be regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "by fact. We hope to have, before long, a Board of Fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be people of fact, and nothing but fact."

Dickens

THE QUASI-SCIENTIFIC IMAGE and seemingly neutral procedures of audit have played an important role in the re-invention of government along entrepreneurial lines. Procedures of audit, performance appraisal and financial management have come to play a constitutive role in the construction of economic and political 'truths'. The Victorian Commission of Audit spelt out the essential principles for the focus of the Kennett Government along entrepreneurial lines (contracting out, purchaser-provider split, separating steering from rowing). It also utilized particular accounting techniques, regimes and practices, which enabled it to speak authoritatively and 'independently' about the nature of debt, the 'true' level of debt, and hence the economic necessity for cuts to government programs.

It also provided a rationale for the necessity of the Victorian Government's widespread privatization program.

Similarly the truth-defining capacities of audit and the invigilating and classifying practices of contemporary accountancy were used by the incoming Howard Government to 'discover' black holes in the previous administration's fiscal regime. In both instances, purportedly 'independent validation' is sought by recourse to the political technologies and practices of audit and accounting. In both instances, the pastoral promise of these political rationalities is a return to economic and social security through the remanaging of risk.

The constitutive and transformative nature of accounting also flows from its ability to make policy and organizational assessments bow down before the inscrutable logic of the single figure. Miller states,

Whether this single figure takes the form of a Return on Investment, a Net Present Value, of an investment opportunity, Earnings Per Share, Profit, or the labour efficiency variance of a department, accounting draws much of its social authority from the objectivity and neutrality accorded to the single financial figure in Western societies. By this device, accounting can claim a legitimacy that is set above the fray, apart from political interests and intrigue.¹⁴

The "elegance of the single figure" as Miller terms it lies in its ostensibly apolitical and value-free nature. These assumptions make challenges to its logic difficult to sustain. The reference point of the single figure enables accounting to envelop diverse and heterogeneous processes (for example, the production of goods, health and education services), within a vocabulary of costs and costliness. The socio-political frames of reference of current debates with respect to the public sector, health, education, welfare and industrial reorganization are frequently locked into this vocabulary. Issues pertaining to governance of complex institutional arrangements, form, function, process and social objectives tend to be displaced in the process.

THE MYTHOLOGICAL STATUS and legitimating function of the single figure or 'bottom line', particularly as it pertains to the Budget deficit is increasingly the fulcrum upon which policy programs are articulated and austerity measures introduced. It provides a basis upon which measures of efficiency and effectiveness are assessed and organizations remade. What is excluded

or included within current accounting conventions and modes of national economic calculation (National Accounts) serves to define the parameters of 'economic reality' and social policy.

Critics have pointed to the limited and arbitrary nature of national accounting systems and questioned the utility of per capita Gross National Product as a useful or accurate measure of social and economic wellbeing. The exclusion of unpaid domestic labour; care for elderly people, children, those who are ill or disabled; the informal economy; the social and economic costs of environmental degradation and so on, has led to attempts to develop more inclusive accounting systems and thus shift the narrow and inflexible base of contemporary financial accounting. For example, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) includes measures of life expectancy and literacy rates among its indicators. Indicators such as access to clean water, infant and maternal mortality rates, the independence of trade unions, completion of primary school, and fertility rates have been identified, in 'developing' countries, as important measures of social and economic wellbeing. The reductive economism of much contemporary accounting ignores valuations of this kind in favour of "the elegance of the single figure", in turn generating "a drift towards centralized forms of control and the displacement of concerns about good policy by concerns about good management".¹⁵

No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog, who worried the cat, who killed the rat, who ate malt, or yet with that more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminiverous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs.

Dickens

COULD IT BE THAT these inventions, 'the national economy', 'national debt' and the 'international economy' are graminiverous ruminating quadrupeds? That is, fabrications within certain modes of economic calculation and discourse which seek to define 'economic reality' in a particular fashion?

The notion of a discrete national economy within a globalizing world is today, highly problematic. This does not mean that we live in a borderless world in

which national policies and national borders are dissolving. The period from the late sixties to the present witnessed not only an international relocation of investment, but also an extraordinary increase in credit associated with the rise of the Eurocurrency market and the advent of the Eurodollar. The emergence of 'stateless money', or credit money beyond the control of its nation state of origin provided a basis for new forms of corporate financing. These changes created huge funds of available credit beyond the jurisdiction of national governments and tight regulatory frameworks. Throughout the 1980s debt, generally of international origin, superseded equity as a source of capital. These broad shifts in financial relations where banking, credit and, increasingly, equity investment are highly internationalized, shadow the analysis of accounting as a social and institutional practice at the level of the 'national economy'.

The notion of a 'national economy' is created by marrying the imagined concept of 'the nation' with a wide range of economic processes called the economy. National accounting is the statistical representation of this marriage culminating in the idea of a discrete national economy, internally integrated and supporting domestic capital accumulation. Viewed uncritically such a statistical construct might seem a plausible basis for social and economic decision making. It is, however, deeply problematic, because national accounting constructs a particular version of economic reality which demands programs of fiscal austerity and policy nationalism.

"Statistical nationalism"¹⁶ attributes national significance to what are essentially corporate activities and practices in relation to trade, investment and finance. These activities are represented as *Australian* – in the sense that it is 'Australia' which imports, produces, invests, acquires debt etc. National income, national product, national expenditure appear as measures of national economic performance. They are, in fact, the products of corporate strategies shaped primarily by taxation-rate differentials between countries: the geo-spatial representations and artifacts of corporate accounting.¹⁷

Arguments concerning the need to reduce the balance of payments, current account deficit and the level of national debt are presented as 'national problems' demanding fiscal austerity programs. The main source of net income outflows and hence the long-term deficit on current account is interest and profit outflows (rather than an excess of imports over exports). These

outflows are primarily the direct consequence of private sector borrowing and investing strategies (much of it in international circuits). The effect of national accounting practices however, is to socialize this private debt by defining it as national debt, and therefore the responsibility of all Australians. What appears as "Australia's debt" under current accounting regimes is the debt of "around a dozen large companies recorded, for balance of payments purposes, as 'Australian'".¹⁸

If national policy makers 'believe' the balance of payments picture (and they generally do), they may raise interest rates, or cut public expenditure in order to reduce private expenditure. And if foreign exchange dealers 'believe' the picture (and they generally do) they will push the Australian dollar lower than it would otherwise be. Then indeed, the impact of the debt has been 'socialized'. This has been the history of economic policy in Australia for the past 15 years – private debt as a public problem, via the constitution of Australia as an economic unit.¹⁹

What is an appropriate response to these dilemmas? In what ways might an alternative approach differ in form and substance? Financial markets have the capacity through the buying and selling of foreign exchange to translate their views of a country's economic policy into financial pressure on that country. Risks and uncertainties are associated with deviating from financial market expectations. Nevertheless, the manner in which successive Australian governments have pursued credibility with financial markets has served to tighten rather than loosen constraints on social policy. Budgetary austerity and restrictive fiscal policies have encouraged financial markets to demand more of the same. Neo-liberal discourse, market rationalities and forms of calculation have placed successive governments in an untenable position: on the one hand seeking greater freedom from financial constraints, and at the same time, on the other, embracing logics and governmental calculations that serve to heighten those constraints.

Both Labor and Liberal governments have sought to rectify the 'debt problem' rather than redefine and reposition it. Statistical utilitarianism and 'real worldism' have prevented the posing of more fundamental questions concerning the construction of and calculation of national debt. Successive Liberal and Labor Treas-

urers (Gradgrinds) gradually grind out the same 'economic facts' convinced that "two and two are four, and nothing over" and, they will not be "talked into allowing for anything over", however:

not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these quiet servants, with the composed faces and regulated actions.²⁰

Suppose we were to reverse the arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown qualities by other means!

Dickens

SO-CALLED 'REALIST' (or reflectionist) accounts ignore the fact that accounting is a practical technology and a mechanism of social intervention. Accounting conventions and practices construct particular notions of 'economic reality'. Centralized cost-accounting and capital-budgeting techniques may, for example, produce negative investment outcomes. Return on Investment (ROI) calculations which seek to maximize annual return on investment, encourage management to reduce the investment side of the equation. ROI criteria therefore favour the adoption of short-term, illusory cost-cutting measures at the expense of medium or long-term "Greenfield development".²¹ Similarly, discounting procedures, for example, Net Present Value, which place a current value on the projected returns of future operations, stifle innovation and investment by not allowing for a measure which calculates initial front-end diseconomies against long-term gains or benefits on any other than the most conservative criteria. Accounting practices may therefore encourage or discourage particular kinds of economic activity. These practices bias enterprise calculation to short-term goals, thereby inhibiting the development of long-term sectoral and enterprise strategies. By discouraging investment in capital equipment, training, and research and development, these practices can hinder attempts to synchronize micro-economic reforms with national economic policy objectives.

Calculative practices such as discounting techniques or standard costing have *specific histories* and *conditions of emergence*. They are the product of changes in accounting regimes which occurred at particular

times and places. Historically, accounting has constantly transformed itself as a knowledge and practice. From the twelfth century through to the late twentieth century it is possible to trace the vectors and shifts within forms of economic calculation and to situate these in relation to the nature of specific political systems. Recognition of the historical variability, relativity and specificity of techniques of calculation is important. A genealogical approach to what we call accounting which locates questions of calculation within historically specific social assemblages provides us with a valuable analytical tool for assessing the power of modern accounting. The political and institutional arrangements necessary for the emergence, invention and development of particular calculative practices/bodies of knowledge serve as timely historical reminders of the folly of fetishizing present forms of calculation.²²

It is therefore important not only to understand accounting as a powerful form of professional expertise but to situate it within complex institutional assemblages and particular forms of government and political rationality.

The importance of understanding audit and accounting practices in relation to distinct political rationalities and forms of government can be seen in the debate about the public sector and the implementation of privatization programs in Victoria. Audit as a system purportedly seeks to generate trust and confidence in the processes of external verification. And yet, this process is itself highly paradoxical. The

public image is that audits are conducted in the name of making visible the inner workings of organizations . . . All promise external visibility of internal processes. Yet audit itself is an increasingly private and invisible expert activity.²³

An illustration of this paradox and the capacity of accounting conventions to construct particular notions of 'economic reality' integral to the privatization process is revealed in the sale of United Energy in September 1995. Here we witnessed the extraordinary enforced removal of the Auditor-General as external auditor of the process, and his replacement by a new auditor, Arthur Andersen, who had acted for the new owners



(Power Partnership) during the sale process. The substantially different estimations of profit between the Auditor-General and Arthur Andersen (\$70 million on sales of \$700 million) immediately raises questions concerning the visibility and neutrality of the audit practice and the ethical parameters surrounding such calculations. As Davidson asked at the time,

Did the business make a profit of \$45 million as implied by the auditor-general or loss of \$26 million as agreed by Arthur Andersen, and what implications would acceptance of either figure have for public perceptions about the sale price of the asset and protection of the public interest in the privatization process?²⁴

The specific effects of accounting practices cannot be ignored within political analysis. The infinite malleability of various calculative practices and accounting's powerful rhetorical capacities illustrate that accounting is not simply a neutral/objective, value-free technology recording data for rational economic decisions. Because accounting has become such an influential cluster of knowledges and calculative techniques the protocols governing accounting calculative practices are extremely important, carrying within them ethical content and moral substance. The significance of procedural norms and due process within liberal democracies should not be underestimated or preemp-



torily dismissed as technical, instrumental or bureaucratic rationality. The inability of the two regulatory bodies – the Australian Securities Commission and the Institute of Chartered Accountants – to adequately address questions of ethical governance in the case of the sale of United Energy raises important issues concerning the borders between the accounting profession, the accounting industry, the ‘state’ and legal frameworks.

Ethically, Arthur Andersen could not act as adviser to the purchaser of the business during the sale process when their duty is to minimize the cost of the sale to their client and then become the external auditor for the same period when the purpose is to provide a true value of the business for the people in whose name the business is to be sold.²⁵

The attempt by the previous Victorian Liberal National Party government (1993–Oct. 1999) to dispense with the Office of the Auditor General altogether and fully contractualize (privatize) the functions of the Office raised the spectre of untrammelled entrepreneurial government. The widespread practice of ‘businessing’ the activities of government, and a general contempt for the ethos of bureaucratic office, in particular the notion of the art of separation, was seen by critics of

the Government as placing hard-won and fragile achievements of liberal democratic rule at peril. Playing free and easy with the foundational elements of a liberal polity the Kennett Government revealed a profound lack of historical awareness regarding the role and function that such institutions have played in securing liberal freedoms and anchoring ethical conduct. Concern about the defences available to liberal democratic regimes against moral absolutism and the potential dangers of private unaccountable government may have figured more prominently in voters’ minds than Liberal National Party strategists had anticipated.

Termed neo-liberalism by some, the re-designing of government along entrepreneurial lines is dependent upon particular rationalities and techniques which are brought to bear on both state and non-state agencies. The entrepreneurial ethos is characterized by distinct types of rationalizing activity and integrates

quite specific domains of expertise into the practices of government. Understanding how and why certain knowledges acquire the capacity and authority to specify individuals and organizations as the objects and objectives of social governance is vital if we are to understand the impact of neo-liberal thought on social policy formation in recent years.

... his room was quite a blue chamber in its abundance of blue books. Whatever they could prove (which was usually anything you like), they proved there, in an army constantly strengthening by the arrival of new recruits. In that charmed apartment, the most complicated social questions were cast up, got into exact totals, and finally settled – if those concerned could only have been brought to know it. As if an astronomical observatory should be made without windows, and the astronomer within should arrange the starry universe solely by pen, ink, and paper, so Mr Gradgrind in his Observatory (and there are many like it) had no need to cast an eye upon the teeming myriads of human beings around him, but could settle their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge.

Dickens

ACCOUNTING AS A TECHNOLOGY for “making up people”²⁶ has not received the analytical scrutiny it warrants partly because it is frequently caricatured as boring. Accountants are often stereotyped as grey men in grey suits, who have extremely trim lawns, wash the car every Sunday and wear flannelette pyjamas while making love. Appealing as I find this image at one level, it is nevertheless an inaccurate and misleading picture of the social power of modern accounting.

Accounting practices and the procedures which govern them are of considerable importance in relation to current debate about public sector asset sales, the entrepreneurialization of state functions and state debt. Calculation and rationales of cost, efficiency, competitiveness, flexibility, productivity and so on are constituted as the ‘truths’ according to which the social identity of individuals and organizations are to be restructured and reorganized. As Foucault argues, power in this sense “is able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour”²⁷ How and why accounting measures and the idea of audit have come to play such a significant part in governing our cultural identity requires careful scrutiny. How different forms of calculation are appropriated and mobilized within political discourse and governmental strategies is important and demands greater attention than it has hitherto received. Astute statisticians of the world unite – you have nothing to lose but your pyjamas!

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fiction

Around the World in Fifty Steps

Libby Sommer

1. Joanne lives in a Sydney suburb with her two sons. It's 1992 and Australia is in recession.
2. "I'm sick of licking arse in a service industry," she says of her marketing business. "And I'm fed up with financial insecurity, the feast or famine of too many projects or not enough and chasing new business and getting clients to pay their bills."
3. "I'm thinking of renting the house out and travelling," she tells her grown-up sons after reading 'The Pitter Patter of Thirty-Year-Old Feet' in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.
4. "You're ready to leave home are you mum?" said one son.
5. "Why don't you just go on a long holiday instead?" said the other.
6. "I want a new beginning, a change of career, a new home, a community of people, an intimate relationship with a significant other, that sort of thing."
7. "You could always get yourself a dog," suggests a friend.
8. Her son moves out when she puts his rent up.
9. "Are you going to wait till he buys a new house for cash before you ask for a decent rent?" her mother had said.
10. "I've decided to go and live with Dad for a change," says the other son.
11. "I'll be away for six to twelve months," Joanne says as she throws her client files on the rubbish tip.
12. She spends the spring in Italy. The summer in England, Scotland and Ireland. The autumn walking the gorge country of the Ardeche in France.
13. In the winter she rents a studio apartment in Villefranche on the French Riviera. The studio belongs to a friend of a friend so she's able to get it at a good price. She works as a casual deckhand on one of the luxury cruisers in dry dock for maintenance. "The first thing I want you to do," says her boss when she arrives at work on the first day, "is blitz the tender." After a backbreaking morning of hard physical work cleaning the small runabout she goes to lunch. She orders a salad nicoise and a coffee and realizes her lunch will cost her a morning's pay.
14. A young and handsome French man who lives in Paris but comes to Villefranche to visit his grandmother most weekends, pursues her. Joanne comes to realize that French men love and cherish women as much as they appreciate good food.
15. She shops at the markets, paints and reads and falls in love with the light and the colours of the south of France.
16. "I'm able to live contentedly alone without a regular job, without a car, without speaking the language," she writes to her friends back home.
17. In the summer she moves on again before the tourist masses arrive and the rent goes up.
18. She gives away to her new friends in Villefranche all the things that won't now fit in her backpack but keeps her paintbrushes and pallet knife.
19. On the Greek island of Skyros she joins a group of landscape artists led by a famous English painter.
20. "My purpose in leading this group is to help everyone find their own unique style," says the woman.
21. Joanne spends the autumn in London meeting with other artists from the island and the

- woman becomes her mentor and they meet for a cup of tea every week and talk about the isolation of being an artist as well as many other things.
22. "It's important to stop and regenerate before the creative battery runs flat," she says.
 23. Joanne paints every day and goes out with an English man named Clive.
 24. "Your painting is vivid and alive," says the famous English artist. "I'll write you a letter of introduction to my contacts in Australia when you're ready to exhibit this collection."
 25. Clive has a strong face with chiselled square cheekbones. Dark brown eyes and dark hair that falls in a square fringe on his forehead. His fingers are long and sensitive for playing the piano.
 26. "What are you doing there?" her mother asks on the phone from across the ocean.
 27. "I'm painting," says Joanne.
 28. "But what are you *doing*?"
 29. "My mother is like a poisonous gas that can cross from one side of the world to the other," Joanne says.
 30. Joanne dreams about her sons every night and Clive tells her she cries in her sleep.
 31. She yearns for the bright Australian light and for the sound of the ocean.
 32. She returns to Australia for her eldest son's wedding.
 33. In Sydney, Joanne supplements her income from the house rental by getting a job as a casual for a clothing company. She unpacks boxes and steampresses the garments. Her back, neck and shoulders ache and she suspects she's getting RSI from the steam-presser.
 34. Clive rings to say he's coming to visit her.
 35. In preparation for his arrival she moves all her furniture out of storage and rents a small place near the beach hoping that he'll love it in Australia and decide to stay.
 36. Two weeks before his arrival Clive rings to say he's not coming and Joanne finds out through a friend that he's met someone else and is moving in with her.
 37. She tears up his photos and throws his Christmas present at the wall.
 38. Joanne stops painting.
 39. She reflects on the past and all that she's lost.
 40. *I thought when love for you died, I should die. It's dead. Alone, most strangely, I live on.*
Rupert Brooke.
 41. Joanne stays in bed most days but still feels so tired that she can only remain vertical for four hours in any twenty-four-hour period.
 42. The phone stops ringing.
 43. She rehearses her own death by going to the edge of the cliff.
 44. From the edge she sketches the waves breaking on rocks, the lone seagull on the shore at the water's edge.
 45. At home she fills in the drawing, blending black charcoal and white pastel reminding herself *the darkest hour is before the dawn.*
 46. *And, after winter spring always comes.*
 47. Joanne sells the house where she lived with her children and spends half the money on a home unit overlooking the ocean and the rest of the money on Australian shares.
 48. Her new home faces the east and she can smell the salt from the ocean.
 49. "It takes twenty years to be a successful artist," echoes in her mind.
 50. On a new canvas she drags the colours of the sunrise across the blank white space.

fiction

The complete illustrated s...

Myfanwy Jones

AT PRECISELY MIDDAY – as the ABC news tune unrolls on the airwaves and the bell tolls at the local primary school – the alarm clock beside the stove in Flat 58 buzzes. Time for lunch. It'll be a poached egg on toast with a glass of milk for the man with a face like a clown, just as it is every Wednesday. As he rises from the single white chair in the living area, and moves to place the book he has been reading squarely on the shelf by the window, a small slip of paper flutters out from between the pages. (He will always remember it as if in slow motion, the paper swimming down through the air like a fish out of water, nowhere to escape.) The slip of paper – not much bigger than a playing card – lands face-down on the carpet beside his left foot. Left is lucky. With one pedicured toe he flips it over to see what it is.

MORELAND CITY LIBRARIES

Branch: brunswick library
Date: 22 FEB 97
Name: Jennifer Susan Whitlock
(ID 85744)

ITEMS BORROWED	DUE DATE
Go tell it on the mountain 061991	20 MAR 97
Ngati 100691	01 MAR 97
Splitting the atom 140867	20 MAR 97
The complete illustrated s... 026264	20 MAR 97

Please retain this receipt and return works before the due date.

For renewals phone:
B'WICK 9240 2217 COBURG 9240 1246
FAWKNER 9359 4156 GLENROY 9306 3390
CAMPBELL TURNBULL 9383 4808

A library receipt. For just a fraction of a second he is unsettled and his brow furrows. How could it have found its way into the book? But it can't be his. He always folds his library receipt neatly and tucks it away in the back compartment of his wallet.

He bends over from the hip – lithe and flexible, like a rubber figure – and picks it up.

Jennifer Susan Whitlock

The rectangle of paper in his hand is without weight or substance; yet as he skims down the list of titles, a steady beat drums up in his gut. In April she read Go tell it on the mountain by James Baldwin, the book he is reading, one of the three he picked out last Saturday. He stifles a giggle that rises up in his throat, putting his hand reflexively to his mouth. Jennifer Susan Whitlock. She's left that in here just for me, he thinks.

The list is short and on the face of it gives little away: Go tell it on the mountain; Ngati (sounds African); Splitting the atom (nuclear physics?); and The complete illustrated s... But he is pleased by a puzzle, a challenge.

With a start, he realizes that it's just gone 12.15 p.m. and he hasn't yet put lunch on. He pulls the as-new 1979 MAXI Book of Photographic Design from behind the TV and opens to page 16. Today is April 16. He slips the library receipt between the shiny pages and closes it again, resisting the desire to open other pages, other days.

With the book safely back in its place, he moves the few metres across the room into the kitchenette.

– It's not that his face is ugly, exactly, but it looks like he has taken a very sharp crayon and outlined his eyes, so that they somehow stand out and stand back at the same time. It's only if you look into them carefully that you can see something amiss –

When the egg and milk have gone down and each

utensil has been washed and dried, the man takes the book from behind the TV and sits down again in the stiff-backed chair. It is 12.57 p.m.

His flat is on the seventeenth floor and he can hear kids playing way down below. It is a warm and bright autumn day, but this is neither here nor there. He never leaves the building on a Wednesday.

From where he sits, with the chair placed in the very centre of the room, the view from the window takes him to Rathdowne Street. Of a quiet night, he often sits and watches the orange buses pass by. He times them; a pattern is yet to emerge.

Flat 58 has one bedroom, a small bathroom, and a living area with adjoining kitchenette. There is only the one chair; he eats all his meals standing at the kitchen bench. The walls throughout are clean and white; no crying harlequins or galloping brumbies like those that adorned his mother's walls. And he has no trouble with the neighbours here. He can come and go by day or night and no-one pays him any attention.

He takes the library receipt from page 16. Now he can look at it properly. Jennifer Susan Whitlock. He fingers it gently and brushes it over his face, his lips, and, just for a second, touches it teasingly with the tip of his tongue. That feels too good so he stops.

No hurry. It strikes him that there is no hurry. No need to get out the phonebook, make any calls. He doesn't even need to see her. Yet. He can go through the back door, starting right now with the preachers in Harlem. Then Saturday is Supermarket and Library Day and he can find more of her stories and read her all through Sunday. Slowly open her up, slip inside, without her even knowing.

As he reopens the novel, it is with a new sense of anticipation and pleasure. He knows that she read this book sometime in March and that her fingerprints must be stamped on the corner of every page; when he looks closely, he imagines he sees spots of her coffee-flecked saliva.

Though he has already read to page 42, he resumes reading at page 16, carefully scanning for a clue, some kind of pointer. Where was she when she was reading this page? Lying in her bed at night with a lamp lighting up the words? Sitting at a table over breakfast with the radio humming, socked feet tapping? Traveling to work, or school, on an orange bus?

What was she feeling? She wasn't to know then that it was an important page; though maybe she had a twinge, a small moment of discomfort that she put down to a hard day, a fight with a friend. There must

be a clue there for him somewhere. He soon finds a sentence that stops him in his tracks. The central character, John, is talking about his mother:

Between the two faces there stretched a darkness and a mystery that John feared, and that sometimes caused him to hate her.

But then, as soon as he has taken the notepad from beside the phone and copied down the words, it seems much too easy – a brightly painted lure, not the real thing. He reads and rereads the page and as he does, he gradually becomes frustrated by the mess of words. They yell out at him but they hide something. Maybe Jennifer Susan Whitlock is herself a mother, all black inside, not a girl-woman like the picture that's already formed in his mind. This thought makes him angry – makes him think that the joke's all on him – and he almost rips out the page; but just as his face begins to fold in on itself, he finds the reassurance he is seeking:

Her face became the face that he gave her in his dreams . . .

Before he can stop them, tears of relief well up in his eyes. He quickly shakes his head from side to side to scare them away. 1:36 p.m. exactly. He is relieved, but also cross that she has played this game with him, so he closes the paperback and puts Jennifer Susan Whitlock back between pages 15 and 16, between arrangements of tomatoes on green velvet.

To reassert himself (he imagines her in the corner, watching him) he turns to page 29 of the same book and pulls out a photo of a woman with short black hair, taken at night as she is stepping out of a taxi. He props the photo up against the book, on top of the TV, and drops his trousers to the floor. As he looks at March 29, he flexes his calves, bare and smooth, and strokes his hand up his leg and along the inside of his thigh.

At 7:30 p.m. the buzzer goes off and the man with a face like a clown takes a break from reading *Go tell it on the mountain* to sup on fish fingers and frozen chips and beans. He stands at the bench to eat his meal and watches a police helicopter weave through the stars.

At 10:27 p.m. he finishes reading the last page and then he sits and wonders about her into the early hours. Jennifer Susan Whitlock. It's a name that takes itself seriously. He imagines her saying it aloud over the phone to Telstra or Citipower, enunciating each

syllable with care and pride. He wonders if she liked the book. Did she like John even though he is ugly and impure? Does she believe in being saved?

By morning he has almost decided to break the rules and visit the library. He's hardly slept. He can't imagine waiting until Saturday to find more of her books, though breaking the rules always makes him nervous. As a precaution, he touches his left hand to his left foot three times then waits in bed until the alarm goes off at 6:45 a.m.

He breakfasts at 7:00 a.m. on Weetbix with sugar and milk and a cup of instant coffee, then he washes and dries the dishes, wipes down the single white chair with bleach, and vacuums the flat right through. In the shower, he runs a razor up his legs and under his arms. After drying thoroughly – separating each toe and contorting to dry the dip between his shoulder blades – he covers his body in lavender lotion. He chooses a new blue tracksuit from the cupboard to wear with his whiterunners. In front of the mirror, he combs his bobbed black hair, smiles, and winks with his left eye three times.

Just before he leaves, he slips Jennifer Susan Whitlock into his pocket and sets the alarm clock in the kitchen for 12:00 p.m. He will be back in time for lunch.

Outside it's turned bad again and rain starts pelting down only seconds after he leaves the piss-drenched stairwell. He takes it as a good sign. He moves quickly through the playground and past the other blocks of flats. On Lygon Street he decides not to wait for a tram and walks the fourteen blocks through the rain to the library.

Every few minutes he reaches into his pocket to check she is still there.

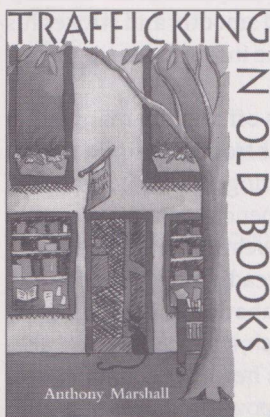
Inside the library it's warm and dry. The smell of woman is thick and it makes him squirm. A girl behind the desk smiles, so he nods and half-smiles back. There are only two other people in the library: an elderly man sits in a corner taking notes from a big reference book and a teenage girl sits head-bent over a text book at one of the square tables.

The man goes straight to the computer near the back to check through the titles. Ngati turns out to be a Maori film and according to the screen the video is on the shelf. Splitting the atom is out but due back in a week, and it's not a book on nuclear physics but a work of fiction. Finally, he scrolls through all the titles that begin *The complete illustrated s...* until one matches up with the code on the receipt. *The complete illustrated stories of the Brothers Grimm. Fairy tales.* This makes him smile.

At the front desk, he fills out a request slip for *Splitting the atom* and randomly selects a paperback from a trolley of books to be shelved. He always borrows three items.

"Weather for it," the desk girl says, as she drags the video under the scanner. He nods. He feels terribly excited. It's like he's a boy again and he's just stolen a handbag and doesn't know what's inside. The girl puts the video and books into a plastic bag and hands him back his card and a new library receipt. He folds the receipt neatly and places it in the back compartment of his wallet.

As he walks home, he caresses the big fat book of fairy tales through the plastic. Two down, one to go. And then? He pictures an orange in his mind and carefully quarters it with a knife, the pieces falling outwards in perfect symmetry.



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Drug Addiction as Demonic Possession

DRUG PROBLEMS ARE AS OLD as drugs themselves. Intoxication, violence and social neglect have followed in the wake of alcohol and opiates for thousands of years. Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and hundreds of less celebrated societies have experienced the fuzzy end of the drug lollipop. Drug use was just another problem until very recently when addiction came on the scene. Now we are told that addiction has propelled drug use to epidemic proportions and the wolves of debauchery and decay are baying ominously at the gates of civilization.

Addictive drugs are said to have the unique ability to perpetuate their use by compromising rationality and wreaking havoc on the faculty of self-preservation. They are said to enchant the victim by initiating a molecular-level brain disease. Molecular possession inevitably leads to disorder, dysfunction, perhaps even destruction.

Our response to what we are told is a drug epidemic has been to declare war on it. This follows a long imperial tradition of gunboat social policies. There have already been highly visible wars on cancer, hunger and poverty. These wars have had less than satisfactory outcomes. Cancer, hunger and poverty have barely been bruised, let alone battered. The main enduring effects of these wars are war industries. The war on drugs is one of the biggest. The National Institute of Drug Abuse in Washington DC has an annual budget of over US\$500 million and that is only a small part of the total war effort. The US prison system is growing at a much faster rate than the education system. It's all because of addiction.

The war on drugs generates a great deal of passion. It is one of those rare issues that unite people across gulfs of personal differences. John Howard and Normie Rowe stand shoulder-to-shoulder dredging up the same old and thoroughly discredited clichés. As an indicator of the desperate lack of viable ideas in this

area, the FBI is called in. The war on drugs is increasingly taking on the trappings of religion. It has its own saints, sinners and demons. American school children are taught to chant anti-drug mantras. This technique is reminiscent of education during Mao's Cultural Revolution. It should come as no surprise that these programs have been scandalous failures. Indoctrination is not a reliable path to enlightenment. The addiction demon has not been exorcized.

The demonology of addiction permeates our lives. The media are full of terrifying accounts of how addiction has destroyed individuals, families and threatens the very fabric of society. Public affairs programs are replete with images of kids flaked in doorways, and alleys littered with syringes and needles. Worse yet, clean-cut kids from suburbs with tended lawns and Volvo station wagons are portrayed as victims of this new chemical pestilence.

Addiction was once exclusively associated with drugs, but now it has extended its tentacles everywhere. There are reports of addiction to eating, dieting, love, hate, spending, saving, work, laziness, sex, chastity, pain, pleasure and even tap water. Tabloid television continues to contribute to the list of addictions. Saying "I'm an addict!" is a good way to get on the 'Jerry Springer' show.

Much of the fear and loathing of drugs is related to the notion of contagion. There is a mystical belief that simply being near someone experiencing the ineffable rapture unleashed by drugs may be enough to subvert the innocent bystander. Crack was seriously described as a forthcoming bubonic plague that would devastate the civilized world. End of the world rhetoric notwithstanding, crack use never spread beyond the black ghettos and even there it has changed little in the last decade.

Strangely, there is little evidence that drugs produce anything like the overwhelming and irresistible

euphoria dreaded by the public. The vast majority of those who take even the most feared and loathed substances report that they are very nice, little more. The idea of 'one hit and you're hooked' has no foundations in psychology or pharmacology. This common fiction breeds irrational fears and suggests that certain substances really do have demonic powers.

It is also curious that there is little evidence of a drug epidemic. It appears that illicit drug use peaked in the early eighties and has generally been declining fairly steadily ever since. Much the same pattern has been seen with legal drugs such as tobacco and alcohol. It is incorrect and alarmist to interpret the occasional upward movement in the use of one or two drugs as an epidemic. The current epidemic is one of concern about drug use, not about actual drug use.

INCREASING NUMBERS of scientists are beginning to question the addiction hypothesis. There are grave concerns as to whether the notion of addiction is well founded or productive. However, the expression of such politically-incorrect beliefs tends to be muted. In academia, such heresy is career suicide. It is seen as tantamount to the advocacy of pederasty. There is no doubt that drug problems are real, if consistently overstated, but there is good reason to believe that addiction is nothing more than a nightmare that we have created for ourselves. Addiction is a pseudo-scientific form of demonic possession. This, of course, requires some explanation.

To deny that addiction is a valid scientific concept or medical diagnosis is not a blithe denial of drug problems. It is beyond question that there are many shattered and dysfunctional lives in which drugs figure prominently. Nor is an anti-addiction stance a form of drug advocacy. Let these old and feeble cavils be put to rest: questioning the notion of addiction entails full recognition of the scope of drug problems and it has nothing to do with advocating anything other than a bit of sanity.

Given the enormous influence of addiction ideology, it is surprising that the concept has been subject to so little scrutiny. The notion of addiction is commonly treated as an indelible truth with the same weight of reason as the law of gravity. Its sacrosanct status is curious since even a cursory examination reveals major problems at every level of analysis.

The notion of addiction suffers from major conceptual, definitional and empirical problems. These problems have been detailed in the scientific literature but

they remain almost totally ignored. If the criticism is misguided, the errors should be exposed. If the criticism is not misguided, it suggests the need for a radical revision in the way drug problems are approached. Instead of resolving these core issues in a rational and informed manner, addiction advocates simply cover their ears and press on. They convene consensus committees that attempt to legislate the truth. The addiction hypothesis is based on assertion and faith, not evidence and logic. The belief in addiction exists, not because of scientific information, but in spite of it. It is old-fashioned demonology, thinly disguised as science.

If addictiveness is a property of certain drugs it should be pretty much the same now as a hundred years ago; it should be the same in Perth or Peru. If any drug is addictive it should be addictive in all places and at all times. *Bona fide* drug properties remain constant. However, addiction does not have even the most elementary constancy. Which drugs are considered addictive varies enormously from time to time and place to place. Authoritative pronouncements on the addictive properties of drugs are frequently reversed as the social climate changes. The political loading here is clear: if drug problems are not mainly due to drugs, they must be due to social factors. This places the blame on the doorstep of Canberra. Shouldering this burden of responsibility is not politically acceptable: it is far easier (read, cheaper) to scapegoat drugs.

Until recently cannabis was considered powerfully addictive. The cult classic *Reefer Madness*, once widely used in drug education programs, is now shown in art cinemas as a high camp comedy of the absurd. It has the memorable tagline: "Women cry for it - men die for it." Cannabis addiction is no longer fashionable. Or at least it wasn't until a few weeks ago. Newspapers now suggest that the new hydroponic cannabis may have jumped the rails and once again have become the killer weed of past generations. Just when most of us thought cannabis was fairly innocuous, we are told that it has mutated into a virulent and sinister form. The classic amotivational syndrome, discredited from stem to stern, is once again getting time on tabloid television.

Cocaine was considered harmless not long ago, but now it is said to be one of the most powerfully addictive substances known. Crack cocaine is said to be insanely addictive, capable of erasing the magnetic stripe on your credit card from a block away. For years health agencies stressed that nicotine was *not* addictive, whereas now they maintain that its addictive proper-

ties match those of heroin. There were no scientific breakthroughs that prompted these wild reversals in official attitudes, but there was a lot of political activity.

Addictive labelling has considerable social utility. The same behaviour may be treated very differently depending on the label attached to it. Habitual thieves get jail, kleptomaniacs get sympathy. Dopers get jail, addicts get therapy. 'Addiction' is a social label, not a valid medical or scientific concept. Power politics has transformed a social label into a medical concept, then it ratified the change by calling it a brain disease.

Social theorists are fond of the notion of addiction. It appears to be progressive in shifting blame from the user to the substance. Drug problems were long seen as signs of personal weakness, moral failings, wilful vice. Drug wars were usually just coded means of attacking minorities. Absolving the individual of responsibility seems to bring the matter into the twenty-first century, guilt free. At one time drug users were seen as evil, now it is the drugs that are evil. We're still dealing with sin. We've replaced old-fashioned guilt-ridden demonology with shiny new guilt-free demonology.

Addiction is based on the belief that certain drugs have a remarkable and unprecedented property. Addictive drugs are said to be able to coerce people into taking them again and again. To do this, the drugs must subvert rationality, cloud men's minds. Lamont Cranston, as the Shadow, had the same mysterious power. In spite of the frequency and authority of the assertion that drugs can subvert rationality, it is empty rhetoric.

That drugs do not subvert rationality is illustrated by heroin. Even sceptics say that if anything is addictive, it is heroin. However, large doses of heroin over long periods of time leave many quite indifferent to the drug. People who take opiates for analgesia report little euphoria, whereas those who take them for euphoria report little analgesia. Many thousands of soldiers in Vietnam were regular heroin users for months, even years. The US army was concerned about unleashing this legion of junkies on society. However, on returning home, the vast majority of these hard-core 'addicts' simply walked away from the drug. They could say 'no' all too easily. These 'addicts' may even be *less* likely to have drug problems than the general population. This is incomprehensible in the ideology of addiction since it suggests that addiction *reduces* drug problems.

The fact that some can use any drug and remain unscathed, whereas others get into problems with almost anything has led to the notion of an addictive

personality. According to this view, the development of addiction requires a pathogen (i.e. drug) and receptive host, someone with an addictive personality. This model follows the well-established bacterial infection model of disease. The notion of an addictive personality has never had much support. People with drug problems do not fall into any distinct personality type. As early as 1945, investigators reported no personality differences between alcoholics and non-alcoholics. Since that time the notion has fared consistently poorly. Miller summarized his review of the addictive personality: "One could conclude from the research that the average alcoholic is a passive, overactive, inhibited, acting-out, withdrawn, gregarious psychopath with a conscience, defending against poor defences as a result of excessive and insufficient mothering."

Many see the existence of withdrawal symptoms as proof positive of addiction. There is a widespread belief that the body comes to 'need' certain substances and, when the substances are no longer available, unpleasant consequences follow. Taking the drug reduces the unpleasant consequences and the vicious circle begins. Withdrawal symptoms are said to indicate physical dependence. As with so many aspects of addiction lore, the nature and implications of withdrawal are badly misunderstood. Beneath the superficial reasonableness lies a mass of inconsistencies.

Scores of withdrawal signs have been described. They include: irritability, anxiety, sleep disturbances, moodiness, runny nose, the shakes and even convulsions. However, these symptoms do not occur in many users and even when they do, they rarely last for more than days. In contrast, relapse to drug use may occur months or years after any withdrawal signs have disappeared. Withdrawal signs cannot explain relapse, or anything else about drug use.

Drug users have to know what withdrawal symptoms are expected in order to produce them. Clear withdrawal signs often do not follow even long-term heroin use. The image of the junkie writhing in the agony of cold turkey is largely a creation of Hollywood. Few heroin users have ever seen such symptoms. Once again, this is psychology, not pharmacology.

There is another reason why withdrawal cannot be an important factor in drug use. Some of the most commonly abused drugs such as cocaine and amphetamine produce virtually no withdrawal symptoms. Conversely, anti-depressant and anti-hypertensive drugs are not abused at all although they often produce heavy-duty withdrawal symptoms. Abuse with-

out withdrawal is common, as is withdrawal without abuse. There is no fundamental association here. There is only a relentless grasping at straws.

SINCE THE ASCENDANCY of the addiction notion there has been little progress made in treating drug problems. In spite of mountains of research, theory and application, drug treatment success rates are so poor that they are rarely even mentioned. Worse, poor success rates are often covered up. The heavily-funded DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program in the US has repeatedly been shown to be ineffective or worse. Just the same, the money keeps pouring in. Bad results can always be dealt with by the spin doctors in public relations. This is bad science and worse social policy.

The major reason given by users for their failure to quit is that they think they are addicted. Drug users are widely portrayed as victims of molecular processes beyond their control, devils in their brains. Addiction provides a 'vocabulary of motive' which makes the failure to stop, not just acceptable, but expectable. The success of drug cessation programs is limited by a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The definitional chaos surrounding the notion of addiction highlights the weakness of the concept. The extremely broad and variable usage of 'addiction' has deprived it of precision. 'Addiction' is popularly applied to almost any recurrent, motivated behaviour. Even with respect to drug addiction, there is a great deal of confusion. A recent review identified one hundred and twenty-six different definitions of tranquilizer addiction alone.

There are hundreds of definitions of addiction, each trying to rectify the glaring inadequacies of the others. Apart from that of the US Surgeon General, two other definitions have become standards: they are that of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The relatively wide use of these definitions does not reflect their inherent superiority, rather it reflects the superior marketing muscle of these powerful lobbies.

The Surgeon General lists three primary criteria of addiction. They are: highly controlled or compulsive use; psychoactive effect; drug-reinforced behaviour. The analysis below indicates that these criteria are either so vague as to be meaningless or so absurdly over-inclusive as to be useless.

The criterion of controlled or compulsive use does not specify just how much control or compulsiveness indicates an addiction. This is a crippling deficiency.

Without this specification there is no way of differentiating shooting heroin from drinking coffee, or smoking crack from jogging. 'Addiction' increasingly means whatever you want it to mean. Anything that means everything means nothing. 'Psychoactive' is also an over-inclusive criterion since virtually every substance we encounter can alter mood. The same criticism applies to 'drug-reinforced behaviour'. Heroin can alter mood and reinforce behaviour. So too can water, aspirin, sugar and dozens of other harmless substances. The Surgeon General does not define addiction at all. His pronouncement is little more than a loose amalgam of ill-defined buzz words.

WHO has attempted to side-step the definitional pitfalls of 'addiction' by dropping the term altogether. They now prefer 'drug dependence'. Unfortunately, this is only a change in the Emperor's clothes; 'dependence' looks suspiciously like 'addiction' and all of the authorities, including WHO, use the terms interchangeably. The semantic shuffle solves nothing. The current WHO definition is: "Repeated use of a psychoactive substance or substances, to the extent that the user (referred to as an addict) is periodically or chronically intoxicated, shows a compulsion to take the preferred substance (or substances), has great difficulty in voluntarily ceasing or modifying substance use, and exhibits determination to obtain psychoactive substances by almost any means. Typically, tolerance is prominent and a withdrawal syndrome frequently occurs when substance use is interrupted. The life of the addict may be dominated by substance use to the virtual exclusion of all other activities and responsibilities."

The WHO definition suffers from all of the inadequacies of that of the Surgeon General plus a few of its own. First consider the criterion of repeated use. Addiction is supposed to account for repeated use, so including it as a criterion of addiction is circular reasoning. This fundamental logical error is as common as it is wrong. Next is 'periodic or chronic intoxication'. Virtually all drinkers become a bit intoxicated from time to time; does this mean they are addicted? The next two points, 'compulsion' and 'difficulty in stopping', are just variations on the repeated use theme and are circular and inappropriate. It is strange to use 'tolerance' in a definition of addiction since we become tolerant to light, sound, sugar, salt and a thousand other things. Lastly is the presence of withdrawal signs. The inappropriateness of this criterion was discussed above. There's nothing left. This is another empty definition, replete with authority, nothing else.

The definition presented in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association is a combination of those offered by the Surgeon General and WHO. As such, it suffers from a host of problems. There is one significant element of the DSM-IV definition that is not present in the other members of the big three. The American Psychiatric Association stresses that the substance must result in harm to the individual or society. This criterion suggests that the authors have a social conscience, but it creates more problems than it solves.

Humans are irrational in many respects. In spite of a barrage of warnings about sunlight, dietary fat, sugar and salt, we continue to expose ourselves wantonly to these agents of death and destruction. Use despite harm is not an indicator of addiction, but of human frailty and the ineffectiveness of fear in changing behaviour. The 'stop it or you'll go blind' rhetoric is becoming increasingly ineffective. The vast majority of drug users think that any harm associated with their drug of preference will happen to someone else, not them. Everyone who drives a car or turns on a light harms the environment. Are these persistent and harmful behaviours addictions?

There is an attempt to disguise the essential inadequacies of definitions of addiction by dragging in social science jargon. Terms such as 'craving' and 'psychological dependence' are common currency. When does wanting become craving, or needing, or a dependency? There are no criteria for making these crucial distinctions. Since the social science jargon is at least as vague as the notions of addiction, it further hobbles already limping definitions. Current definitions of addiction are fundamentally inadequate and the problem is made worse by trying to prop them up with jargon that is even more poorly specified.

The combined efforts of thousands of legislators and scientists for generations have not produced a definition that is even remotely satisfactory. This utter lack of progress is unparalleled in science. Moreover, the situation is, if anything, getting worse. If, as it seems, addiction cannot be defined, then those who use the term do not know what they are talking about. Alternately, everyone knows what *they* are talking about, but not what anyone else is talking about. Addiction is a tower of babel.

In an attempt to deal with persistent definitional problems, the American Psychiatric Association has adopted a checklist approach. This approach is undeniably flexible, but it creates serious problems. For

example, an automobile may be defined as having four of the following characteristics: windscreen wipers, headlights, seat, wheels, engine, transmission, instruments and an exhaust system. An object with four of these characteristics might be a car, but it could also be a Boeing 747, a lawn mower or an oil derrick. The same applies to using this approach to define addiction. It allows almost anything to be considered an addiction. It is subjectivity masquerading as objectivity.

There can be little objection to the loose everyday use of 'addiction'. However, any definition with major implications for treatment, social policy and litigation should have a degree of precision at least comparable to that of other major diagnostic categories. For addiction, this sort of precision, or even a rough approximation thereof, is not available. Authoritative definitions such as those of the Surgeon General and WHO give an illusion of precision that vanishes under the slightest scrutiny.

The one common element of definitions of addiction is reference to the problem use of something. The futility of this may be illustrated by the following dialogue:

"Why does he keep using drugs?"

"Because he's addicted."

"How do you know he's addicted?"

"Because he keeps on using drugs."

'Addiction' is not a definition, but a restatement of the problem. Circular definitions go nowhere, which is where this problem has been going for a long time.

In an attempt to break the futile circle of definitions, scientists have devoted an enormous effort to investigating mechanisms in the brain. If something in the brain could be found which turned compulsive drug use on or off, the argument would be conclusively resolved. Such findings would establish addiction as genuine and sceptics would be banished to the wilderness overnight. The head of the National Institute of Drug Abuse maintains that such evidence is already in. Such an extravagant claim merits close inspection.

Drugs have many effects on the brain. The question is whether any of these effects perpetuate drug use. Are they the neural basis of addiction? At the moment, the hot candidate is the release of dopamine in a brain area called the nucleus accumbens. Cocaine and heroin release dopamine in this area and this has been widely heralded as the neural basis of addiction. However, the hosannas are clearly premature. Hunger,

eating, thirst, drinking, sex, pain and all sorts of harmless everyday events also release dopamine in the nucleus accumbens. Dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens is not the neural basis of drug addiction in spite of claims to the contrary.

Whereas brain research has greatly increased our understanding of many conditions, problem drug use is not one of them. There is a vast amount of information, much of which is interesting, perhaps even important, but putting it together to unravel the riddle of problem drug use is still a long way off. Current concepts and data are just not ready for prime time. Addiction advocates make inappropriate use of unsubstantiated brain mechanisms to validate their unfortunately unsuccessful efforts. This is neuromythology.

The addiction argument rests heavily on data from animal experimentation. Advocates of animal experimentation maintain that the essential features of human drug taking may be represented in laboratory species. The validity of animal models of addiction is increasingly doubtful. Human drug taking is influenced by many factors that have no meaning for animals. Imagine a rat turning to alcohol because it has lost its job, or a monkey using cocaine to improve its sex life, or a chimp shooting heroin in order to be accepted by its friends. The major factors in human drug use have no parallels in lab species. It is questionable whether animals could correctly be said to 'abuse' drugs. If a rat was stoned all the time, would it lose its job, be evicted, shunned by its peers, or feel the long arm of the law?

When given any choice, even animals that have been forced to take drugs for a long time choose *not* to take drugs. Equally damaging are findings that laboratory animals will take many drugs that humans don't like at all. Conversely, laboratory animals are indifferent to or actually dislike alcohol, cannabis, tranquillizers and other drugs that humans like a lot. There is no animal model of addiction, yet the vast majority of

addiction research continues to use animals and talk about them as though they were addicted. This approach is about as valid as using animals to study music appreciation.

Significantly, heroin use among Afro-Americans in New York has recently plummeted. This reduction in drug use is not due to any treatment, but to changes in fashion. There is an important moral in this. Drug use is more a problem of psychology than pharmacology. It is irrational to blame behavioural problems on mythical drug demons. As long as we pursue demons, the real determinants of drug use will remain a mystery. It is impossible to start with a weak concept, add definitional chaos, make this hopeless amalgam a quasi-religious belief structure and expect to have a viable end-product. Even politicians can't make this one work.

IF IT'S NOT ADDICTION, why do people do dumb and destructive things with drugs, gambling, sex, and a thousand other things? Quite simply, we don't know. There is undoubtedly no single reason to account for such a diverse group of self-destructive activities. However, there is one certainty. Invoking an invalid phantom like addiction is unlikely to help. Science is about escaping from the demons that haunted our ancestors, not embracing them.

Irrespective of authoritarian pronouncements, the belief in addiction is no more rational than the belief in demonic possession or brain karma. The fact that 'addiction' is couched in scientific terminology does nothing to disguise its fundamental inadequacies.

As the great social luminary Kinky Friedman once said: "When the horse is dead, get off." Addiction is a dead horse, yet a lot of cowboys are still trying to ride off into the sunset on it.

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Brian Musgrove

Red-White-and-Blue Conspiracy

Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair:
Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press (Verso, \$50).

IN THE *Weekend Australian* of 15–16 January 2000, Frank Campbell reviewed William De Maria's *Deadly Disclosures: Whistleblowing and the Ethical Meltdown of Australia*, painting a grim picture of the invariable fate of those who "see and report wrongdoing as if they lived in a working democracy". In contemporary western states, De Maria suggests, the whistleblowers *always* suffer; what they represent is a spike of conscience jammed in the machines of politics or corporatism, momentarily showing how the big end of town goes about its business. There is no end to the rich variety of ways in which exposers of public- or private-sector malpractice are damned, demonized and destroyed; and Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair's *Whiteout* starts with such a study in classic American character assassination.

The book's springboard is the case of Gary Webb: the *San Jose Mercury News* journalist who first broke the story that the cocaine converted into crack and sold through street gangs in south-central Los Angeles could be traced back to a San Francisco syndicate. Webb revealed that major players in San Francisco – Nicaraguan 'refugees' – had strong links with the US intelligence community. The crack epidemic blighting America's ghettos had its origins in clandestine dirty operations: the CIA-driven war against the Sandanistas, in which the co-related traffic of arms and drugs, and the imperative of raising vast stashes of unaccountable cash, were the main structural features. As Webb's story gained a national profile, through his appearance on talkback radio, breakfast television and neighbourhood-hall stages – and the *Mercury News* website, logging 1.3 million hits per day – the initial positive interest in his claims evaporated. "Within a couple of weeks, the story that Webb laid [in late August 1996] would convulse black America and prompt the Central Intelligence Agency first to furious denials and then to one of the most ruthless campaigns of vilifica-

tion of a journalist" in American history. Through open accusation and newsmedia networks, where CIA-friendly journalists occupied influential positions, the Agency relayed counter-stories which undermined and eventually ruined Webb.

In many ways, the story uncovered by Webb was not totally new. Decades before, the CIA had mauled the historian Alfred W. McCoy, whose book on *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (1972) remains an indispensable study of American foreign-policy realities in the Vietnam era. Despite the Agency's attempt to ban it, *The Politics of Heroin* was published, archiving a 'tradition' of US intelligence involvement in narcotics trafficking. McCoy discovered that the cheap heroin peddled to American GIs in Saigon was an actual currency of the war-effort: a fulcrum of fundraising, which financed pro-US insurgents in Laos, bought hardware, bribed officials, and mitigated the unpopular conflict's cost to the American taxpayer. Quite simply, addiction in America's armed forces was a direct outcome of official political strategy. Gary Webb's *Mercury News* story had a similar flashpoint: that crack-cocaine use in US cities resulted from the CIA's Contra-supportive activities in Central America, and that the Agency allowed 'renegade' operatives to profit from the drug trade. This was quickly seized upon by African-American community leaders; escalating, at its most extreme, to the view that the nation's intelligence services tacitly utilized the white-crystal crack as an ethnic-cleanser of the black underclass.

Cockburn and St Clair's *Whiteout* inspects this controversy with balance and sound judgement. But Webb's crack-cocaine stories are only the merest beginning; setting up an argument which valuably extends work such as McCoy's. The argumentative core of *Whiteout* is that we must dispense with the idea of 'renegade elements' unaccountably running amok –

the image of 'mavericks', who take self-serving liberties above and beyond the supposed legal checks that regulate the behaviour of intelligence. When the CIA has been flushed into the open over misfired dirty-ops, its stereotypical defence is to characterize the guilty as field-agents acting without the knowledge or sanction of superiors, or as banana-republic brigadiers and brigands betraying American trust, exploiting the power given to them as paid CIA sub-contractors for private gain – drug pushing, election rigging, murdering, money laundering – as if these were preposterously outside their job descriptions.

The truth is that the CIA is a tight outfit, with a disciplined chain-of-command and communications system, employing people who are rigorously vetted and trained, whose task is precisely to capitalize on links with crime. As *Whiteout* puts it: "Organizations such as the CIA require immersion in criminal milieus, virtually unlimited supplies of 'black' or laundered money and a long-term cadre of entirely ruthless executives (some of them not averse to making personal fortunes from their covert activities). The drug trade is an integral part of such a world." From its foundation in 1947, the CIA's affiliations with mafiosi have been mutually expedient. In the late forties, the Agency employed the Corsican heroin gangs in Marseilles to smash socialist-communist factions in French politics and the union movement – largely so that American goods, flowing through the seaport to a growing European market, would pass without interruption. The Corsicans were paid in kind: with a blind-eye turned to their narcotics shipments, travelling via Havana to Miami and on to New York. If "drugs end up in American veins", Cockburn and St Clair conclude, that "has never deterred the Agency".

Guaranteeing a free market for American enterprise has been in the CIA's mission-statement since its inception. And as super-capitalists par excellence, "drug traders ... are often in opposition to the ruling power" in leftish or unstable states, and thus allies "of paramount interest to a body such as the CIA". As Billy Bragg says in 'The Marching Song of the Covert Battalions', one of the CIA's roles is "making the world safe for capitalism" – "And if you want narcotics we can get you those as well".

Drug trafficking, like many other forms of subversion – from the death-squad to the infiltration of trade unions – has been an officially-endorsed keystone in the architecture of US foreign policy since the end of

the Second World War. Even 'endemic' would not accurately describe the place of drugs in the CIA ethos: it suggests deviance or chronic illness. The shocking fact, Cockburn and St Clair assert, is the utterly quotidian nature of CIA operations. This is a healthy bureaucracy in which organizing drug transshipments, reporting, business lunches and clocking-out of the office are the workaday routines of well-educated, well-spoken men in suits. In contrast to the glamorous Hollywood depiction of espionage culture, this is the sphere of public servants, who are bid to do the job of achieving American geopolitical aspirations as best they can: "it should again be emphasized," write Cockburn and St Clair, that the CIA works not as a "'rogue' Agency but always as the expression of US government policy" dictated from the Oval Office.

All this might be dismissed as conspiracy theory were it not for the impressive research and documentation in *Whiteout*. Occasionally, this involves retelling episodes covered elsewhere, but Cockburn and St Clair manage to produce new supplementary material. They draw, for example, on Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain's *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, The Sixties, and Beyond* (1992), adding more victim-histories to the list of casualties in "Dr Gottlieb's House of Horrors". This was Sidney Gottlieb, the CIA subaltern who headed MK-ULTRA: a 1950s project investigating the potential of LSD as a weapon of mass derangement. In the course of this and other CIA mind-drug experiments, large numbers – possibly tens of thousands – of unsuspecting American army personnel and citizens were dosed with acid. Many were permanently maddened: as in the case of the young artist Stanley Glickman, discussed in *The Age's Good Weekend magazine* (20 February 1999) by Russ Baker. The CIA confessed this to Congress in the late 1970s; and since then, as *Whiteout* details, it has been forced to repeated admissions of "dark alliances" with drug cartels.

Whiteout draws on Congressional hearings, CIA papers, interviews with Agency employees, and many more reputable sources to construct an overview of systemic narco-miscreance; and there is little need for wild speculation when this is mostly a matter of public record. The value of *Whiteout* is its comprehensive survey of a series of historic CIA pacts with right-wing political movements which are, in the main, involved in drugs and indistinguishable from organized crime. Dating to its support for the notorious opium-trader

Chiang Kai-shek, through the guerrilla warlord Li Mi in Burma's Shan states, the CIA's Civil Air Transport and its successor, Air America, shuttled drugs and arms and helped build the infrastructure of what would become the 'Golden Triangle' – one of the world's biggest opium-heroin suppliers.

Then there is the tale of Colonel Oliver North – another 'rogue' patriot – who acted under instruction from the Reagan White House to set up the 'Iran-Contra' drugs-arms deals. This is a saga studied before – in Leslie Cockburn's *Out Of Control: The Story of the Reagan Administration's Secret War in Nicaragua, the Illegal Arms Pipeline, and the Contra Drug Connection* (1988), but *Whiteout* puts it in perspective by highlighting the simultaneity of policy-based narco-trafficking and America's domestic attack on its own hapless street junkies. As "The queen of the drug war, Nancy Reagan" preached to the people – "If you're a casual drug user, you're an accomplice to murder" – her husband and his intelligence corps were flying plane-loads of cocaine into Florida and California to pay for a Central American war which was reputedly not happening. The Reagan administration watched, unconcerned, as American pilots and 'investors', Columbian drug barons, and 'refugee' Nicaraguans in San Francisco (CIA-backed agents) banked narco-dollars as a reward for fighting communism. Given this, *Whiteout* maintains, the international narcotics industry is 'business as usual' – and what odds, it asks, of any single nation winning 'the war on drugs' in such circumstances?

The resonant 'whiteout' of the book's title is the trade in white powders – heroin and cocaine – which has been so useful to the red-white-and-blue conspiracies hatched by the CIA in many troubling parts of the world. 'Whiteout' is also the magic stuff that obliterates typescript, that over-writes the pages of history with blank denial, that creates a gap-in-sense where different words can be inserted. *Whiteout* discusses this kind of scripted re-invention in minute detail, showing how the CIA retains "journalistic assets" in high places; writers and broadcasters who willingly recycle misinformation supplied by the Agency as legitimate news, narratively masking what they know to be wrong and profiting from the deception.

A final lesson of *Whiteout*, embedded in the tale of Gary Webb's systematic ruination, is of the American

media establishment's corruption; its reluctance to probe the apparently improbable fringes of governmentality, and its processes of professionally excluding dissident voices in its own ranks. In this regard, an investigation of the proximity of drug trafficking to the corridors of power inside Washington's beltway or in Langley, Virginia, is only one volatile issue which demonstrates the long and continuing collapse of journalistic integrity. For years, Noam Chomsky has argued repeatedly that the media in countries like the US – and, indeed, Australia – deserve public disrespect for their cowed complicity and neglect of vital social responsibilities. Consequently, Chomsky – himself an outspoken critic of American aggression in Nicaragua and of US narco-warfare – has been universally berated in the press as a conspiracist, anarchist lunatic who should have stuck to linguistics.

The author biographies on *Whiteout's* dustjacket proudly note that Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair are co-editors "of the muckraking newsletter *CounterPunch*". Muckraking smells bad; its habitus is the gutter and its motivation is money-grubbing. But as D.H. Lawrence memorably said, "culture" itself too often has "roots in the deep dung of cash": and *Whiteout* adds to that Lawrencean perception, demonstrating how the promotion of American culture and its democratic triumphalism is grounded in a squalid *realpolitik* which enables politicians, businessmen and gangsters to mint vast personal fortunes as a silent pay-off for their functionary allegiance. In this context, at least, 'muckraking' acquires a better odour. There should be more excavations of the policy dung-hill unearthed by Cockburn and St Clair – though future spadeworkers ought to know in advance that, for their trouble and conscience, they will be branded conspiracy-theorists (or worse), threatened, harassed, dragged through the courts, and greeted with mainstream-media disbelief. To anyone who is already conversant with the extensive literature on narco-politics, however, the revelations dug up by *White Out* will be sometimes familiar and generally credible. For those who wish to begin exploring this byzantine global underworld, *Whiteout* is an absorbing introduction.

Brian Musgrove teaches at the University of Southern Queensland. His first book on drug literature is due soon; a second, on drugs and geopolitics, is in train.

two poems

by Jim Aubrey

The Last Liberator

to Xanana Gusmao

For thirty years the puppet-master
blamed the communists.
Now his successors denounce a
small Australian prime minister
and they lament their embarrassment
and anguish after all they have done
for this ungrateful people.

“All your roads lead to misery
and death,” says the Maubere leader.
“Dig them up and take them with you!
We want nothing to remember you by!”

Mahatir and Woolcott say that the
dead are still alive, somewhere over there.
In Jakarta, the new president appears
more crippled than the nation.
They say he is a living saint and
his first proclamation echoes across
the Timor Gap – “Don’t piss in my face!”

The First Lady is transfixed by
a permanent Madonna smile
as if while posing for the Master she is
paralysed by the realisation that the
tiger has become a crazy dog.

In Dili, the last great Liberator
of this cruel century of weeping
and broken bones addresses his people.
Singing praise amidst forlorn tears
his testimony becomes a manifesto to
the true wealth that fortune’s seekers
discover – freedom, o bitter-sweet freedom!

Aussie Gringo

*to politicians who do not forsake principle
for power*

It began in 1975
when Pontius Pilate
washed his hands of
East Timor’s independence.
The cost of national interest –
200,000 innocent victims.

While genuflecting at
the altar of Realpolitik
and chanting their mantra
of pragmatic realism
they would call the dead
an exaggeration,
an aberration – like a wandering
biblical tribe, they would return.

Not one would reflect upon
our blood debt from another war
and they would leap over each other
like a solicitous frog choir
whose repetitive song was
a cacophony of lavish gratuity
for their Javanese uncle.

Every Christmas they would lead the
exodus to the beaches of Bali
where the smiling general would
MC the evening’s entertainment with
stories about the legendary deep-sea
waves of the Timor Gap and the
strange black-gold lustre of this
untamed playground.

Back in Canberra El Niño and
bogong moths envelop the Hill
while along the corridors of power
a curious echo heralds
the incoming Latin heat –
Hijo de puta Gringo!
What’d yer say mate?
Hijo de puta Gringo!

fiction

Passport

Victoria Cleal

THEY DID NOT TELL ME. They did not say I would need a passport. They did not mention mould-ering blankets in cellars and furniture rotting in the rain. Our house was dry and clean and the air was purified, but it seems I was no party to that.

When they told me I recognized the truth. I was gone, immediately, to seize a life at the risk of eroding theirs.

It's green. A land of Sunday afternoons spent watching black and white movies on TV. The cows are soporific and the people are gone. It's a long drive from the airport to the city and beyond, and somewhere on the way I realize I don't know what I'm doing; haven't thought it out at all. I want to stay on the motorway. In desperation I burn through half a pack of cigarettes.

Blue phones, special phones dotted on the way. Should I call? I want her to see me first, I want to be a mirror for her past and watch as it floods her.

But then I lose my nerve and spend the night in a city hotel.

My adolescent room still had a child's prissiness: a pink bed cover, small china ornaments, plastic jewellery. But I had begun reading *Dolly*, and select pages were spread thinly over my walls.

Sometimes, in this enclave of small, dainty fantasies, voices came when I lay down. They crept up, like the sound of leaves shaking; they pulled me closer until they were not leaves but a fey language in a hostaged forest. In the roots of dark trees they spoke around me, never at me.

I knew this was wrong, and would run to my parents.

They took me to a psychiatrist. They said I would be alright. Years later when the voices had stopped my mother said,

– We thought you might be schizophrenic. We were beside ourselves, though we didn't like to frighten you.

– Isn't schizophrenia hereditary?

– Well, it was just something hormonal, anyway.

I read a map in a cafe in a city where rain is like air and people imprint themselves with bone carvings. I feel sick and keep rushing to the toilet and swallowing Nurofen. In the cafe's bathroom I look pale. I scratch my chin and realize this trademark gesture is perhaps someone else's.

The drizzle isolates each house and fractures small towns into a series of shabby follies scattered over hills. A scruffy place. Many lanes part from the main road and it's hard to read names on letterboxes through the rain and the windscreen wipers. I chew several nails, slap the steering wheel, become irate, then drive up to a person in tracksuit pants and a raincoat who is trudging along the road.

– Excuse me? Excuse me?

She is a young woman and I seem to confuse her.

– I'm looking for Mrs Richards' house. Do you know Mrs Richards?

– Yes. Um . . . I don't know her really well. I know where she lives.

The vowels, like a petulant child's, are hard not to laugh at. Everybody here sounds awkward.

– Am I close?

– Yes, it's just behind – just behind the bush over there.

I thank her and drive on, but she doesn't move.

I panic going up the gravel drive, because apparently you're not supposed to just show up – you're guaranteed a bad reaction – and stop just past the trees to tidy myself in the rear-view mirror. I'm blurry in the dark day.

Oh God.

This is her world: an old house, 1920s maybe, with newer rooms tacked on. A house and empty paddocks, surrounded by bush. She cannot see the road. A station wagon juts from a small shed. No dogs bark.

I open the flyscreen on the front door and knock, the personification of suspense and frightened of my shock potential.

But she doesn't come for me.

The door is unlocked and although I'm unsure of rural etiquette, I decide I have a right to be here and enter.

The house smells of chickens. It is dark and frayed. An ancient red sofa piled with quilts sags before a fireplace, a bright refuge locked in by dark cupboards, mounds of junk and stacks of newspaper for the fire. Too many newspapers.

The kitchen is a mess of dirty dishes and junk-food wrappers. The rubbish bin is overflowing with Twisties packets and TV-dinner containers.

Where are the photographs of a husband? Parents? Another child? There are two unrevealing paintings, one of a sad-eyed dog and another of deer grazing in a lurid autumn landscape.

Down the hall there is a filthy bathroom, a room full of more rubbish and two other doors jammed shut. Rain drowns out the sound of all noise except the floorboards creaking below me. At the end of the hall, the former back door now leads to her room. It's lighter, a stale afterthought. More packets are discarded in here and I'm reluctant to go in, thinking of the many stormy nights I slept with Mum and Dad, the weekend mornings when I played beside their bed while they shared toast and the paper above me.

Her bed is a great fortress. The sheets and layers of blankets have been peeled back. She is gone, but she

has moulded a massive hollow there for me.

So this is my mother. She must be obese: the clothes on the ground testify to this.

– Voluptuous, not fat, my boyfriend Matt calls me when I'm depressed.

– Fat, I eat way too much. Look at my brother, he's a stick.

I have to rush to the bathroom to confirm what he says.

I wish he was here.

I switch on the light and stare into the mirror until I can't see myself properly and my face crawls into other shapes. Though I'm afraid I'll see something awful, the decrepit woman of the future, I wait passively.

The rain, like hissing, fades to whispers, and I can hear them; the old voices are rushing back from the darkness behind me. It is no strange language now but as I begin to understand they die back until there is only one voice.

It has no language at all.

I creep away from it, along the walls to the lounge, and bury myself in the quilts.

She must come back soon.

I light a cigarette. Goldilocks, with imaginary friend. Goldilocks was not one to reflect on her situation. I switch on the television.

Now. It is night. Something has blown through my hair and woken me.

The rain has stopped.

I feel along the walls and find a lamp. It gives out a weak light. I look around the room.

I see myself, on the other side.

I see my ghost.

It dissolves into the hallway.

I think I will lose control; I try to imagine Matt and my parents and their solid gestures. Light the fire, they would say. You should not be here.

Well, they were right.

– Mum, I want a perm.

– You're too young for that kind of thing.

– I want to look different from the other girls.

– You mean you want to look nicer.

– Yes.

I want a surfer boyfriend; what's the point of frying all summer on Manly beach in a turquoise bikini if you don't get noticed? Though the ones I want most only care about waves, I know what to do from numerous magazines: play hard to get, keep your hair tidy, never bitch about anybody, take cues from popular girls.

So there are many things I don't like about this house. When I leave, I discover the hire car has disappeared. And for a moment, before a good, hearty fear like a hidden razor plunges in, I think I could have stepped out of a fairy ring. It could be any time; it could be decades later.

I walk slowly down the hill, aware without looking that many lights are on in that house.

Carefully down the lane, through the bush and onto the road, believing in anything, remembering those dreams in which I am a mouse in the dark and an unseen cat is spiralling towards me. Down on the road it begins to rain again.

Some malicious bastard has stolen my car.

The town's buildings are swollen in the rain. The phonebox is vandalized and the grocery store is shut, but the cinema is open.

It's a small building, painted blue-green as they like to do here, with red concrete steps fanning out from flaking doors. A small sign at the snack bar/ticket counter announces it is not open for business.

The credits of a movie are rolling to, it seems, an empty theatre, to crooked rows of seats. The damp has gathered here for decades. It has built a palace of rest on maroon velvet and gilded wallpaper. Even the floorboards are slippery. The cinema has a proper stage.

The credits finish. Is the projectionist watching me?

It occurs to me to go ask them if I can use their phone, but first I want to walk up the stage's side steps.

What a strange place I've come to.

And I stand on the stage and don't know what to do. I touch the drapery. Look out.

The curtain opposite sways, breathes in, out regally. It moves so slowly it seems alive. Like the heart of a monster rose. A gentle ripple builds. It runs up and down leisurely. The ripple moves up and down faster. It brings out, locked in her own rhythm, a girl.

She is my twin.

Her head moves back and forwards, her body rocks. She looks sideways at me and pulls on the curtain. She is humming and she is my sister and I think she must be funny in the head. In jeans and a jumper like me but swaying, breaking away from the curtain into a circular dance. She dances around herself.

She dances and it is strange not to make introductions, to ask who she is and explain why I'm here, strange to be relieved of civility.

She is my sister and I don't know what she will do next. Her dance, perhaps to an audience after all, on this stage. Grimy pink beads from her neck to her navel. She is moving closer and when she looks at me I know I am not safe. Perhaps I'm being melodramatic to see hate there. I am thinking, thinking faster than her body can race to meet mine and this is what I can tell about her already . . .

The lights go on. A middle-aged woman stands by the doors, calling,

– Leanne? What are you doing here? Where's your mother? She stares at me. – And who's this?

Leanne shakes her head; it's my place to speak. I know what to say here.

Commercial Traveller

When you're in the train, alone
with anticipation and the evening
shuffle, you check that everything
works. The brain, your body,
little cubes of soap in thin paper.
You have done this before. And will
do it again. It has something to do
with the way the weather unfolds.
Or you go out to buy new shoes, full
of optimism that everyone says
will help.

"Latitudes of irony" – take that phrase.
Why is it never longitudes? does
longitude describe nothing?

*"Pour une peuple corpulent,
non!"*

Why is it
the French are so smart?
I get none of this.

Soon I will get off my train.

"I ONLY ASKED!" (that is my attitude).

Honesty is the best policy, it's what
thrills or hurts.

Here is my ticket. "Take this,
you bastard." I say that
merely under my breath. In fact –
though who can say it? –
I like the look of this nut.

I once walked to the top of
a tall tower and looked out at
all the birds, and at the air. They
and it, were everywhere, beyond the
lift and the plastic colosseum. (But I
don't tell him that. It's too familiar.)

Anyway, here's the ticket. He takes it
and I am through. My first day
in the city of Brussels!
where nothing will perplex me, I hope.

(It was sort of a plastic thing, out
near the diorama – as I looked at it.)
And nothing does.

Though strangely I am thinking of it,
that plastic thing. You have to laugh:
you take all those big thinkers – Wittgenstein,
Heidegger, Oliver North – and what do they
say the big questions are – *Is you is or is you ain't
my baby?* Stuff like that. No way.

Give me a pigfoot and a bottle of wine, my ticket
and a little umbrella. They're history.

John Jenkins & Ken Bolton

java, bali, november 1997

upturned lotus leaf. competing crickets chirp & scratch. vibrating tones become background noise (pull it forward). sweet incense smells: to give thanks to bring luck to continue to bring forth the past & summon the future to the orange present-tip dropping grey & crumbling into ash. pinpricks in the curved blanket above our heads. when green becomes turquoise becomes crimson on a leaf's underside. generation. regeneration. the river.

to survive among the red hibiscus one needs silverevee consciousness passivity & vibration sense. coconut palm trunks marked with time crack & warp abandoning capsules of watery milk. clicking bamboo blinds against the balcony. cauliflower clouds over the ocean.

there are potted plants; crimson frangipanis & palms for the tourists. blinded am i one unrepentant sun. the way foreign capital creates holes then penetrates them. you are sitting patiently crosslegged beneath the banyan tree carving a log's knots & branches into spirits. clumsy orangetiled roof. in a painted scene from the mahabharata a river separates the world of the living from the world of the dead.

it is written on the back of a postcard: you are waving as you pass alone rowing on glassy water towards the mountains crinkled silhouettes in the misty distance growing tiny under blossoming clouds. fruit hidden in branches' angles. sculpting sculpting how will you sing me? am i the oil slick collecting at the mouth of the river?

an incantation from unseen throats thickens the atmosphere before trailing into a quivering vibrato. you help people onto the bus with no doors. transformation. into smoke. weaving bamboo weaving bamboo mosscovered & matted with leaves waiting horizontal for the sky to crack. how will you write me? am i pouring concrete into your enveloping heat?

D.J. Huppertz

three poems by Robert Adamson

For Vicki Viidikas

East Balmain, the ferry wharf, dragon flies
and killer prawns hovering
above and below their reflections
on the harbour's milky surface
after rain. We knew there was no such
thing as death and felt good about that knowledge,
though where did we get it from?
You thought any form of flattery
was the rhetoric that killed poems;
now you are dead, there's no 'other side'
although maybe you're back
as something not so human.
I looked up a line of Michael Palmer
with your random method tonight, it is
She said 'perhaps' then it echoed.
and found this phrase in his essay on Jess's Narkissos
'The dark spring of Narcissus
is a kind of well of symbols' I stood there
before the words in my room
with a torn page in my hand, the last poem
you wrote for me. It doesn't work
I would say. 'Everything works if you forget
your so called reputation'
You mocked the idea of any kind of fame
even if it paid. I fall into talking to you in this space
and wonder if I should mention pomegranates,
night parrots or poodles – When
we first met you told me your job
was clipping the nails of poodles, I thought you
were making a savage joke about work.
You told me the imagination would get me nowhere.
Miles Davis is allowed to speak to God.
And I'd never write a line of poetry until I learnt to dance.
Vicki, one of your lines of advice still haunts me.
Give up everything and write.

Elizabeth Bishop In Tasmania

The hop-sotch map on the pavement
puzzled her at first, a boy mucking
around with a hoop caught her sharp eye
and she put them together

as a new drink. A wizard with flowers
no good with bereavement, she
continuously topped up her tight stanzas
and tucked her emotions away

in print. The critics write about her
scrupulous control, her management
of traditional forms alongside her verse libere –
hardly her style in life itself

where she found oblivion in tides
of alcohol, where she said she wanted,
'closets, closets and more closets!' She set sail
for Tasmania once a year, when

the moon was full; nobody knew
where she ended up, people thought
her poetry was some kind of record when it was
subterfuge, she was a true Tasmanian.

Bring me flying fish on a crinkled ocean,
sea-horse and patagonian toothfish, the icy crags
turn pink tonight, the kiss of flesh on flesh,
as the eyes dim and invisible black birds sing.

Cornflowers

There are no cornflowers here,
the sunlight slants through
the glass, the harbour
glitters, ruffled by a light westerly;
the jacaranda tree is in flower
and almost comes in through
the open window; honeysuckle
perfume, channel-billed cuckoos
and then huge fruit bats
as soon as night comes –
in the darkness neon signs
throwing red and blue reflections
across the surface of the tide,
Sydney Harbour Bridge
a dark arch with lights blossoming
linking the past with the present.
I pick up an empty vase
and place it on the coffee table,
when you walk through the door
you will fill it with the missing cornflowers.

Heroine

for Vicki Viidikas (1948–1998)

you are my heroine exotic traveller
in distant places mood changer
a look can make my blood sing or
bring on the darkness take my arm
I walk tall until I grow wary

White Lady always the stronger lover
exhausted I crawl ashore – too frail –
you said – to hold me in your arms –
waves crash on rocks you cannot breathe
caught in a rip you drown at the reef

all lost in the change of tides
I cannot cry my tears

Jenni Nixon

Poetry Reading

at the rostrum the Spanish poet
wears black & serious sideburns
thinks emptiness “takes on a meaning”
reads a poem about Luna Park
abstruse as literary theory
he tells his listeners
to “have a nice fucking day”
they neither flinch
nor glance at each other in collusion
& inhale this listless existentialism
the wind drags the canvas
over the dirt back & forth

an endless tide
then there's laughter
from the tent next door
i must be in the wrong place
& leave aspiring after hilarity
my feet crunching stones

Carolyn Gerrish

A Friend Come from Afar

for Xiao Ding

you crossed the yellow river to seek me out
you traversed the south all the way
from no. 1 to no. 203
the 202 households were individual ones
no. 203 had over 1000 people living in it
you were surprised
full of complaint saying that it was so hard to find me
did you think that the south was all bird nests
you were tall lying on your stomach in love every day
like a happy stud
i was short creeping in and out of love
like a male cat that could not find its nest
you were white skinned i was black in the face
the sun was closer to me distant from you
we were sitting in an inn in the south
feeling like old friends at the first meeting
like two murderers feeling like old friends at the first
meeting
you told me about many geniuses in the provinces
this so and so called han dong
this guy who wanted to be a sartre
this guy of fine, delicate features
this guy who was living in nanjing
this guy who could only run for sports
you read my work in a winter
and were quite taken aback
you said that apart from you
yu jian was our enemy

we'd have to be cautious about that bastard
probably he'd got his ticket for sweden
feeling like old friends at the first meeting
i was happy i did not know you in the past
i was happy there were things to talk about
the women in the south were beautiful like spring
in all seasons
many men had affairs all their life there
but in the south you could not say anything
there were tall mountains
the sun was the golden pendant on its neck
there were deep rivers
when the sun dropped in them it would not even
make a splash
many years no-one knocked on my small room
han dong said we could have a chat
we then chatted about
writing first-rate poetry
reading second-rate work
falling in third-rate love
as for what poets meant
we sneered
it was dusk outside
someone was selling evening newspapers
drinking coffee then beer then cold water
pissing three times at intervals
when the dinner time came
ding dang your name was really ringing
i did not have money today
next time i'll take you to shuncheng street
to eat *the rice noodle across the bridge*

Yu Jian

translated by Ouyang Yu

Mark Mordue

Pissing in the Wind

YOU KNOW WHENEVER I put Neil Young on the stereo, I find myself fifteen years old, learning to drive on the long free roads of the Northern Territory, a bauxite redness in the land and the pale, ghost greys and lean tawns of the gum trees jittering past like wilting bones. The air seems to burn in the bush, to crackle in the sun, hot breath in an old man's ribcage. Nothing is moving, but the whole place seethes. This big, vast silence, crackling, while *Vampire Blues* pumps on the cassette player and my mother has to keep seizing the wheel and pulling it towards her as I keep getting hypnotized by oncoming cars, drifting toward them as I watch them approach. Took me a while to get the hang of watching where I was going. Watch the fucking road, for God's sake, watch the road. Jesus.

I'm thirty-eight years old now, listening to Neil Young in New York City, snowflakes out my window, getting carried home to Australia and the dry heat of growing up in an isolated mining town. To those times. It's his voice. The weight of his guitar. Both embedded in me.

My mother had picked up on Neil Young from a couple of Canadian hippies who lived across the road in Nhulunbuy. They were mostly famous for smoking pot, walking around their house nude, and their two young sons, who had nearly waist-length blond hair and seemed to run feral, although Carol their mum – who the kids called by her first name – used to teach them herself and they usually got good grades that no-one felt they deserved. The boys were twins. One would grow up to be an artist in Sydney, the other stayed in town as a miner.

It could be a brutal town for choices. I used to watch the next-door neighbour's husband falling asleep standing up at 6a.m. at the bus stop opposite our home. His wife was fucking another guy, and he was trying to literally work it out, doing 'doublers', these long

twenty-four-hour shifts in solid blocks of 2x12. As if he could pummel himself back into shape. Eventually he couldn't take it anymore, and he left town in a four-wheel drive. There were no roads in or out, so this was a dangerous business at the best of times. About a week later they found his truck bogged in a dry riverbed, with him crouching dead beside it. My father was called in to identify his friend and neighbour, but he came home weeping, not able to recognize his dark-haired workmate at all: his whole body had been cooked black by the sun, his hair had turned white as a ghost. The sun had made him into something else.

Down the road from us were the Stevenses. Nothing but trouble. The older brother Tim was a skinny guy with black hair, a bad tattoo of a heart on his arm and a leather jacket in tropical weather. Just fucking dumb acting cool without even knowing what cool was. By the time he was seventeen he would already be in some kinda jail for a few break-and-enters in a town so small everybody knew who was having affairs with whom, and when you went out to buy groceries, and probably what you bought as well.

My best friend when I was fourteen was his younger brother Steven. Steven Stevens. You'd think they coulda come up with something . . . more. He always seemed to be in the shadow of his brother, who hadn't been arrested then, and I didn't understand what I feel today: that there was an anger starting to sprout up inside of him. I can't even remember Steven's face now. Just the sinews on his arms turning tighter. And how there was something prematurely male about him, as if the boy in him didn't last long. But when I felt I knew him there was a looseness to what we did. We could just wander all day. Things weren't hard. Whether we took an axe to the tops of termite mounds just to see how long they would take to grow back, or simply walked down to the local garbage dump to scrounge in the smoke, we were ani-

mated slowly, hovering in our scenery, not quite shaped in what we did, what we were.

I was also slowly drawn to his sister Jenny, who was just a year older than me and Steven. The way she could glance at you. The cup of her neck.

One time I went to Steven's place to see if he was there. I knocked, called out and walked in. It seemed like no-one was home, even though the door was open. The Dry Season heat streamed in like a balloon sagging over the entrance and into the air-conditioned room. I was glad to get inside, to pull myself beyond its weight and into the centre of the room. It was mid-day. Most sensible people were staying still, staying under cover. I stood there nervously in the lounge room, and called out again.

I heard a voice call me back deeper into the house. It was Jenny. So I walked down the white hall, past paintings of horses drinking and purple-blue impressions of Spanish señoritas. When I came to Jenny's room, she was still getting dressed. It's the first time I can recall having an erotic moment, her back, its nakedness, the false way she pretended to cover up, but unhurried, brazen, inviting me into her room without saying a word – if I wanted to make my own decision, I could.

I backed away, frightened, wishing I could somehow step forward. Not even understanding what I was feeling. She just called out then that Steven wasn't home. "Okay, see ya later. Tell him I came over," I said in a flat, hollow way, making how I spoke rougher, as if to protect myself from her. To sound further away, less interested, drier than I really was.

Later that same season Steven and I would go spearfishing in the local mangroves. We had our own spears of bamboo with three metal prongs made out of clothes-hanger wire, and we chased fish through the open, undulating shadows and shallows that faced onto the sea. The water was so peaceful you could still see footprints in the sandy beds where Aboriginal people had been here hunting earlier and smarter that morning. I didn't know what sunstroke was, and after a few hours I began to feel faint. Eventually I went to sit under a saltbush. But it made no difference to the nausea spinning over me. Steven didn't give a fuck and went back to hunt in the mangroves. Eventually I realized something was seriously wrong and I started to walk home, staggered really, losing my head to the sky.

It was a half-hour through the bush to town. The noisiest silence you could ever struggle through. A

goanna came running, like a fuse along the dry ground, so fast, rattling twigs and leaves. I had startled it, and it me. Its whipping run caused me to go off-balance and almost vomit with a rush of fear. It slithered up a tree and some bark peeled slowly to the ground from where it had furiously scratched its way up the trunk. Birds screamed, something whistled a way off in the distance, I heard my own footsteps as if they were coming from someone near me.

Finally I passed through the local 'golf course', really just cleared ground then on the outskirts of town. The greens weren't anything more than flattened sand and clay beds. Pathetic shit. It mocked itself and the fantasies of leisure that the town was trying to have.

I had that head-tipping momentum, where you start to fall forward rather than walk. It may have been thirty or forty minutes since I had left the mangroves, but it felt like hours.

Later my mother would tell I had walked straight through the fertilizer sprays. I was so out of it I didn't even know. Walking through all these trucks set up to spout out some noxious shit to make this new world grow. Just desperate to make it home.

It was a brand new mining town and the whole place was still being set up. Still being civilized, from cyclone-proof homes to the golf course. The sprays were part of the making of the town, the invention of lawns. Quite a process. It had taken weeks. First off people were encouraged to dig up and soften their yards with hoes. Then trucks had come round with decent quality dirt to make a topsoil. They'd dumped it in giant mounds out the front of each person's home. Then it was a case of spade or wheelbarrow, just spreading the dirt, beautiful and sweet, shit brown, rich, all over your yard. People had then been encouraged to go out in the bush and look for grass roots and runners to help with the next phase. So we went out and pulled them up like green rope, then replanted them, yellowing already. Giant trucks then came around and sprayed the lawns on, with what were like fire hoses spouting out this blue-green algae, a high powered mix of seeds, mulch and fertilizer. Then it was a case of water the hell of it in this Dry Season. And water it some more. A whole suburban landscape drenched in psychedelic blue.

I came stumbling through a fortnight later, having spread some of the original dirt myself, the blue magic already comfortably, normally green, blades sprouting in fresh earth. A new round of trucks was re-spraying with a softer, clearer essence. And I just

staggered through the fertile mist.

My mother started yelling at me about what the hell I was doing you bloody idiot, swearing at me in a kind, worried way. I just tried to act like I was all right. Not wanting her to know what I had been up to. They hadn't wanted me going to the mangroves, didn't even know I'd gone – now I remember the day, it was probably lucky we didn't get taken by the crocodiles that hunted there. Innocence is bliss sometimes.

Whatever my story, it became pretty apparent to my mum that I was in a fucked-up state. She was relieved to realize it was sunstroke rather than the sprayed poison I'd been blasted with. Figuring I was dehydrated, she made me drink water, lots of water, then she offered me a cold, sweet, strawberry lemonade that I promptly vomited back out.

Don't remember much else. Apparently I lost almost twenty-four hours in a delirium. Thinking of fish in pools darting away from me, cars coming towards me, bush ghosts, lizards, blue grass, blue skies, sweat, and me running, staggering, not even knowing my own name, not even lying down on a bed, just spinning through space.

When I came out of that world, I felt so weak it was unbelievable. Sticky and drained. My mother had water for me, bread, some chicken soup with not too much chicken. I could barely make it through this geriatric's meal. Where had I been? It was frightening to land back in my own body and realize I could go so far away from it.

I DIDN'T SEE STEVEN AFTER THAT. And I was kinda pissed off with him for leaving me to make my own way home when I was so sick. For deserting me so he could keep spearfishing.

Then all of a sudden the holidays were over and I went away again down south to school. Didn't see him for a whole year. When I came back it had all changed. By now Steven's brother was in jail, no longer the rebel, just a dickhead loser. Steven's sister Jenny looked sexier than ever, but she was known as 'the town bike', easy to ride. No decent guy should go near her. And Steven was headed down the same road as his brother, dropped outta school, no job, getting pissed, doing casual vandalism on phone booths and street lights, and small-time theft that everybody knew he'd done, or said he'd done, though somehow he hadn't been caught yet.

I'd already been told to stay away from him and his family as soon as I arrived. His sister smiled at me

down at the shopping centre and I had to just smile back and ignore her then with a nod of the head and I'm on my way. She knew straight away what I was doing and I burned with shame. She was wearing tight jeans and a soft, old checked green shirt. She didn't look like a slut to me.

Steven called round a few times but I didn't call back. He finally caught me at home reading one day – there wasn't much else for me to do that holiday – and we sat on the morning verandah in the rising heat and talked. But it was all stiff. I couldn't invite him inside, though my mother did relent and bring us out some soft drinks. Then Steven tried to intimidate me into being his friend, to threaten me somehow. He had become much harder and I was repulsed by this toughness and frightened too. I did not know how to remake our old familiarity. Or even if it had existed.

He'd get busted trying to break into my parents' car a week later. My father just kicked his arse. Told him to fuck off and never show his face anywhere near him again. And that was the absolute end of Steven Stevens for me and my family. I don't know where he or Jenny ended up, what happened to them – eventually they just all moved outta town. I heard stories about jail and babies, but nothing certain. I was away studying and when I came back they were just gone. That was what a mining town was like. New people were living in their house. It was like they didn't exist anymore, except in old talk – and because of it being a mining town, with lots of people coming and going, not many people could talk the old talk anyway.

Funny to think how it all began with whispers that I could sorta hear. Then it became a fact with hardly anything being said. They were just an untouchable family. Then they didn't exist anymore.

I felt like a guilty witness to something. And I found it hard to go from being best friends with someone one year to not speaking to them at all the next. It just wasn't my way. But it was imposed upon me – by my family, by circumstances, by Steven too and the way he behaved. Like he challenged our friendship out of existence.

I was pretty bored whenever I came home after that. So bored I used to kill time riding around town on the free bus, just sitting up the back, looking at the streets, watching the few passengers get on and off. This wasn't an uncommon way for Nhulunbuy youths to entertain themselves. Round and round a two-suburb circuit.

Alternatively, I'd cruise the sports shop, mostly run-

ning my hands over fish-hooks, diving masks, snorkels and shark chains, feeling the thickness of lines and weights, all the murder of the water. Or I'd go down to the chemist, which had a records section where I pondered *Kiss Alive* for a whole three months like it was an indecipherable mystery before I finally bought it. Read *Catch 22* in like three days. Then ploughed through a bunch of *Archie* comics, plus my dad's collection of crap westerns, a lesbian vampire novel and heaps of science fiction. A highlight was seeing Bruce Lee in *Enter The Dragon* at the local pictures when he had to fight in a hall of mirrors. I gave the trees, the lamp-posts and my sisters hell on the way home after that.

In the end though, I was experiencing most things on my own, trying to deal with how my world had shifted. Trying to fill up the space. Or live with it in my head.

My mother had changed a lot in this time too. I arrived back from studying to find her doing the vacuuming to 'Get It On'. She switched me on to T-Rex's *Electric Warrior* completely and at least a little Neil Diamond, though I could never hack my father bellying 'Song Sung Blue'. I started to explore music then, to find out about stuff that wasn't in the Top 40. To listen to things I didn't even understand. That was when my mother started to teach me to drive on red dirt roads just off the highway to get me away from those oncoming cars. We'd listen to Neil Young's *On The Beach*, our mutual favourite, and sing "they're all just pissing in the wind" and laugh and drive down to the sea, where a blue-pocked moon could sometimes be seen on pale afternoons, half-formed, hanging like an ear in the sky.

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Highlights

*The Migration Museum, Adelaide,
November '98*

Mostly obvious –
commemorative plates
of Queen Victoria, grainy photos of
refugees clutching all that embodied
them,
a wall of embroidered national flags,
ploughs, tea-chests, walking sticks and
passports from many nations
with faded names.

Just before exiting, an
exhibit highlighting entry criteria
under "White Australia",
and an uncomfortably long
pause waiting for a switch to respond.

I pressed the button again and
overheard a tour guide answer
questions from schoolchildren
about growing up as a Chinese
in the 60s. The words
on the exhibit lit up briefly
but before I could look again
the bulb which had illuminated
the entire room had already expired.

Shen

Christina Stead's Satirical Vision

I'm Dying Laughing and Twentieth-Century History

CRITICS RARELY NOTICE the satirical vigour of Stead's fiction and they have largely overlooked her distinctive comic style. Certainly satirical elements have been documented in Stead's novels, and one or two critics have recognized the satirical force and verve of works such as *House of All Nations* (1938). But there has been no attempt to investigate the nature of Stead's satire or its development during her fifty-year publishing career.

Just as satire is frequently regarded as an inferior genre, Stead's satirical novels of the postwar period have been neglected in favour of her earlier, less satirical and more autobiographical novels such as *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and *For Love Alone* (1944). In contrast to these novels in which Stead focuses on the individual's psychic quest, the 'quests' of Letty Fox and Emily Howard in *I'm Dying Laughing* resonate more clearly in historical and allegorical terms. Moreover, Stead transforms the genre of satire, blending tragic, comic, grotesque and realist elements.

I'm Dying Laughing is the final work in what I see as a multi-novel, satirical history of Stead's own period, a history that began with *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946). *I'm Dying Laughing* completes Stead's study of contemporary American society in general and the dissolution of the American left in particular. In this novel Stead addresses what she sees as the excesses of American political culture from 1935 until 1950, and depicts the dilemma of the writer who attempts to respond to history within that culture.

The novel both documents history and comments satirically on the atrocities of Stead's own political period. The historically referential elements in Stead's later fiction reflect a significant feature of satire itself, as satire in verse or prose frequently attacks historically specific targets by way of irony, parody and ridicule. Stead's use of comedy, invective, distortion and exaggeration combines with her radical political per-

spective to create satire that offers a powerful comment on her own period.

I'm Dying Laughing presents the story of Emily and Stephen Howard, two hard-line communists living in Hollywood in 1945, who are ousted from the local party because of their refusal to soften their line and adjust their Marxist views to suit US Government Policy, in line with their party colleagues. Denounced by their Hollywood comrades the Howards were said to:

have described as reformist what we term progressive, and call all reference to pro-Roosevelt forces "reformist illusions". They have demanded the casting away of the present political structure of the Party and the formation of a class-conscious Labour Party. Now is not the time for any such trial and error tactics.¹

Unable to make a living in Hollywood, they move back east and then to Paris, to escape the witch-hunts of the period. In war-ravaged Paris they attempt to retain their leftist principles while living a life of luxury, in the end betraying their communist friends to the authorities at the American embassy.

Stead engages with the history of her period by presenting characters who are representative of their times. Her satirical portraits, from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and *House of all Nations* (1938) right through to *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986), reveal characters who embody their times in some way. We are told in the two biographies of Stead that the characters are based very closely on real people. This gives the satire even greater potency and referential strength. However even without this knowledge the representative power of Stead's characters provides a nexus for the political reflections of the novel. Yet none of Stead's characters can be seen as archetypes. Stead's ambivalence towards her satiric targets reflects the ambiva-

lence of someone who has lived through the period, experienced the same struggles, and feels implicated in them.

To the extent that Stead plays with the mode of existence of the text, Emily's texts and all the texts in the world, we can see glimmers of a postmodernist aesthetic. At times *I'm Dying Laughing* meets Linda Hutcheon's description of the postmodern phenomenon as self-conscious, self-contradictory and self-undermining in statement.² The mode of the novel is subversive and ironic, presenting us with humour that both celebrates and condemns the humorist and all her faults.

I'm Dying Laughing is also Stead's most overtly political novel and her most self-consciously satirical work, encompassing the anti-communist hysteria and corruption of an individual, the humorist and ideologue, Emily Howard. Emily is the Gargantua of Stead's oeuvre; she personifies excess. She is the hungriest, thirstiest, greediest, most arrogant, most generous, wittiest, most cheerful, most hopeful and most brilliant of all the characters Stead portrays. She is also Stead's most sympathetic satiric target.

I'm Dying Laughing therefore depends on excess. This excess makes it her most humorous work. The humour is black, obscene, at times Rabelaisian, and politically incisive. Stead's attitude to the communist witch-hunts as well as the sense of black comedy expressed in *I'm Dying Laughing*, are echoed by Lillian Hellman in her recollections of the period and Arthur Miller in his autobiography, *Timebends*.

Stead's diaries and notes reveal her determination to make the novel as accurate and as realistic as possible. They demonstrate Stead's intense preoccupation with the events of her own period and her disgust with the hysteria surrounding the communist trials. *I'm Dying Laughing* was written in the late 1940s and early 1950s, finally submitted for publication in 1966, but not published until 1986, almost three years after Stead's death. 'UNO 1945', which became Chapter Four, appeared in a special Stead issue of *Southerly* in 1962 as 'Chapter One of an unpublished novel: *I'm Dying Laughing*'.³

There is no doubt that Stead set out to write an important political novel about what she called "the Judas Time".⁴ In contrast to her description of *Cotters' England* as a "pretty little Strindberg type of comedy, filled with tears of blood" and "a poetic interpretation of life", Stead described *I'm Dying Laughing* as "not poetic, but political" in a letter to Norman Rosten of

October 1966.⁵ Her emphatically stated interest was in making the story as 'real' as possible, but she feared that "as usual people won't believe it's like that – American writer[']s life – but is it? Profoundly so. It's Hollywood, success writing . . . with a terrific central character, female."⁶

Stead's determination to root this book in the actual political conditions of the time is manifest in the final version, with its constant references to actual political figures and events and innumerable dates, in her many comments about the text, in her diaries and notes, and in her reluctance to disguise much of the truth about the real life subjects of the novel, Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten. When he first read Stead's manuscript in 1966 Stanley Burnshaw was struck by how "uncannily real" the voices of her characters were. In fact the proximity of the text to the reality of McKenney and Bransten's lives raised alarm about possible libel suits at Stead's publishing house in 1967.⁷ Stead struggled with the advice of her agent, and both her American and English publishers, to revise the text in order to provide more material on the political atmosphere of the late 1940s, and background details about Emily's life to make clear her later disagreements with the Communist Party.

Given the massive amount of background reading, note-taking and historical research Stead undertook to write *I'm Dying Laughing*, it is a little surprising that these requests for more political and historical detail so derailed the publication of this novel. On the other hand, Stead's anxiety about the accuracy and integrity of the book ("I felt I had to write 'the truth'", "I am very serious about getting this book right"),⁸ not to mention the intensity of her feelings about her targets, must have been difficult to reconcile with her knowledge that a novel about communists in the wake of the McCarthy witch-hunts would not win her too many friends. That the novel heavily satirizes the phenomenon of American amnesia with respect to American history must have contributed to Stead's sense of defeat in the face of such immoderate requests for more 'history' in the novel.

Somewhat paradoxically, given Stead's problems in acceding to the wishes of her publishers, *I'm Dying Laughing* evolved to become Stead's most explicit satirical history. It offers her most expansive portrait of Cold War manners, the unravelling of the American left and the theatre of the absurd that was the House Un-American Activities Committee. Even before Stead was asked to make any changes the manuscript con-

tained her most politically potent and historically sweeping material.⁹ Moreover the narrative power of this satire derives from a more powerful allegory than that of *The People with the Dogs*, *Cotters' England* and *Miss Herbert*.

Acknowledging the breadth and sincerity of Stead's historic project in this novel gives us several insights into the creative process of her writing but also unveils some of her perceptions of the purpose of her own works. Stead's background materials for *I'm Dying Laughing* fill several thick folders, and include copious notes on speeches made at the Paris Writers Congress held in April 1935, notes on the Alger Hiss trial from various sources, dozens of newspaper clippings on the HUAC¹⁰ hearings, notes on the Sacco and Vanzetti case of 1927, detailed timelines of the events leading up to and during both World Wars, extensive jottings on Roosevelt and the New Deal, notes on J.M. Keynes and a diary-style document from 1949, outlining what happened in the Committee hearings of communists every day of the year.¹¹

Furthermore Stead did not confine her reading in the early 1950s to newspapers of the mainstream or radical press. On the contrary she read *The God That Failed* (1950), a collection of accounts by former communists about the sources of their disillusionment.¹² The latter included an account by Richard Wright, an old friend of Stead and Blake,¹³ as well as those by Andre Gide, Louis Fischer, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone and Stephen Spender. Her dedication to the task of 'research' is remarkable given that she was constantly moving from country to country and relied solely on public libraries for information. In 1951 Stead and Blake moved from Montreux to Lausanne because of the more extensive public library there.

Stead's study of American legislative history, constitutional rights, the Espionage Acts of 1917–18 and their origins in the Naturalization Law of 1798, as well as her comprehensive notes on the Truman and Eisenhower years, are documented in the folders that correspond to the drafts of *I'm Dying Laughing*.¹⁴ Indeed some of the earliest draft materials contain slabs of 'historical text' interspersed with fictional narrative, revealing a gradual shift from historical notes and commentary to fictional prose drafts. Stead finds a balance between telling history and giving it life through the emotions of its representatives. We are treated to regular encapsulating paragraphs which comment on historical phenomena and propel the drama onward. For example:

The Howards thought that it was wrong to choose between the old reactionary parties, Republican and Democratic, the same party under two names; they should attempt to found a third party representing labour; that it was wrong to support the quixotic erratic millionaire Henry Wallace, who would change his mind when he pleased, like other rich romantics; that Rooseveltism had not been the hope of American labour, but a romantic form of capitalist consolidation, that Roosevelt had saved American capitalism from its sharpest threat and had only been opposed by the Republicans and Wall Street, opposed merely on gang principles by what they called the Black Hand or true fascist tendencies brought up by war and oppression.

Stead later cut some of the early didactic material from the manuscript, replacing it with more suggestive and more dramatically interesting dialogue. But a glance at any of Stead's earlier drafts or her background work impresses upon the reader a sense of her distinctive scholarly method and her determination with regard to 'getting the book right'.

Stead's intention to make Emily a representative of the US – in her words, a "Henrietta Smith" is also clear from her notes.¹⁵ The allegorical connection between Emily and her country, so vividly rendered in the first few pages of the novel, produces the main vehicle of the satire. Stead explicitly associates Emily with her country, just as she explicitly associated the Massine retreat, Whitehouse, with the US in *The People with the Dogs*.

In her Swiss diaries Stead refers to Ruth McKenney as "The Renegade", her working title for the novel. In January 1951 she noted:

Yesterday, The Renegade's first letter since Belgium. Their debts, desperation, death of this world, "when a new world arises, it won't be marked, Made in the USA". Evening, soft small rain, warm.¹⁶

Somehow the contemporary phenomenon of the "Renegade, Mr. and Mrs." was to her "pure American, only raised to infernal heights, sorrows, excitements".¹⁷ Emily, based on Ruth McKenney, came to embody for Stead what it was to be an American, and therefore was a perfect satiric target and heroine for *I'm Dying Laughing*.

Emily is not only the target of Stead's most complex satire – she is also a vehement satirist herself.

Another diary entry reveals Stead's determination to portray with accuracy the nature of Emily's work: "Three days spring fever, though yesterday copied American ads all day for psychology of and satire by EE."¹⁸ Emily's bombastic and penetrating analysis of American humour expresses at the outset of the novel her incisive understanding of her own culture, with its gross materialistic excesses, and her determination to reach beyond satire.

It sizzles. It burns holes in the paper. Well, that's the bitter truth . . . American humour is another way of seeing the truth; and what a vision! It isn't giggles or smut, it isn't anecdotes about babysitters and chars and Uncle Brown's habits; it is homespun, godlike truth stalking in from the plains and the tall timber, coonskin and deerhide, with a gun to disturb our little home comforts.¹⁹

Emily's speech announces the satiric project of *I'm Dying Laughing* which Stead had hoped would "go on from fire to more fiery to fierier still" and have "a very terrible dramatic end".²⁰ It also suggests Stead's dissatisfaction with satire itself, evident in Emily's dismissive reference to it:

You listen to any Hollywood dialogue in a modern film and you'll hear such a mash of good sense, brashness, earthy wit, impudence – that's American wisdom, that's our humour. It's not *les bons mots* . . . it's not like satire which is just needling someone you're afraid to touch.

Throughout the novel Stead draws attention to the satiric nature of her project and to Emily as a reluctant satirist. Emily constantly mocks herself and at one point, while trying to write in Paris, she condemns her own material as "worthless". Identifying with her own characters she brands herself and Stephen "not-in-our-time revolutionists, on-and-off revolutionists, keep the deep-freeze safe revolutionists."

The satire in *I'm Dying Laughing* is allegorical, and attacks a medley of social ills. The opening pages present the entire range of satirical targets pursued in the novel. Emily's self-mockery fills the novel and reaches hilarious proportions when she begins to compare herself to the Statue of Liberty:

She's French, their idea of the wheatfed goddess. Her nose is Greek, four feet six inches long; but her

waist, oh, her waist, is thirty-five feet round. Mrs MidWest America herself . . . And her mouth, like mine, is three feet wide!

Stead blatantly associates Emily with the Statue of Liberty, and therefore with American idealism. We are invited to consider her as a symbol of the United States, as "Mrs MidWest America".

It is not until the fourth chapter 'UNO 1945', which was originally the opening chapter,²¹ that Stead's satire begins to bite, and to tackle the elegant 'radicalism' of Hollywood at the end of the war. With the sale of Emily's second script the Howards purchase a home at a 'good address' and begin to receive invitations from "fashionable leftist society, people who without giving up their beliefs had made good in a highly competitive and sometimes hidden game".

The language of money speaks loudest in Hollywood and people there are known by what they earn, arranging themselves around the hills according to their weekly incomes. Very quickly the 'American dilemma' manifests itself in the Howards' lives as they spend long hours writing articles for the *Labor Daily* and the *Washington Liberator*, while Emily's agents become increasingly impatient for her next manuscripts. The tension of this situation ignites some bitter arguments between the pair, foreshadowing everything that is to come.

Emily and Stephen argue bitterly about American isolationism and arrogance, Emily accusing Stephen of "servility to a system" that made his family rich, and for pushing the line that US intervention in the war was to offer Europe the benefits of "benevolent business democracy". She accuses the local leftists of caving in and 'asslicking' in their crude modification of Marxism to US Government policy. It is here that we begin to see the perilous split between Emily and Stephen that sets the pattern of alternate toadying and rebellion.

With the repeated references to humour, to tragedy, and to so-called 'great satire', Stead attempts to sort out the difference between genres, as Emily confronts the dilemma of not being able to sell her serious political essays and novels, and her immense talent for 'corn'. Stephen reminds her that "All humorists are gloomy, cruel bastards. But at least they're not dull. They have both worlds. They see the sinister truth and they can laugh." Seeing herself as a doll "with two faces glued together", Emily worries about what she perceives to be the hard-heartedness of the satire of

Mark Twain. She wishes to be more than a cynical satirist but she wants her satire to “sizzle, burn holes in the paper”, to be a “godlike truth” just as Stead wanted her novel to move from “fire to more fiery” and “to tell the truth”. Emily fears she will become like Jack London, who stated that he “hadn’t written an honest word in twenty years”, and she compares herself to Damon Runyon, who is described as a “Hired Rebel . . . a great rebel at heart, but lacking moral courage . . . My life too, eh? Pretty”.

As early as 1946 Stead was concerned to ground the novel in the politics of the Depression and New Deal. Some notes in an early draft list the contents of a prologue in which Emily and Stephen live in Washington and:

how they got inflated – their disgust with Washington. How they longed to go to Hollywood to make money . . . Their concern with the Party with which they were all the time at loggerheads (false routes taken by party – united front? USA capitalism in Europe) i.e. Introduce their setting and inflation . . . The atmosphere of the ND – and backlook at the atmosphere of early ND.²²

The opening page of the novel immediately plunges us into a debate about Depression art, followed by a discussion of how Roosevelt’s own class “hate him”. While Stead is concerned to link historical events to their antecedents and to explore patterns of history, her focus is very much on exactly what happened in the US from 1935 to 1950, and how the left failed to make a real impact on American society. In this project she re-examines the pre-war and postwar decades in the attempt to understand a different set of people from the targets of both *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs*.

In *I’m Dying Laughing* Stead focuses on the communist movement in the US, and the rising middle class. It becomes apparent that these groups must, in the US, be mutually exclusive. But this was not always the case, as the early chapters on Emily and Stephen reveal. Arguments rage about whether or not Roosevelt is a friend of the forgotten man or whether relief is merely “a few sandbags against the flood”. At the same time Stead compares the US situation with that of Europe, revisiting some of the themes touched on via the American fascists of *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* (1948). Stephen cautions Emily against making a trip to Berlin, as:

The Nazis are crushing opposition: the multi-millions, though humming and ha-ing are preparing to move in behind Hitler; and everyone is *gleichgeschaltet*,²³ co-ordinated, incorporated. It’s the fashion. Mussolini, Hitler, and even the USA is in the shadow of the corporate state: they’re chewing their nails and thinking it over, waiting to see what happens over here, letting the Nazi terror spread its foul wing, while big business recovers. Don’t you know it’s like that? Do you have to go and record the dying shrieks of a republic?

Emily’s retort to this (“You want to live in Washington and record things”), reinforces Stead’s mounting association of America with decay and decline; her choice of Hollywood and Washington for Emily and Stephen’s homes (though in the published novel they never actually move to Washington, DC) registers Stead’s sense of place as symbolic and paradigmatic. But their different sentiments eventually lead to the “great wound” in their relationship, “a disagreement about American exceptionalism”. It is via this central dispute between the two protagonists that the history of the left is interpreted and its collapse is understood. Stead satirizes the collapsing values of the Hollywood communists using the terms of this dispute. Emily accuses Stephen of believing, like many Americans, that “what happened in Europe and the rest of the world belonged to other streams of history, never influencing that Mississippi which bears the USA”. Under the ‘United Front’ policy of Earl Browder the Party wholly appropriates American exceptionalism, declaring that “American aid was necessary for broken Europe”. All of the views expressed by Emily are now repudiated by the Party and the Howards asked either to recant or face expulsion. Moffat Byrd (based on John Howard Lawson) writes to them asking them how they can possibly:

quarrel with the Party on all its fundamental views, formed not idly, but in the crucible of war, in the fight against fascism (Stephen having written that cartels, American industrial capitalism, the control of one country by another, were a form of colonialism and opposed to all Marxian doctrine)? . . . The country, the Party in the lead, and along with it, its elected leaders, was going ahead to set up a new regime in Europe, where all the past had gone down the drain, America, the best organized society in the world, was gallantly and generously about to rebuild her allies . . .

In the early chapters Stead's satire is replete with the details of the internal collapse of the American Communist Party. Through the 'straightening out' sections of the novel, she comments on attitudes to Europe adopted by the Party that could only be described as right-wing revisionism, a prelude to Cold War politics and the complete marginalization of the American left.

Emily and Stephen are betrayed by their leftist friends very early during their stay in Hollywood. One of the most comical and scathing satirical passages in Stead's body of work demonstrates the ludicrous charlatanism of the Hollywood communists. Stead portrays the 'trial' in a chapter entitled 'The Straightening Out' (in which Emily's mode of mothering as well as her political views are condemned) as fatuous, cruel and menacing. Stead's immediate targets are the affluent communists of Hollywood, but she is clearly satirizing the Washington hearings going on at the time of writing. The humour is deft and pointed; the satire targets the excessive conformism of the society, its obsession with psychology and its blind repetition of history. The other guests, Stead informs us, "were fascinated by this trial without jury, entirely in the spirit of mid-century and of their society; but they were helping themselves to drinks, also".

As if to answer the criticism levelled at American communism and its unstinting support of Stalin, the satire of *I'm Dying Laughing* acknowledges the crimes of the Soviet communists. Stead recognizes the absurdity of the entire 'naming names' debacle through frequent comparisons to the perils of dissent under far more authoritarian regimes. These kinds of comparisons provide a vehicle for the satirical humour that permeates the text. Emily realizes after hearing about the Soviet labour camps, and millions killed, that no regime has a monopoly on terror.

By golly, what a canticle you have made! We talk about the crimes of the USA, but, well, with that list, put that way, we've got a shining morning face compared with them. . . . History doesn't bear scrutiny!

Through deconstructive swipes such as this, that become more and more disconcerting as the novel continues, Emily's subversive comments direct our attention to Stead's insistent scrutiny of her own period. As Emily's very own 'American dilemma' becomes more extreme, she reaffirms the rhetorical thrust of the text, her own ego and circumstances driving her further from the 'truths' she and the text uphold.

The posturing of the 'parlour pinks' comes in for the most Juvenalian satire in this novel. Even Vittorio, who some critics have cited as evidence of a kind of renewing energy in the work, is seen as no more than a "poster comrade". The narrative fully explains Stephen's suicide and Emily's disintegration in terms of their sense of treachery and loss. But it denounces the extent to which they react to their own sense of failure and corruption as sheer histrionics. Stead goes to a great deal of trouble to demonstrate the absurdity of their reactions. She shows that the absurdity is not confined to the characters themselves but is a symptom of the times. Of course the economic effects on people of being blacklisted or betrayed by friends should not be diminished;²⁴ *I'm Dying Laughing* powerfully portrays the sense of guilt and loss, but Stead focuses on the broader cultural meaning of the hearings within the context of the postwar world.

The novel provides a sense of the hearings as grand theatre for the entire nation (as Emily knows only too well, right from the beginning). Emily's knowledge only serves to exacerbate her dilemma over whether to fight the good fight or avoid becoming a martyr. She changes course midstream and decides to placate Stephen's mother in order to retain financial support and her American passport, but loses both her integrity and her sanity.

Stead satirizes the climate of amorality and grandiose mendacity in *I'm Dying Laughing*. As a result she has no difficulty in establishing Hollywood as the paradigmatic place of this satire. Hollywood is the pinnacle of "fashionable leftist society", full of elegant and celebrated radicals but as stratified as every other level of American society. Stead however is quick to point out that "Hollywood 1944-45 was far from as radical as it had been, because of the fear of investigation running through the studios." The "mad Hollywood carnival" becomes associated with the jaded party, now dedicated to Browderite notions of patriotism and faith in American capitalism. Hollywood, with its glamour and excess, its gossip, rumour and myth-making, becomes symbolic of America. The Hollywood communists are portrayed as quintessentially American:

here were people who were graduating from excitable and unsure radical groups to long-breathed Hollywood society of the stabler sort, people who had had jobs in the studios for many years. Some actors were here, even one director; and here Moffat Byrd, the five-thousand-dollar-a-week man, leader

by common consent of Hollywood progressive society, had one of his houses.²⁵

Lillian Hellman's recollections of the period reinforce Stead's portrayal of Hollywood as a "paradigmatic place" full of naive and not so naive people who relished and enjoyed the attention the hearings brought. Neither Stead nor Hellman diminish the seriousness of these hearings in terms of their broader historical significance, but the actual impact on people was minimal in comparison to the atrocities perpetrated in Europe. Stead and Hellman acknowledge that frequently the betrayals among friends amounted to nothing. Emily's friends, the Oates, continue with their radical activities. We do not hear of any serious consequences of the fact that they have been named. Hellman describes a common practice at the time, of witnesses telephoning their friends before testifying to let them know they planned to name them, and sometimes getting permission to do this. "They understood the motive of their friends' betrayal – money, injury to a career."²⁶ Arthur Miller also comments on the "high drama" of the period.²⁷

The Howards leave Hollywood after the trial, hoping to find acceptance on the East Coast and later leave the US, hoping to fight for their causes in Paris, believing ingenuously that life will be much "gayer, tougher, stranger, more complex in Europe".

Ironically for Emily, life does become stranger and more complex in Paris; her naive and simplistic views of the world are challenged so forcibly that she is overwhelmed to the point where she loses sight of her ideals, and plays the role of the clownish humorist more and more energetically. She feels compelled to write about the war and its aftermath but wonders how to adopt a fittingly serious and yet persuasive tone. In the chapter entitled 'Subjects for Emily', Stead questions the validity of writing with a savagery that is unparalleled in the rest of the novel, posing the argument that writers are selfish collaborators, "fixing" and "corrupting" language to make it sell. At the same time, however, the text works against this idea by telling the ghastly truth about the politics of survival. Emily meets a couple of "resistants" who offer her stories of their decision to collaborate, to denounce fellow Jews in order to survive:

I was a student, a brilliant student of course, being the son of a Jew . . . I had not been circumcised. When the Nazis came I immediately denied that I

was a Jew. I had from the first given another name. I denied, denied, denied . . . I was preserved . . . I'd pick out every secret Jew in the camp for them . . . Naturally, I denounced them all. I would pick out any Jew, even yellow-haired Nordic ones like myself . . . I got on splendidly.

The banality of evil, and the unexceptionality of betrayal, appal and vex Emily. It is Suzanne who attempts to offer an explanation of the corruption, describing the resistants as "tortured souls" and declaring "The hero is a very dangerous animal." She talks about her own work during the war and her painful realization that "you couldn't help everyone. Some had to perish."

Emily is in a sense paralysed by her confrontation with so much misery and hellish treachery in the name of survival; she retreats into her own safe, cosy, writer's corner, realizing with a kind of relief:

I'm so smug, so satisfied, so happy with my darlings, such a real success as a woman, that the human race is just a passing show to me. Clapas is right. All writers care about is their work. But we ask more of a mechanic. We expect him to save the human race via socialism. Oh, my God, save me from being a philistine in my old age.

But Emily is unable to write about what she hears. Moreover she cannot distinguish between the ridiculous political betrayals of her own American friends, and these ghastly betrayals perpetrated in the name of survival.

Confronting the poverty of Paris after the war, Emily is gripped by the fear and terror of the occupation. She is melodramatic but incisively truthful:

These unwanted houses make me feel all the terror and the horror of the years. I begin really to hate the Germans and I'm afraid of them, too. All those outhouses and fences and all these attics have seen such fear, hideous terror of death, hunger; the dusty boards of a stage of such misery! . . . And each man is history, you can't talk about history; we are history, each thudding heart. Oh, my! I can hardly stand it! What they have been through!

Emily's response registers something of the actuality of people's experience of 'history' felt bodily in hunger, fear and terror. Again Stead contextualizes the American experience through Emily's articulate re-

sponse to Paris. The American “youthful inquisition” is placed in perspective against the reign of Nazi terror, as Stead builds a satiric distance from her protagonists. But this distance is not without considerable sympathy and equivocation. As with most of Stead’s other satires the satiric targets are not portrayed simply as villains. Considering himself and Emily to be “dead politically”, as their mounting debts, divided loyalties and spectacularly decadent lifestyle demand, Stephen counts himself merely as an “onlooker”, not quite being able to admit his renegade status.

In our country, all has failed. Who will resist? And who am I to say this? What am I? Hiding my head in a foreign country where I have just agreed to mix with villains only . . .

He foresaw their slow separation from the Party, the beliefs of the Roosevelt era.

He too describes his self-disgust in terms of terror and fear, admitting to Emily his thoughts of suicide. While the dramatic and melodramatic struggle of the Howards provides the stuff of the narrative as well as the allegorical core of the novel, Stead’s satire is ebullient in its portrayal of the demise of “Madame Gargantua”, but also demonstrates a commitment to historical and psychological authenticity.

In *I’m Dying Laughing* Stead uses the lives of real people to comment upon the hysteria of the communist trials after the War. In doing so she expresses the betrayals that occurred as a grim parody of the betrayals exacted by holocaust survivors during the War. In its reflections on the dehumanizing effects of the capitalist work culture, the excesses of national ideology, the decadence wealth engenders, and the history of the American left, *I’m Dying Laughing* presents a richly satirical, historically referential vision of western culture, while telling the “godlike truth” about a real woman, an actual political movement and a defining moment in history.

ENDNOTES

1. In September 1946 Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten were expelled from the Communist Party for their left-wing sectarian activities. They had joined Stead and Blake’s discussion group in 1944, set up to “preserve imperilled theory at a time of crisis”. Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography*, Melbourne, 1993, p.327, quotes an unpublished manuscript by Edith Anderson called ‘Cold War Marriage’.
2. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London, 1989, p.1.
3. As Christina Stead’s literary trustee, R.G. Geering prepared the manuscript of the novel for publication after Stead’s death. Stead had worked on the novel on and off for more than twenty years and there was a massive amount of text, with revisions, altered typescript and changes in the plot. In his preface to the novel Geering comments on some of the changes he made to the text, and it is possible that without his sustained work on the manuscript *I’m Dying Laughing*, Stead’s most important novel, would never have been published.
4. Letter from Stead to Nettie Palmer, 5 December 1950, in *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters of Christina Stead 1928-1973*, Sydney, A&R, 1992, p.121.
5. Stead’s comparison of *Cotters’ England* with Strindberg was made in a letter to Florence James in 1953, Rowley, p. 393. Stead described *Cotters’ England* as “a poetic interpretation of life, not unreal, quite true, but as poets see truth” to Maurice Temple Smith in 1966, Rowley, p. 442. Stead’s comment to Norman Rosten is quoted in Chris Williams, *Christina Stead: A Life of Letters* (Melbourne, 1989), p.241.
6. Letter to Nettie Palmer, 5 December 1950.
7. Rowley, p.460.
8. Letter from Stead to Leda and Stanley Burnshaw, 10 November 1966, in *A Web of Friendship*, p. 272. Hazel Rowley quotes Stead’s comments to Stanley Burnshaw, to whom Stead sent the manuscript in 1966, explaining that “You are the only person I know who knows part of the story.” p.459.
9. The early drafts of the novel are held in the National Library of Australia, MS 4967, Boxes 11–14.
10. The House Un-American Activities Committee was set up in 1938.
11. All of the notes and background materials referred to here are held in the National Library of Australia, Papers of Christina Stead, MS 4967, Box 11, folder 85.
12. Notes on *The God that Failed* appear in NLA, MS 4967, Box 11, folder 86.
13. Rowley, p.370.
14. The relevant folders are 85–87, MS 4967, containing notes and background material and folders 88–107 containing drafts of the novel.
15. Diary note, 9 January 1951, Papers of Christina Stead, National Library of Australia, MS 4967, Box 15, folder 111.
16. Diary note, 12 January 1951.
17. Diary note, 16 January 1951.
18. EE means Emily in the diary notes; this note is dated 3 February 1951.
19. Emily in *I’m Dying Laughing*, p.20
20. R.G. Geering’s preface to the novel quotes Stead, p.viii.
21. R.G. Geering notes in his preface to the 1986 edition that ‘UNO 1945’ was the opening chapter of the 1966 version of the text.
22. NLA, MS 4967 Box 11, folder 86.

23. The word translates as 'likeminded'.
24. Hellman talks about the period in which she was blacklisted from 1948 until 1956, commenting that she did work in the theatre. She claims that she is unable to forgive and forget. "Too many lives got mangled for the wrong reasons. It was a very cruel time." Hellman in an interview with Rex Reed, November 1975, in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*, ed. by Jackson R. Bryer, Jackson, 1986, p.180.
25. The character Moffat Byrd is based on John Howard Lawson, whom Rowley describes as the "unofficial leader of the Hollywood communists from 1937-50". He was imprisoned with other members of the Hollywood Ten, p.308.
26. Hellman in Bryer, p.62.
27. Arthur Miller also comments on the period in his autobiography *Timebends* and describes his reactions to hearing about Elia Kazan's testimony before HUAC. "I remember thinking that the issue

was now being made to sound altogether political when it was really becoming something else, something I could not name . . . What we had now seemed a withering parody of what was being advertised as high drama. When the Committee knew all the names beforehand, there was hardly a conspiracy being unveiled but rather a symbolic display that would neither string anybody up on a gallows nor cause him to be cut down. No material thing had been moved one way or another by a single inch, only the air we all breathed had grown somewhat thinner and the destruction of meaning seemed total when the sundering of friendships was so often with people whom the witness had not ceased to love." Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life*, London, 1987, p.339.

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Boats Without Sails

(for Mal Morgan)

I am rocky
And want to get moved.

I am an eight o'clock duplicate
And want to get swept off my feet.

I am a constant twilight
Wishing on my streetlights.

I am a single bed
And a partly furnished room.
A seed
And a concrete path.

I am a still lake
Send me no
Boats without sails.

Lyndon Walker

Colleen Burke

Marie E.J. Pitt, Poet and Socialist

GLANCING THROUGH a *Green Left* newspaper I read an article about the Rosebery Miners, Axemen, Bush and Blarney Festival in Tasmania – they were putting on a community play inspired by Marie Pitt’s poem ‘The Keening’. The article gave some information about Marie Pitt – said she’d joined the Communist Party of Australia in Melbourne. She hadn’t and the CPA wasn’t formed until 1921. However, like so many people on the left in Victoria at the time, she joined, and was active in, the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), writing extensive articles on working-class and social justice issues for its newspaper *The Socialist*. She was co-editor of *The Socialist* in 1911.

I wrote a letter to the editor expressing pleasure at the community play, the interest in Marie Pitt’s poetry, pointing out biographical errors and mentioning my biography of Marie E.J. Pitt, *Doherty’s Corner*. As a result of my letter I received a phone call inviting me to the festival. It was arranged that I would do a small introduction to the play and also a poetry reading.

I’d been to Tasmania twice before – once on a song-collecting tour and camping holiday with my late husband, the folksinger Declan Affley – we’d come up the west coast, but I didn’t recall Rosebery. The stark moonscape of Queenstown had stayed with me, the wildness of the west coast. One night, camping in an isolated place on the west we both freaked out convinced we’d seen the eyes of a Tasmanian tiger – of course it’s extinct but... we huddled in the landrover until dawn broke.

‘The Keening’ was the poem that had sent me on my quest for Marie Pitt. At the time Declan and I had been doing research on political songs and poems of Australia for a series of workshops and concerts we were organizing. Denis Kevans suggested I read ‘The Keening’ which was reprinted in Marjorie Pizer’s anthology *Freedom on the Wallaby*. I was moved, impressed. It was a strong poem, a poem of vengeance for injustices, and exploitation endured by miners. The women and



Marie Pitt with son Bill,
courtesy Mrs Q and Bill Pitt

children would not languish, wilt away, but they would fight – “would come again for their own”.

I went in to work the next day all fired up about Marie Pitt – I mentioned the poem to a friend – “I’ve just read the most incredible and powerful poem by an Australian poet, Marie Pitt,” I said. “Why haven’t I heard about her?” My friend said, “I know her great-granddaughter Marie. I could introduce you if you’d like.” I corresponded with and met Marie and she introduced me to her father Bill Pitt, Marie Pitt’s eldest grandson, who lived in Sydney. He was very interested in his grandmother, told me stories, showed me some letters. Delving in libraries I found material about her was scarce. This piqued my curiosity and I became interested to find out more about her life and work, wondering why I hadn’t known about a woman so important in Australia’s left and literary history.

Once I started asking questions, finding tidbits and scraps of information, I was hooked. And so I came in by the back door to a biography.

Because of my family circumstances, juggling full-time work, babies, writing, I didn't get to Tasmania when I was doing the research for the biography. And now fourteen years after its publication in 1985, I was on my way to Rosebery on Tasmania's west coast, near to where the Pitts lived and worked.

The play called *The Keening*, inspired by Marie's poem, was about a strike in the mining area, instigated and supported by women. This was a creative idea as it never happened in real life, nor had she written about it. The participants in the play came from the mining area and included adults and children. It was an important community activity.

MARIE ELIZABETH JOSEPHINE PITT (nee McKeown) was born on 6 August 1869 at Bulumwaal, Boggy Creek, north-east Gippsland, the eldest of seven children. Her Irish Catholic father, Edward McKeown, was a goldminer, originally from County Armagh. Her mother, Mary Stuart McIver (nee Dawson) was a Presbyterian from County Ayrshire, Scotland. The family's selection was small, meagre and it was difficult to earn a living, difficult to support the growing family.

When Marie was three years old the family took up a small selection at Doherty's Corner, Wy Yung, East Gippsland. Young Marie McKeown's formal schooling, slotted in around the demands of farm work, was patchy. However, she imbibed oral poetic traditions from her father and mother, and learnt about nature, life, from her closeness to the bush. She had an affinity with the landscape, the elements and often had to rely on her own resources and an inquisitive, observant and imaginative mind.

After a difficult childhood and fragile health, when she was twenty she took what was then seen as a radical step, and moved to Bairnsdale where she worked as a retoucher in a photographer's studio. She had her first verse published in the *Bairnsdale Advertiser*.

She met William Edward Pitt in Bairnsdale. They were married on 18 March 1893, when she was twenty-two. Her husband was born in Longford House, Catherine Street, Longford, which belonged to Pitt cousins. However, he grew up on his father's farm at Winterbrook, Bishopbourne Road, seven miles from Longford.

There was a myth in the Pitt family that they were descended from nobility. William Pitt was brought up believing he was descended from the Earl of Chatham.

The truth about their convict ancestry was concealed and didn't come out until much later. At the time no one was keen to acknowledge what was seen as a disgrace, a taint, on the family name.

William's paternal grandfather from Bristol, England, found guilty of stealing 9/6d and a handkerchief, was convicted and transported to Tasmania for fourteen years.¹ Granted a ticket-of-leave in 1842 he quickly acquired one hundred acres of land. In 1850 he purchased Longford House and its farm, which had originally been a private school. It remained in the Pitt family until recent times, and although the house has been sold, the surrounding land is still in the family.

William Pitt was eventually disowned by his father because he preferred reading the classics to haymaking and helping out on the family farm. The split was possibly a symptom of a deeper conflict between father and son. During their courtship he and Marie discovered a shared interest in literature. In later life Marie described her husband as "a tall dark man – dark hair, dark eyes with a temper but who only drank in very strict moderation. He loved good literature, both prose and poetry but had no particular gift of expression in either, though he was quite a good critic and had a good brain generally with a leaning to the scientific".²

Soon after their marriage Marie and Bill Pitt moved to the Longford area of Tasmania. Eventually William obtained work as a miner with the Mt Read Silver Mining Company, a silver, lead, zinc and gold mine. The company had an eighty-acre block situated on the western slope of Mt Read, adjoining the Governor Hamilton mine, near Mt Hercules. This area is part of the Mt Read volcanic belt. By 1896 the mine, perched on top of rugged, inhospitable mountains, was in operation.

Getting to the foot of the mountain was no mean feat and the Pitts probably travelled by a variety of transport – boat, train, dray and packhorse. They made their way up the mountain before anyone dreamed of a haulage. While Bill worked at Mt Read they lived in a miner's cottage in the tiny mining settlement on Mt Hamilton.

As well as Mt Read, Bill Pitt also worked at The Magnet, Waratah, primarily a silver mine, with lead and some zinc, north of Rosebery. The Magnet was discovered in 1890 and closed in 1932. Both of these mines are on the rugged west coast. Bill Pitt later obtained employment at Mathinna, a gold mine (with some tin) in the north-east. It closed in the 1940s.

The town of Magnet consisted of miners' houses on the side of a steep gully beside the little train line

going up to the mine at the top of the mountain. Today it is difficult to reach and a four-wheel drive doesn't necessarily guarantee entry. ('Magnet' was one of Marie's pseudonyms.)

Marie and William spent twelve years in Tasmania and at times she was the only woman in the mining settlements. These years were seminal for her political and literary development.

BECAUSE OF TASMANIA'S rugged terrain, mining didn't start there until the 1870s and it wasn't until the 1890s that a branch of the Amalgamated Miners' Association (AMA) was established at Zeehan. Once it was set up, miners and their families in other areas became interested in the Tasmanian union movement, including Marie and Bill Pitt.

The development of Tasmania's union movement went hand in hand with the formation of Workers' Political Associations (WPA). The two organizations were complementary. The union movement was concerned with working conditions and wages, and the WPA was concerned with political and social activities coming to the fore at election times. Marie became Vice-President of the WPA at Mathinna. Yet it wasn't until 1903 in Tasmania that three Labor members, all from mining areas, were elected to the State Parliament.

Despite isolation, restrictions imposed by pregnancy and small children these were stimulating days for Marie. Even when her third child was only a year old, she had been active in the election campaign, particularly of George Burns, the new Labor Member for Queenstown. George Burns and his wife Lillian were close friends of the Pitts. The Labor and Union movements ran education courses on politics and economics which extended her experiences of the appalling working and living conditions in mining areas. Her articles exposed the substandard working conditions endured by miners and in one she captured the horror of living outside a mining town:

To those who have always lived outside the 'vicious circle' of a mining town or centre it would be well nigh impossible, humanly speaking, to convey any conception of the sleepless terror of impending evil – the grisly obsession of 'who next' – that tugs at the heart of every woman whose husband, son, brother or lover goes 'below'. Particularly is this so when the body or bodies of someone's breadwinner or winners lies at the changing-house waiting for the packed inquest that formality demands –

while the grinding gear moans its incessant dirge, and the siren shrieks at the change of shifts 'more blood' – 'more blood'. To the sensitive spectator the whole thing conjures up a vision of the drafting pens of the slaughter yards.³

However, because of the restrictive political climate she disguised her gender under initials and pseudonyms. It wasn't easy then for women to be published.

Inspired by Tasmania's climatic extremes her poetry and prose evoke the bleakness, the beauty –

an austere land of mountains and gorges of ice and snow, and raging torrents of creeping mist and never-ending rain – a land speaking another language, superb in its silence, appalling in its melancholy grandeur – it lives above the world.⁴

Despite hardship, primitive living conditions and babies, she found time to develop her creative writing:

Scribbled verse in young girlhood but didn't get much encouragement from surroundings. Took it up against the loneliness of the West Coast Mountains in the intervals of house and baby tendings. Sent my first verse to *The Bulletin* in 1900 – some Boer War verse – and it was accepted.⁵

Her satirical poem on the Boer War, 'Ode to the Fat Man', written under the pseudonym 'Magnet' was published in *The Bulletin* reciter in 1901. She was quite prolific around this period and had a number of poems published in *The Weekly Courier*, now the *Launceston Examiner*.

The landscape and vegetation of Tasmania's west coast are integral to Marie Pitt's writing. The hardwood tree, the mountain myrtle, the mainstay of the pine huts, is given pride of place as well as other hardwoods such as sassafras, blackwood and leatherwood. The only Australian deciduous tree native to Tasmania, the fagus or dwarf beech, appears regularly in her poetry. She wrote of button grass, bauera and the terrifying "'horizontal' scrub".

In her poem 'A West Coast Silhouette' she describes the relentless fury of a west coast winter which is like "a black Sou'wester screaming without, / Hard through the 'horizontal' scrub".⁶ Fortunately there were moments of respite:

Summer in these Tasmanian highlands is a wonderfully beautiful season – for more than nine months one has wrestled with rain and spiteful hail, days of fog, that never saw the sun, when men groped through the long twilight night when the pine-huts rocked in the grip of the sou’wester till they plucked at the 10 inch [250 mm] spikes that held their footplates to the myrtle logs. Suddenly, almost as though a wizard had waved his wand, one feels it coming – an indefinable lightness and sweetness – a new presence. Summer has come to the mountains . . .

Six weeks or so of halcyon calm and as suddenly as it came it will go – a greying of the southern sky; the breath of the damp seawind and the stealthy fog wrapping everything in its melancholy mantle through which the brown thrush calls, and the eternal lantern glimmers like a wavering star up and down the twisted tracks where men go to and fro and the tunnels pierce the rocky ribs of the world, above the clouds.⁷

The challenge of life on the west was an experience denied to the

*children of softer climes . . . who never know of
the spears of sleet
Stabbing the skin and pricking the veins
And biting the bone as the axe-blade bites
To a mountain myrtle’s shuddering heart.⁸*

One former Rosebery miner felt an instant rapport with her description of “spiteful hail and sleet”.

Even when she was living in Melbourne, Tasmania’s west coast was an integral part of her life and imagination:

*As I drowse and dream of an open door
Of a pine hut set by a bridle-track
High on the shoulder of Hamilton.⁹*

Four children were born to the Pitts in Tasmania. The births of Evaline Marie on 18 June 1896 and Ida Mabel



*Marie Pitt and family,
courtesy Mrs Q and Bill Pitt*

on 1 July 1898 are recorded in the Zeehan register. Their third child, William Pitt, was born in the north-east in 1902. The baby referred to and not registered was possibly a stillbirth. It is only in recent years that stillbirths are acknowledged and parents allowed to grieve and bury their babies. There is strong indication that the baby was buried on Hamilton –

*Half my heart is buried there
buried high on Hamilton –
Lonely is the sepulchre,
with never stone for sign.¹⁰*

Marie Pitt is copious in her praise of Tasmania’s pioneers. In her poem ‘The West Coasters’,¹¹ heroic

pioneers take on a larger-than-life perspective meeting all challenges, removing all obstacles including the unique, pristine forests:

*The Axe flung, like a levin sword,
Her challenge down the wind.
They slew the pine and sassafras,
The myrtle host laid low,
Tramping through the button-grass . . .
Forty years ago!*

Axemen were also celebrated in her poem ‘Song of the Axe’.¹² Marie saw the felling of Tasmanian trees as a clean, wholesome act linked to the development of civilization, essential to the process of taming, wakening the slumbering landscape:

*O the song of the axe on the westward tracks
By the camp fire ruddily leaping –
’Twas the Marseillaise for the roving days
That wakened the land from sleeping
Unlike other activities of mankind it is not
destructive, but benevolent –
It has poured no tears on the restless years
Its march is no march of terror.*

It’s a very exaggerated and romantic view of tree felling. She extols the axe as being “stronger” and “braver”¹³ than the sword or pen.

Felling of trees was necessary for human habitation,

for the pine huts of miners, families and settlers, for support structures within mines, essential for survival. In the 1890s in Tasmania the extent of the destruction of native forests was probably inconceivable. Tasmanian forests were vast, there was a feeling that resources were inexhaustible.

It was only so-called 'progress' and the introduction of more sophisticated tree-felling techniques that led to escalating demands in the timber industry and forest destruction. The results couldn't have been foreseen by Marie Pitt nor anyone else at the time. There was hardship, and people not only endured they were triumphant, but the seeds of future destruction were sown.

Returning to the Gippsland area of her childhood, it is the dramatic change in the landscape – the denuding of the Gippsland forest – which forcibly brings home to Marie the changes which are caused by time and human intervention.

In 'Doherty's Corner'¹⁴ she expresses concern for forest destruction, juxtaposing the barren landscape of today against the magic of yesterday, of childhood:

*There's no bush today at Doherty's Corner
Only strange green hills and the glint of a far bay;*

The succinct image of "strange green hills" powerfully evokes the absence of trees.

In Tasmania she was given the impetus to enter the poetry competition run by *Good Words* in England, which she won in 1902 with her 'Song of the Empire', when her husband remarked that with her Celtic background she wouldn't be able to write an English poem. "That did it. Thereupon I sat down and wrote a poem. Those were the days before the typewriter had found its way into the bush. In spite of difficulties however, I managed to get my poem to the mail."¹⁵

Despite his challenge to her ancestry, Marie's husband supported her through long and difficult nights while she drafted and wrote by hand the 'Song of the Empire':

*She told of sitting up all night writing by lamplight
to complete her poem, her husband making pots of
tea and attending to three fretful children. Of dash-
ing down the mountain side to ask the post office to
hold the mail till the last possible second so that the
poem could go by the last date eligible in England.¹⁶*

In her poem 'A West Coast Silhouette'¹⁷ there's a reference to the west coast mining community of Deep

Lead. Its name was later changed to Williamsford, and residents caught a little train to Rosebery, before the road went through in 1963 and was officially opened in 1964. The mine is closed now and although the township no longer exists it lives on in Marie's poem:

*And hear, now muffled, now rising clear,
The jangling note of a single bell,
And the beat of hoofs on the corded track
Of the pack team tolling up from the 'Lead'.*

With friends I did the ten-kilometre walk to Montezuma Falls, a few kilometres out of Rosebery. The bush track follows the disused train track to the now-defunct mine. A further track leads up to the impressive falls. In her poem 'Mountain Myrtle'¹⁸ Marie refers to

*Where old Montezuma races
Down the waterworn rock-faces,
Singing songs to lonely places
Set in ways of wind and wet!*

It was wet – the bush was dripping with water – etched with small waterfalls, ferns, purple flowers.

During the festival I stayed for a few nights in the Rosebery Hotel, commonly referred to as the 'Bottom Pub', and a couple of nights at Mt Black Lodge. Unfortunately the Rosebery Pub, an integral part of the township, burnt down in June 1999. Over a hundred years old, it was constructed of Huon and King Billy pine. Luckily there was no loss of life.

Rosebery is dominated by Mt Black and the mine and also by spectacular Mt Murchison. My first night at Mt Black Lodge I met some people from the north-east who were travelling around Tasmania. One of the men from Ringarooma was praising what he saw as Tasmania's neglected north-east. I explained what I was doing in Rosebery, about Marie Pitt, and the mining areas of Mt Read, the Magnet, Waratah and Mathinna. He told me that his mother went to school at Waratah in 1908 – he had an old postcard of the mining area which he showed me. His grandfather, an engineer, was in charge of the mine.

The north-east inspired several of Marie Pitt's Tasmanian poems. In 'Mathinna'¹⁹ she captures with vigorous, vivid images the area dominated by Ben Lomond:

*I saw the dawn leap from his bed,
All wild and red and thunder-fed,*

*Behind Ben Lomond's purple head
And the mountains – and Mathinna!
I saw the ragged red sun rise
And climb the steel stairs of the skies,
Like blood between mine aching eyes
And the mountains – and Mathinna.*

As with many of her Tasmanian poems, they were written in retrospect, and there is sadness at loss, at distance:

*I turned me from the mountains tall;
Behind me distance built her wall*

In 'Hill Ghosts'²⁰ she evokes Fingal and the South Esk river, south of Mathinna in the mountain region but literally a world away:

*But old Fingal is a world away,
By Malahide and the low mists creeping;
And it's O for South Esk under skies of gray,
South Esk and the brown trout leaping!*

'Autumn in Tasmania'²¹ is also set in the north-east:

*... now like a ghost
A haggard moon rides up the eastern coast
And through the silence, like a passing bell,
A bittern booms across the caverned dusk*

There is no going back, but these Tasmanian landscapes and mining communities, often located in wilderness and mountain areas, exert a strong emotional pull on Marie Pitt's imagination.

The Pitts left Mathinna, returning to Melbourne in 1905 after Bill contracted the miner's lung disease phthisis, commonly referred to as 'dust on the lungs'. A bleak time followed, a time of a bitter struggle with economics, unemployment, ill-health. Bill Pitt got some casual labouring work with the Victorian Railways, but eventually was too frail and sick to work. He lingered on in pain for three years before his death in 1912. He was in his early forties. Marie had found it increasingly difficult looking after her sick husband, three children, and trying to earn an income by writing. She turned her hand to a variety of jobs including casual clerical work, roll checking, census collecting and also as a part-time reader for a publishing company.

Finally in desperation she put capitalistic justice to the test by writing

to the Chairman and Board of Directors of the New Golden Gate Mine, Mathinna, whose dividends her husband's labour had helped to raise, an eloquent letter explaining her destitute position – asking them in justice to make some compensation to help her support her dying husband and three children. "My husband" she wrote, "sold to you during the four years that he worked for you, not his time, nor his labour, but his life, his usefulness, his wife and children's future bread and shelter. I appeal to you as men and in the name of justice, remember this when you consider my appeal."

The reply came courteous but cold: "We have no fund out of which such help could be given", etcetera, etcetera.²²

Then Marie Pitt wrote 'The Keening',²³ strongly critical of a system that places little value on human life. Fathers, husbands, brothers, lovers destroyed by the mines will be vindicated by women and children:

*We are the women and children
Of the men that ye mowed like wheat;
Some of us slave for a pittance –
Some of us walk the street;
Bodies and souls, ye have scourged us;
Ye have winnowed us flesh from bone:
But, by the God ye have flouted,
We will come again for our own!*

As a result of her husband's long illness and death Marie herself suffered ill-health. Some friends raised funds so that she could recuperate in Tasmania. She spent six months there, returning in May, 1913.

DURING MY STAY in Rosebery I spoke to, and interviewed on several occasions, a local identity and ex-miner, Kim McDermott. He told me about the history of the mining areas – his life as a miner – the working conditions. Since the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century conditions in mines had continued to improve. However, in more recent years, hard-won improvements and safety in mines have been drastically eroded.

In the 1980s the Pasmenco Mine in Rosebery brought in men from outside the area, 'seagulls' to break the union, working conditions and communities.

Twelve-hour shifts had been introduced for five days on and five days off, although moving towards seven-day rosters. The Renison Bell mine just south of Rosebery

had just introduced seven-day rosters of twelve-hour shifts. These are not good conditions for workers or their families. The new shifts have manyteething problems. The workers, as usual, the guinea pigs.

Issues of clean air were being neglected – diesel fumes from the huge trucks working underground were wreaking havoc on workers' health. Miners' lungs were collapsing – particularly those of men in their thirties and forties. There seemed to be a relationship to diesel fumes.

WHEN THE FESTIVAL WAS OVER I moved in with some of the festival organizers, in their miner's house perched on Mt Black. They were mining underneath the houses and every evening you could hear the underground blasts. Sitting out on their verandah I could see Mt Read – the mist draping the mountain – obscuring the television tower, bare slopes, trees. The mine and settlement were on the other side, out of sight, but it was still special.

It was inspiring talking to locals, people interested in Marie Pitt's poetry, miners, walking and seeing areas where the Pitts lived – the mountains and mining environments that were the stimulus for much of her Tasmanian writing and poetry. It enhanced my understanding of her strong political beliefs and life-long commitment to justice for miners, workers, women, for the underdog.

But it was depressing to see gains miners had won through the twentieth century, seemingly so easily lost in recent years, reinforcing the fact that the fight for better living and working conditions is never over, can never be taken for granted.

Since my visit in March, 1999, there have been more job losses in the Rosebery mine. People are moving out of the area in droves. In mid-1999 there was a death of a miner in the nearby Hercules mine.

I was told that an old road led up to the disused Mt Read mine, to Hamilton where Marie and Bill Pitt had lived. Access was by four-wheel drive only and there was a locked gate, but the key could easily be procured from the police station. However, this was no longer the case. Recently an ancient Huon pine, a male, 10,500 years old has been discovered on Mt Read – near the road. It's been conserved, fenced off, and no one is allowed into the area. Several people tried on my behalf but it wasn't possible. This Huon pine is

growing in a higher altitude than normal. Self propagating, it seeded when its branches laden with snow touched the earth – or just leant low to the ground. It was there when the indigenous inhabitants were still there, when the miners and the families lived on Hamilton – when Marie and her family lived there. I wanted to walk on Mt Read, see the site of the old mine, the old settlement of Hamilton, wanted to see the Huon pine. One day maybe a key will be available but somehow I feel incredibly happy, invigorated, knowing that the Huon pine has survived, when so much else has been destroyed.

ENDNOTES

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3. Marie Pitt, 'A Morbid Expression of Class Consciousness', *The Socialist*, 5 January 1912.
4. 'Bauera and Buttongrass', *Lone Hand*, 2 June 1913.
5. Letter to Zora Cross, 16 December 1921.
6. Colleen Burke, *Doherty's Corner: the life and work of Marie E.J. Pitt*, Sydney, A&R, 1985, p.109.
7. 'Bauera and Buttongrass'.
8. Burke, p.110.
9. Burke, p.111.
10. Marie Pitt, *Selected Poems*, Melbourne, Lothian, 1944, p.59.
11. Pitt, p.99
12. Pitt, p.79
13. Pitt, p.79
14. Burke, p.77
15. J.D. Adams, 'Marie Pitt – the Poetess from Bairnsdale', *The Gap*, 1964, p.42.
16. V. O'Dowd, 'The Poetry of Marie E.J. Pitt – The Miriam of Australia'. Paper given to the Australian Poetry Lovers' Society, Melbourne, 22 April 1961, H.H. Pearce Private Papers.
17. Burke, p.109.
18. Pitt, p.73.
19. Burke, p.119.
20. Burke, p.107.
21. Burke, p.102.
22. Letter on Horses of the Hills, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 May 1913, from 'One Who Watched', *Gavutu*, 30 March 1913, Solomon Islands, H.H. Pearce Private Papers.
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Colleen Burke is a Sydney writer. She was recently awarded the NSW Writers' Fellowship. She has published nine books, including seven volumes of poetry.

Bronwen Hickman

Mary Gaunt

an Australian Identity

WHEN MARY GAUNT was growing up on the Victorian goldfields in the 1870s and 1880s, she chafed at the restricted life of middle-class women that she was forced to live while her brothers could travel, live a life of adventure, and get on in the world. In her long life she challenged this situation, but you would hardly have known it from her obituary notice in the Melbourne *Argus*:

The death has occurred at Cannes (France) of Mary Gaunt, Australian novelist. Mary Gaunt was a daughter of the late Judge Gaunt, of Melbourne. Sir Guy and Sir Ernest Gaunt, both Admirals of the British Fleet, were her brothers. So, too, were Mr Clive Gaunt, formerly of the Burma Civil Service, and now of Frankston, and Lt.-Col. Cecil Gaunt, of the Indian Army. In 1894 she married Mr Hubert Lindsay Miller of Warrnambool. On his death in 1900 she went to England, and, after many vicissitudes, established herself as a novelist.

She travelled widely, and eventually settled at Bordighera, in Italy. Two days before Italy entered the war she was evacuated to Cannes and was still in hospital there when she died. She was about 86.¹

This is the woman who wrote regularly for *The Argus*, *The Australasian*, and other Melbourne papers; the woman described by *Table Talk* at the time she left Australia as "one of the best known and successful of Victorian authoresses", who was already earning a living from her pen.

The first woman to study at Melbourne University, she was the author of twenty-six books and many short stories and articles. She knew and loved the bush, and wrote stories of the goldfields, of bushrangers and bushfires, and of life in the Australian colonies, that are a valuable record of a world long gone. She travelled alone where few Western women had ever

been, and wrote successfully of her travels, supporting herself by writing when this was still an unusual thing for a woman to do.

After leaving Australia in 1900, Mary Gaunt lived for twenty years in England, and then spent her last twenty years in Italy. She set many of her books in Australia, always thinking of herself as Australian, and reminded her readers of it on occasion, but she did not come back home. Australia virtually forgot about her. When she died, in January 1942, it was wartime. Australians had just heard of the loss of the *Sydney*; Japan had entered the war, and the conflict which had begun on the other side of the world was suddenly very close to home. The death of a half-forgotten writer in occupied France went almost unnoticed.

Until recently, there was very little biographical information available about Mary Gaunt. There was a short paper in the *Victorian Historical Journal* in 1980 which she shared with Louisa Anne Meredith; a bibliography published in 1986 had twelve pages of biographical information in it. But there was no collection of diaries, papers, letters; she had no children, and her scattered family had limited records. In the past ten years, however, since the Bicentenary gave a boost to women's writing and women's histories, Mary Gaunt's name has appeared on a few reading lists for women's studies, and a number of scholarly articles have discussed aspects of her work.

She grew up in a colony where women were not entitled to higher education or to professional careers. In her own life she broke down the barriers to these, and made it easier for the women who followed her. She began to write at a time when the Australian colonies were moving towards a new national identity as a commonwealth, and showed us what it was like to be a woman in that changing world.

And there is something more. She wrote of the gulf between what a woman wanted out of life and what

the world expected of her. When she was widowed at the age of forty, Mary Gaunt reinvented herself: she bridged the gulf between wanting and being and became all the strong, adventurous women she had written about. There is never a time when we do not delight in such a triumph of the human spirit.

Mary constructed her characters with pieces of herself. She invested them with her ideas about a woman's place in society, about male/female relationships, about a woman's desire – and need – to have a good education which might lead even to a profession and her right to earn her own income. It is only necessary to read some biographical detail – ages of siblings, family situation, father's profession, etc. – and learn something about the author, for pieces of her to start catching attention in her fiction, as well as in less obvious places like her newspaper articles on travel and migration schemes, and her letters to *The Times*.

In 1921 she wrote to *The Times* about the waste of girlhood. In her letter she used as an example a family she had known, where the husband and father (a lawyer) went off to work, leaving the wife to manage the small farm. Because a well-brought-up woman must not be seen to be working, the husband made the contacts, bought the stock, arranged the supplies. He was not a good businessman; his wife could have done it all much better. As a result, the farm did not prosper. It is clear from Guy Gaunt's description of his childhood in *The Yield of the Years*, and from snippets in that part of Mary's autobiography which has been found, that this seemingly random example is a picture of the Gaunt family. It expresses the frustrations and limitations of Mary's early years which come to us most clearly through the mouths of characters like Phoebe in *Kirkham's Find*. The autobiographical fragment, written with intent to publish when Mary was in her seventies and living in Italy in the late 1930s, is a rambling piece which is disappointing as a source of detail about her life. Her vision is not as clear, her writing not as precise – she simply does not remember with clarity and objectiveness the concerns and passions of life in her twenties and thirties. She created herself more realistically in the characters of her novels than in the complaisant uncritical image of herself which she settled into comfortably in later years.

We have to turn to her fiction for her more penetrating insight into the difficulties she faced:

All this talk about higher education for women is all bunkum. No fellow likes a learned wife. Let the

women stick at home and mind their houses. A nice girl's pretty sure to get married in the end. What does she want, spoiling herself, earning her own living?'

These were the words of an older brother in *Kirkham's Find*, published in 1897. In this book, Mary created a well-educated and independent young colonial woman very much like her creator, who was under pressure from her family – particularly her brothers and her mother – to avoid sounding educated and to settle down to the serious business of finding a husband. Phoebe Marsden is the eldest in a big family, with a sister a little younger regarded as the prettier of the two. Their father is a professional man in Ballarat, and their small farm is badly managed ("I wish to goodness father would let me manage just for a year . . . I know I could make it pay", Phoebe says). The girls are aware of the family's limited finances, and Phoebe is keen to earn money of her own. She envies her brothers' educational opportunities, and their chance to earn their own money and make their way in the world. As the story develops, Phoebe determines to earn an independent living by keeping bees, and through many difficulties succeeds in her ambition.

We think of writing fiction as making things up, and of autobiography as writing the truth about ourselves. But we are closer to the reasons that led Mary to drop out of university in Stanley's comments to Phoebe than we are in anything Mary Gaunt wrote about herself. She pursued the truth more earnestly in letters and articles, and in her fiction, than she ever did in autobiography.

In much of Mary Gaunt's writing there is a tension between what she believes is desirable for women – freedom to travel, to follow their interests, to converse openly and intelligently with men – and what society will insist they settle for: marriage, feminine accomplishments, a protected and limited domestic sphere. She emphasizes this tension in letters and articles, but makes the contrast most telling in her fiction. In *Every Man's Desire*, she contrasts Albertine, the hothouse flower, pretty and frivolous, with Janey, late-twenties and single, resourceful, energetic, interested in the world around her. Albertine beguiles the hero ("these little soft purry women get everything"), but ultimately Janey gets the man she loves in a meeting of equals: adventurous, like-minded people who will make an unconventional life together on the Mahogany Coast. Readers are left in no doubt that happiness for both

men and women is to be found when women lead fulfilling lives.

MARY USED HER colonial upbringing and experience as a credential for her critique of British and German colonial policies in West Africa, although growing up in one colony seems hardly, of itself, a qualification for judging another. Most writing about the colonies involved having someone from the centre of empire, from Britain, go out to visit the far-flung places of empire and write about them for the readers at home. But here was someone from the colonies doing the narrative – the empire writing back. And the novelty of someone from one far-flung stopping-place on the all-red King’s Highway moving to another, equally remote section, and writing about it from the point of view of a colonial – and a woman – was no doubt calculated to increase sales of her book.

Mary was a woman of her times. But while she had narrow views and prejudices typical of her time, she could sometimes see very clearly beyond these. She valued native buildings as being far more sensible than many airless colonial buildings in West Africa, and gave lectures in Britain pleading for the preservation of the majestic mahogany forests of West Africa when most colonial officials felt it quite reasonable to clear vast areas by cutting them down.

Mary Gaunt had wanted to go to Africa since childhood; she got her opportunity at last in 1908 (after setting three novels there!). In the account of her travels, *Alone in West Africa*, she makes it clear that she is an Australian writer. She begins the book with a declaration of Australianness which she equates with restlessness and the desire for travel and love of adventure. Later, when reporting a commissioner’s explanation that his wife cannot join him in Africa because her complexion is too delicate, she is impatient with them both: “Perhaps it is because I am an Australian and have had a healthy upbringing that I resent very much the suggestion that a woman cannot go where a man can.” To be Australian is to see more clearly, to be a strong, no-nonsense woman dealing with effete, old-world opinions.

But while she wrote about Africa as an Australian, she presented in Africa as British (as of course she was) and expected to be treated as a superior by black Africans and welcomed and assisted as a visiting British-Australian writer by European missionaries and colonial officials. On her first landfall, in Gambia, she took the trouble to learn to recognize the different

racial groups – Yorubas from Lagos, Gas from Accra, Senegalese from the north, Jolloff river men, Mandingo, etc. But further down the coast in Liberia, she encountered a group of Africans who did not want to have their photographs taken. When she tried to insist, she was met with hostility. With no conception of intrusion, of the cultural significance of making an image of someone, with no questioning of her right to photograph whomever she pleased, her benign interest wore thin: “they need not have reviled me in the blatant, coarse manner of the negro who has just seen enough of civilization to think he rules the universe!”³ Now racial individuality has gone and there is a condescending singular for the group; “the negro” has dared to defy her wishes, something almost akin to a claim to rule the universe.

She spent a few uncomfortable days in Liberia, land of the freed slaves. She could not find bearers to carry her, and had to walk. She was glad to move on.

She was quite comfortable about her status in the British colony of Gambia. She was Australian, but British-Australian, and therefore superior. She did not question this superiority over the Africans, or her place among them. With a disarming unconcern for history, she says: “So the white man has always ruled the black; so I think he must always rule.” When she saw the patient Wangara and Hausa women, with loads on their heads and babies on their backs, she was made aware of the contrast with her own position. “... I was more than content with that station in life into which it had pleased my God to call me.” God and the British had things comfortably arranged in Gambia.

On the Cape Coast, also British territory, she hired bearers for a few pence a day, but they became troublesome. They pleaded weariness, and sickness, and asked for more pay. The weather was growing hotter, and she was beginning to suffer in the heat; the needs of the bearers did not concern her. She felt that they were simply taking advantage of the fact that she was a woman, and said that payment – at the agreed rates – was at journey’s end and not before. Her readers undoubtedly enjoyed the white woman’s triumph over natives; it was ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ travel writing. (She did, however, find herself doing one section of the journey by coastal steamer instead of overland because no bearers could be found – being British was not always enough.)

TO BE AUSTRALIAN was to share the racism of her readers. It was common for Australians to speak of

the Chinese in general, or of a Chinese man they knew, as 'John Chinaman'. The Chinese gardener who brought vegetables to the Gaunt household was known as 'Vegetable John'. Mary remembered how, when she was a child, her mother would threaten to give the baby to Vegetable John if the older siblings would not do what their mother had asked and take care of it. It was a frightful thought which seemed to succeed in getting obedience or co-operation from the children. In China she found herself in the interesting position of having someone run after her in the street with a baby, and seeing the bigger children crying; she realized that she was playing the role of Vegetable John for the Chinese children. She ends the anecdote with a comforting thought which suggests the universality of the experience: "After all, human nature is much the same all the world over, on the sunny hills of Ballarat or in a walled city at the foot of the mountains in northern China".⁴

Mary was proud of her Australianness. She was proud of an upbringing free of most of the restrictions of middle-class English life, of her determination and ability to go where she wanted to go – influenced by a similar freedom in childhood – to cut through red tape to get what she wanted, to ignore social conventions and restrictions which would have made her travels impossible or extremely difficult. Alice Grant Rosman, who interviewed her for English readers in 1912, commented: "Mary Gaunt left Victoria for London more than ten years ago, but she is still a thorough Australian, energetic, enterprising, with a keen, quick sense of humour and a charming manner. . ."⁵ It is not clear how many of the qualities she listed equated in Rosman's mind with being Australian, but 'energetic' and 'enterprising' certainly did.

Mary had occasion to remind Alfred Deakin of her loyalty to Australia in a letter she wrote to him in 1907. Deakin was a family friend, and Mary was sending him a copy of one of her books (presumably the most recent, *Fools Rush In*, published in November 1906). She wrote: "I hope you will like my book. . . I want you too [sic] particularly for another reason. I want to write for Australia . . . I love my native land and dearly should I like to write about her and glorify her." There is probably more to these rather cloying sentiments than national pride; she may have been hoping for some kind of official writing task which would get her back to Australia. Deakin, in London for an Imperial Conference, was then in his second term as Prime Minister, and was well placed to help her if she was hoping for

some official appointment or recognition.

Although she thought of herself as thoroughly Australian (an identification common to travellers who have left their own country), Mary had learned early on in her writing career that the 'Australian identity' in the 1890s was largely a male construct. In the late 1880s Mary published a short story in *The Bulletin*. 'A Dilemma' was set on the goldfields; one man is a bush-ranger with a price on his head, one a commissioner on the goldfields. An old friendship triumphs when the two men come face to face. The story embodied the emerging ideas that were to contribute to the 'bush' image: it was mateship on a pedestal. About this time stories featuring Englishmen wooing squatters' daughters were giving way to those of Barcroft Boake, Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson; from these new stories emerged the developing images of the bush – the idea of mateship, of the easy-going colonial cutting through social barriers, the man or woman battling and beating the vastness of the bush and coping with heat, bushfires, flood and isolation. Many of Mary's stories of life on the diggings fitted well with this romantic 'Australian' image that centred around *The Bulletin*, but some of her values were very different. Egalitarianism as understood by *The Bulletin* was for white males. It did not include the Chinese, or Aborigines, and it did not include women. When Mary urged the right of women to be independent, and to carve out careers for themselves, she found that the brave new world of colonial literature was the domain of male writers. She was to discover later that reviewers could treat women writers with withering scorn.

Kirkham's Find (1897) was her third novel, and the most successful to date. *The Argus* reviewer was complimentary; the London *Bookman* said it showed "an increase in strength and vitality [over her earlier books]". "A really charming novel" said the London *Standard*. Overseas it went well. In Melbourne it went well. But in Sydney . . .

In November 1897 *The Bulletin* Red Page reviewed three new books by Australian women: Mary's *Kirkham's Find*, Louise Mack's *Teens*, and *Miss Bobbie*, by Ethel Turner. For *Miss Bobbie* there was kindly enthusiasm: "Ethel Turner's *Miss Bobbie* completes her round half-dozen volumes: she will soon need a whole shelf to herself . . . *Miss Bobbie* quite maintains the author's excellent level . . ."

For Louise Mack, for whom a bright future was predicted, there was a short and rather dismissive paragraph about her output, and how one had to "admire

the lady's industry". Her book lost out in comparison to *Little Women*, "that permanent standard of girls' -book all-but-perfection", but received reasonable praise.

Then the reviewer turned to Mary:

About 'Kirkham's Find' there is little to say. The author dribbles commonplaces over a vast number of pages through which lacklustre characters walk slowly and gossip about nothing in particular. In 'Dave's Sweetheart' Mary Gaunt left room for hope that she might become something more than the average fluent female penster. There is dramatic power in that book, and, so far as the women are concerned, a good deal of dramatic insight. But 'Dave's Sweetheart' for the most part lacks intensity. The incidents are lost in a flux of flabby words. The author attenuates in ten sentences an impression which a vigorous writer would paint vividly in two. The collection of short stories called 'The Moving Finger' exhibited the same fault without compensating virtue. And 'Kirkham's Find' touches the nadir of feeble flatulency. Scenes and people are indeed photographed minutely, with feminine precision; but, as the author's mind has no depth or scope or originality wherewith to glorify them, the whole is only a sorry small-beer chronicle. And the average woman's pre-eminence as a small-beer chronicler was already well established.⁶

It was a damning criticism from an influential paper. Nothing by Mary appeared in *The Bulletin* again. But, looking back at the romanticized picture of 'real' Australian men, and women, promoted by *The Bulletin*, her writing provides an effective counter-balance. It offers a choice – another 'Australian' identity:

"Come in here," said the girl, quickly drawing him into a little room with a brick floor and a tiny window high up in the wall. There was a guttering candle standing on one of the shelves, and he could see it was used as a place to keep the milk buckets

and milk cans in. "Maybe me father's quiet now. Stay here and I'll slip round and see."

She gave the hand she held a tender squeeze and was out of the door without waiting for an answer, closing it after her. The sergeant thought he heard the bolt shot and the sound of scampering feet, and a cold sweat broke out over him as he began to think he had been sold. He strode up and put his salwart shoulder to the door and shook it violently. "Maggie, Maggie O'Brien!" he called.

He yelled, he shouted, he flung himself against the door, and for all the effect it had upon the household they might have been dead. Then he paused and rested, and through the open window he heard, borne on the wild wind, the sound he had waited so long to hear, the sound of heavily-laden drays coming down the road.

from short story, 'The Humbling of Sergeant Mahone'.

When Mary Gaunt was widowed in 1900, three years after *Kirkham's Find*, she had the freedom, and just enough money, to step out and make a career for herself. It was now possible that the goals she had striven for as a writer in her fiction – a woman's right to be independent, to travel, to earn a living – could be her own. However difficult the transition, the fiction was to become the life.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Argus*, 31 January 1942.
2. *Kirkham's Find*, Melbourne, Penguin, 1988, p. 10.
3. *Alone in West Africa*, p. 76.
4. *A Woman in China*, pp. 210–211.
5. *Everylady's Journal*, 6 June 1912.
6. *The Bulletin* Red Page, 20 November 1897.

Bronwen Hickman is a Melbourne teacher and writer. She recently completed a biography of Mary Gaunt, and is preparing a collection of Mary Gaunt's short stories for publication.

January 18th

after Raymond Carver

Today

I wake up and look out of the window
for some reason I am surprised
to see the sun

I go for a walk which starts out
pleasantly enough
but becomes hot and long
my arm hurts

when I get home I remember
the dog has thrown up
just inside the gate
a glob of whitish yellow stuff
like butter

garnished with green
blades of grass

I need to get rid of it
but first I have to get
a bucket of disinfectant
to soak the nozzle of the hose
on which some prowling tom has shat
(touching I'm told

I could go blind
or develop any number
of fatal diseases)
from there it should be easy
but no

the nozzle is clogged
and no water comes out except
everywhere over me
everywhere but from the place
it should

I fix that
then try again
the bright blue thing
moves like a snake
in the sparse grass and weeds
I start to wash away the spot
the hose kinks and stops
once then twice and
I give up

Nicolette Stasko

In the Black of His Pupils . . . Something Familiar

Elisa Trunzo

OUR WEDDING DAY. You stand on the stairway, holding me in your arms as you prepare to carry me across the threshold. My hands are clasped behind your neck. The sun shoots down from the window, flooding my black lace dress with a sepia wash. My red hair glows in the light as we smile mischievously at the camera, comrades in arms against convention.

I flip the page to the next photo. The honeymoon. We are in East Berlin. It is dark. You chase me around a monument. You mould yourself well into my fantasies, into my stories of the girl who let herself loose in Europe. I am dancing around the monument with my flaming red hair. I am crazy and so are you. This must be love.

I slam the photo album shut and fling it across the floor.

The boiling coffee cries out to me from the kitchen. I shake the ants off the oven mitt and slide it between the screaming percolator and the wooden bench. You gave me this oven mitt. You said the red and gold fabric had a spiritual feel to it you thought I would like. But now the pattern is lost beneath the gravy stains and all I can see are the mundane memories; my hands removing a dish from the oven in our old flat, my skin brushing against the burning rack, the clock flashing 6.45 p.m., me racing around the kitchen pulling plates out of cupboards, cutlery out of drawers. And then the sound of a key thrusting into a lock and a moment of fantasy; you standing there, your hair long and unruly, dressed in black, your studded belt promising so much magic, your hands appearing from behind your back with a single red rose. You pick me up, carry me across the rug, throw me down gently and . . . You stood in the doorway. My eyes fell to your white socks pulled up past your calves, then to your King Gee

shorts, blue work shirt and the red tool box in your hand. You kissed me briskly on the cheek before placing your tool box on the floor. I closed the door behind you and reached for the serving spoon. I reminded you to wash your hands and your face twinged with annoyance as you switched on the television.

The phone rings. It's my friend Rachel. She talks to me of her marriage, the sagging romance, the stranger-husband, the claustrophobia. She says she needs to get away. I suggest Nepal because that's where I fled to. That's where I was taught the art of detachment by the great Buddhist masters. I tell her about the 'Dear John' fax you sent to me in Katmandu. How you'd fallen in love against your will, how I returned to Sydney knowing you were waiting for me, waiting to be reassured, wanting to be known as the 'nice guy'. I didn't want to argue. I tell her how you brag about our civilized separation, smugly giving advice to others as though you are now an authority on blissful break-ups.

I hang up the phone and it rings again. It's you. You believe that I'm your best friend. You confided in me when the 'other woman' dumped you and now you tell me you're in love again. This time it's serious. She's leaving the country soon, you moan like a love-sick slug. You say you know I don't care. I'm supposed to care? I try to practice detachment, but my rage covers me like a turtleneck sweater. I peer over the top and hiss my flames.

I lie in bed, swallowed by its massiveness. It's cold and the pillow is hard. You refused to give me back my soft pillow. You said it would break the set. I told you the set was already broken. I shake an ant from the pillow and lie back with my eyes open. You used to hold me until my body relaxed and my mind drifted off into the darkness. But now, I'm terrified that if I

close my eyes and travel down that tunnel to where the black wizard of sleep lies in wait . . .

I am standing at your front door holding a cardboard box and a can of kerosene. I push open the door and step into the dark hallway. It slams behind me, sending a shock wave along the wooden floor. I walk to your bedroom. This is where your worst crimes were committed, on our bed, on my pillow. The little room breathes in nervously as I scatter your new quilt cover with our old photographs, your old love letters and those binding marital documents. I look down on my memories and pour kerosene over them.

I survey my history as it lies quivering on the bed, the silver lighter hot in my hand. My paintings hang on the wall, pleading. They are still tied to me by an umbilical cord. One in particular screams out to me. I don't remember having painted it, yet it bears my signature. It is of a young man with bleached hair.

He sits on the step, waves of golden hair lapping against his face, the sunlight toying with the strands that fall across his eyes. His arm rests on his knee, his hand hanging limply, fingers bent as though pulling on a trigger. His eyes reveal nothing, but from his body, a thick cloud of fatigue emanates. He cannot see beyond this moment and this moment offers him nothing.

I look closely at the other paintings. They all bear my signature. They're all of him and the colours are moving, spiralling deeper and deeper into the canvas, until it seems the pigment has turned to flesh. I stand back and watch each image take its first breath, then spill out of its frame.

He sits alone on the beach, his hair glowing like a single dandelion in a large paddock. His eyes scan the trim bodies of the girls lining the sand and the brown torsos strutting towards the sea armed with their surfboards. The girls shout to the surfers as they leap heroically onto the boards, their laughter mingling with the cry of the seagulls and the music of the ocean. He counts the clusters of bronzed torsos, golden breasts, families grouped together, seagulls scavenging in groups, children splashing around in the waves, and on the horizon, a single battleship heads out to sea. He reaches for his cigarettes and the silver, pistol-shaped lighter.

He fishes the junk mail out of the rusty mail box marked 'No Advertising Material' and crushing each one in his hand, tosses the balls of coloured paper into

the overgrown garden. He walks up the jagged stone path to the front door of the old mansion. The darkness inside the corridor is thick and oppressive. His footsteps echo between the hollow walls announcing to the world, he is home and he is alone. He makes his way to the kitchen and opens the refrigerator door, a shaft of light creating a gentle halo around his bleached hair. He removes a can of beer and sits down at the kitchen table. An automatic rifle and a plastic bag full of high calibre bullets lean against the wall. Spider webs dress the corner and drape across to the window where a bee smashes its head repeatedly against the glass.

Golden angry flames gulping down everything in their path and spitting out his flesh like pips. I wake up. My black ballerina lamp anchors me, reassuring me that this was only a dream. I flick an ant off the pillow and turn over in bed, pulling at the blankets until I'm in a foetal position. Who was that young man that was swallowed by the fire? I know it wasn't you. The alarm clock interrupts my thoughts. I raise my head and catch my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. My face is aflame.

A few streets away in a large mansion, a cockroach manoeuvres its way over mountains of unwashed clothing. It crawls through the minefield of dusty video cassettes propped up against their covers, gun magazines with folded corners, dirty socks, mouldy shoes, until it arrives at yesterday's jam-soaked toast lying dead on a plate. A hand hovers over a cup of cold tea by the bed, the old milk forming a crusty lid. Jamie lies back, his mind focused on the ticking clock.

I stand before the mirror. I cover the rash that has invaded my face with layers of pale foundation and mountains of powder until I look embalmed. I tug at my hair, pulling, teasing, hating you with every pore in my ailing skin. I hate you. I hate what I have become through you. I hate my hair, my skin. My self.

The automatic rifle is propped against the refrigerator, its shadow vibrating with a menacing energy. Jamie picks it up gently like a mother with a newborn child, cradling it in his arms, running his fingers over its radiant skin. He has spent all morn-

ing polishing it. Now he can see his own reflection in its flesh. His face is distorted, snake-like, dark. He places the AR15 on a red, velvet cloth on the kitchen table and heads for the bathroom. He splashes water on his face, uncaps his shaving cream and lathers his skin until a perfect, even layer of white foam covers the area where his bristles grow. Then with his new razor, he methodically mows through the white, revealing strips of pink, angry flesh hidden beneath.

I spray my hair and examine my image. Rage creeps up my thighs, hovers in my groin, torpedos up to my breasts and hammers away there like a bee thumping against a glass pane.

He stands before the mirror surveying his red, naked face. Today he is going to take control. He collects the strands of fine hair at the nape of his neck and captures them with a green hair tie. He slides into a green bomber jacket, wraps his weapon in the red velvet cloth and lays it down in the tennis bag.

My eyes are fixed on the loaf of bread covered with dozens of little black ants. Ants crawling through the butter, marching across the bench top and up my arm as I try to drink my coffee. I grab the kitchen sponge and begin. I crush and crunch and flood the sink with the tiny bodies, then rinsing and wringing out the sponge, I return. I feel no mercy for any of them. Not the group making a last ditch effort at hoisting away that breadcrumb, nor the little one hiding behind the eggcup. I hunt them down under the radio, under the bowl of fruit, flushing them methodically from their hiding places. I need to go for a walk.

He walks through the busy street clutching at his tennis bag. The car fumes, the sound of cloth rubbing against cloth, closing in on him, stalking him from behind.

I'm walking through the crowded street. The sky is clear but I sense a storm brewing. My head is filled with pregnant clouds. The pavement feels hot beneath my boots and the skyscrapers floating by seem to melt together. I mop the sweat from my brow and lunge towards the giant ants that invade my path. The

mother in the woollen cardigan adjusts the straps on her toddler's overalls. I gush past, filled with hate, for her, for me, for all of it.

I walk into a cafe and sit at a table by the window. With a trembling hand, I fumble through my cluttered handbag until I feel the edges of the cigarette packet. I place one of the white sticks between my lips. The flame from my silver lighter appears like an apparition and sets it alight. I draw at it hungrily, the smoke clawing its way through my body, defining its solidity. With each puff the table turns solid, the chair beneath me, the glass of the window, even the bodies that glide past.

The ticking clock echoes through the empty house. It rumbles menacingly, the arms moving around its face, blasting away each second. The shots ricochet between the walls of the mansion. Tick. Tick. Tick. Until the alarm erupts and dwarfs the house that now trembles beneath it like a frightened child.

The cup flies out of the waiter's grip, the hot coffee spilling down my chest. A woman dabs at my burning skin with a silk handkerchief. My chest is on fire and the blisters are bubbling up like boiling porridge. I run to the bathroom, rip off my shirt and splash my angry flesh with cold water. My red face stares back at me from the mirror.

The light that floats beneath the front door seems fragile as it illuminates a lone spider. Its radiant white head looms over the dead and dying insects scattered through its web. A cockroach creeps across the floorboards. It follows the stench of rotting food into the kitchen, rustles over the empty plastic bag once filled with bullets and then climbs up onto the bench where the broccoli draws its last breath.

I open my front door and crawl into the arms of the warm house like a tiny child. I lie on the bed, the dressing cutting into my collarbone, thinking of all the fire that surrounds me, in my dreams, on my face, inside my body and now this blistering chest. I am tired and in pain, but there's nothing I can do now but wait for the healing to begin. I pick up the remote control and turn on the television, just in time for the news flash.

Follow that smell

Gaby Bila-Gunther

TUICA ALIAS SLIPOVITCH ALIAS PALINKA, alias plum brandy alias peasant's drink, 82 per cent pure alcohol, guarantees no hangovers or your liver back. It is delicious, it is pungent, its taste may never grow on you, but it will stay with you forever. It maps out my life: moments of glory and moments of grief. As a young child I remember toothaches and bleeding gums resting underneath buds of cotton wool dipped in tuica.

Misty eyes fogged up at night.

Sweet comfort inside my mother's embrace.

Switching the lights off with my eye keeping the cold at bay.

I remember a dream where we were startled into flight and heavy drumbeats sounded into the night.

And I saw stars, and stripes and pillowcases floating in the streets.

I remember my mother's eye wishing me a warm goodnight and rubbing hot tuica on my heavy breathing. Stirring health back to my chest.

I remember family's Easter reunions, pigs on the roast, tuica in the barrels, gypsies bathing themselves in it while playing their fiddles, gypsy bitches telling fortunes, tying chicken wire around your middle finger, smiles on their faces, luck in your palms. I remember three-day weddings where the mirele (the proud groom) drinks his tuica to lure his mireasa (the blushing bride). I remember tuica as dowries, liquid gold, "bogatia pamintului". Cu cine the insori mai, are tuica, ma naraule, vino si bea tuica cu nasu tau.

Sa-ti traiasca mireasa si copii. Noroc sa ai!

I remember tuica used as barter too, because money didn't matter. It never bought anything useful anyway. Only foreign money looked like gold in our pockets. Tuica was used to get victims out of trouble with the authorities. Every Securitate member liked to be tipsy on the job. Their memory dipped in tuica would

lapse in front of the judge. Tuica was the bribery tool to open the gates of the communist haven where the more barrels one brought and consumed the higher up the party ladder they climbed. When the barrels where emptied and parched so was their career. When their brain was sober once again so was their memory and lives were broken behind bars or working on fruitless fields, oozing for better memories.

As an older child my holidays were in the mountains at my uncle's who would come home, his clothes wearing this very smell. "Are you ready for some gossip?" his tipsy breath tried to entertain our moments of childhood. "I haven't got time to argue"; his wife turning an upper lip would watch him collapse on the bed. "Not even ten cuckoo clocks can wake him now!"

We knew that. My uncle loved consuming tuica and snoring its flavors away. The next morning he would be up when dawn would crack ready for another bottle. I never saw him chunder. Only whip his horses during his dark moods. Beat sa fi noroc sa ai. Drunk to be, and luck to have. He would lie at the bottom of his cuce, curled up and with good fate bestowed upon him while his horses would pull his drunken contents all the way up the mountain. They never missed a turn.

As older this smell takes me back into the kitchen at parties where I was searching for drinks containing the alcohol percentage of this smell. I drank it until I was spitting mult foc (ferocious fire). My teenage angst was that I wouldn't get enough of the stuff. Then I would be driving the porcelain bus all the way home and be awake for hours.

Sweet years later when I revisited my uncle, I rediscovered the smell in his empty kitchen, on an empty stomach, on a very early morning. His cupboard empty of food filled only with ghostly bottles. No wife, no kids

they had enough of his stench. I went there to get away from the bars in Berlin where the smell made me see only doors, floors, and shoes and cowboy boots. Stretchers, men in white carrying victims after Tuica Slammers competitions. The winner never knew he was carrying gold. Intoxicated, he never remembered.

I followed the smell to Prague where it was cheaper than our daily bread. Searching for our last Korunas, we wine and dined with it. Gypsy mothers asked for dimes while the Danube lifted its tide and greeted its departure to coughed-up wretched cans of filth around its rocky ridges; it looked morose and lone at the drop of a coin.

The very smell got my friend Lola into trouble after her inebriated mind won her an invitation into a rapist's home. She was lucky she couldn't remember a thing. My grand frolic partner, Lola was always an enormous binger. Her soggy breath intoxicated her whole aura while her turmoiled behavior lured men between her sheets. Why do some women do this to themselves? Then they wonder in dull innocence why some men take advantage of them.

The smell complicated my life on various occasions. Now I follow it to celebrate my roots, a better life and my good fortune. I raise my glass up to the sky and shout: *Noroc si la multi ani. Sanatate mare!* Good health to you!

Altitude Sickness

Molly Guy

MADNESS AND GRIZELDA WERE OLD FRIENDS, they were the best of mates. Madness was a sly old fox. Madness understood Grizelda's weaknesses, when Grizelda wandered off to her kitchen in the evenings to slice up onions for her dinner, it wondered out loud why Grizelda hadn't thought to use her brand new stay-sharp knife to slit her throat from ear to ear. Once, responding to her best mate's urgings, Grizelda climbed into the five thousand gallon water tank at the back of the house and tried very hard to drown herself, but somehow the water didn't fill up her lungs, it didn't pour down her throat and end her life. Finally Grizelda clambered out of the tank to answer her telephone, Grizelda dripped water all over the lounge room carpet, she told her caller, what can I do for you? A voice on the other end of the line jabbered, you don't know me, my name is Bean, I've recently moved into the house next door. I thought you should know I've just seen someone swimming around in the water tank in your backyard - Later in the day Grizelda's new neigh-

bour came knocking on Grizelda's back door. Grizelda peered at Bean through her security peephole, Bean seemed nervous, "I wondered could I borrow a cup of sugar?" Bean had to be the tallest person Grizelda had ever seen, Bean's head brushed against the cobwebs hanging down from Grizelda's ceiling, Grizelda handed Bean his sugar. Bean told Grizelda, "thanks", he said, "Do people often swim in your water tank?" Grizelda replied, "Only in summer." Bean pointed out, "But it's the middle of winter." Grizelda agreed, "So it is." After a short while Grizelda asked her visitor, "Did you happen to notice if the person you saw in my tank was wearing a hat?" Bean looked thoughtful, "No not really." Grizelda persisted, "You said the person was *swimming* - ?" "Yes, definitely swimming, backstroke I think." Grizelda queried, "Not breast-stroke." Bean shook his head, "Not breast-stroke." The second time Bean came knocking on Grizelda's back door he was wearing daggy black trackie-daks and a T-shirt he'd found lying run-over in the middle of the road. Bean told Grizelda, "I'm all out of coffee." Grizelda

Instant coffee

Nick Heron

YOU SAY, I'll make us up some coffee.
Instant coffee, you say.
I'm sitting at the foot of the staircase.
You're in the kitchen.
You're eating dried apricots out of the packet. There's a radio playing and you're singing along. It's a song I've never heard.
You've got two mugs sitting on the bench. Beside one another.
You're spooning the coffee into the mugs. Same into each, no sugar.
You're pouring hot water from a kettle into the mugs. Filling them up.
Milk. That's what we need, you say.

I'm watching you, through the doorway.

You're opening the fridge. There's a picture of me, stuck on the door with a magnet that looks like the number plate for a car. It is a miniature number plate for California.

The picture is one I have taken of myself.

In the picture, I'm holding a glass of red wine. My face is white and slightly blurred. I'm wearing a hat. A hat I don't recognize. Or recall ever wearing, for that matter. And my eyes are not looking at the camera. They are looking at something else.

It is like I have caught myself off-guard. Like my finger must've slipped onto the button. Or something.

I don't know what this picture is doing. Stuck on your fridge.

You're putting a mug of coffee next to my feet.

Here you go, you say.

You're squeezing next to me. At the foot of the staircase. Our hips are touching.

You're talking to me. I can feel your breath on my ear.

I'm looking ahead. Sipping.

From this coffee you made me.

told Bean, "I'm all out of patience, I'm all out of good humour." She announced, "I've reached the end of my tether." Bean snatched up a jar of Grizelda's International Roast, he said, "You can't imagine what a bummer it is being as tall as I am. Everywhere I go I get stared at, I get jostled, people tell me, 'Man, you sure are one tall son-of-a-bitch!' People want to know, 'What's the weather like up there?' When I was ten years old I was already six feet tall, all my life I've felt a freak." Grizelda countered, "At least you're young and healthy, at least you've got all your teeth and you can chew food properly." Bean continued, "All the women I meet tell me, 'you must be joking'. They tell me, 'Piss off'." Grizelda says, "Be thankful; your kids aren't trying to get you scheduled." She says, "Be grateful your grandchildren don't call you a crazy old bat." Bean removes his sneakers. He peels off his socks, Bean instructs Grizelda, "Feast your eyes on the world's weirdest feet." He confides, "The doctor tells me my entire skeleton is misshapen; he says my shinbones are unnaturally elongated, my thigh bones are as long as javelins." Grizelda

remarks, "Is that so?" Grizelda tells Bean all about how her life is a desolate landscape littered with trash – twisted bits of metal, broken glass, squandered opportunities. It's a funny thing but that night, as Grizelda lies sleeping in her lumpy bed, she dreams she and Bean are swimming together. They're doing the backstroke and the front stroke, butterfly stroke. Bean is wearing a mask and snorkel, he's wearing very large flippers, Bean is swimming underwater. He's diving down deep; Grizelda can see his body silhouetted against waving fronds of seaweed. Bean is long and slender like a pipefish, graceful as an eel. In the morning as Grizelda stands in the kitchen, her butter knife poised purposefully above the toaster, it crosses Grizelda's mind Bean is an itinerant friend. Itinerant friends aren't like old friends; itinerant friends should never be confused with best mates. Eventually itinerant friends packed up their very long thighbones, they packed up their telescoping shinbones and they hitched a ride out of town. Grizelda wasn't so crazy she no longer recognized absence as a fact of life.

Random calls #2

I ring a friend four times
one morning. Each time
the call goes dead.

I try at a pub. The pub
is not open yet.

When I go to another
public phone there is
a prolonged buzz. I cannot
get connection.

When the phone is repaired
I try again. Their line
is engaged. Two houses
and two hours later
there is no answer.

The next day when I ring,
she is asleep. I hear
she was trying to reach me
by phoning a building where
she thinks I am but I am not.

I am to ring her again at one,
or she will ring me. I forget
and when I ring again at three,
there is no answer.

Today I am told the phone
was ringing all morning.
When I am in all afternoon
it rings incessantly. I hear it
and I don't answer.

A friend returns from overseas
and calls. When I do not return
his calls, he leaves messages
suggesting I am not picking up
the phone.

I must be avoiding him, he says.
Maybe I don't live here any more.
His mobile phone is missing. Even

so, when he works long, random hours
he is out of reach.

His messages urge me to pick up
the phone if I am there. Perhaps
I have ceased to exist. I do,
occasionally.

Another rings to chat and I answer.
Do you have a companion?
Not that I know of.
And I have to go.

I arrive at the library
with a bag full of paper
and books. When I take out
my only pen, it dries up
after the first word.

While I am waiting
for the train home, I phone
a friend to say I will drop in.

The train doesn't come. Four
trains leave the platform with
garbled messages about their
destination.

Someone speaking clearly
announces that trains for me
leave from an alternate platform.

I go there and find I can only
travel one stop in that direction.
I travel it.

At that stop, I find the usual
departure platform where a sign
tells passengers like me to catch
the train where I stepped off.

Returning to that platform, I take
a train past my destination
and catch one back. It is 11pm.
Everyone is asleep.

Gail Carson

Petition to Death

Death, sweet Death, gentle Death—
Whatever title Your Negativity
Desires—I have a petition
That will be grateful to your ears,
And might solve some problems:
Please Death, cut off before their
Time all: executives, managers,
Professionals, trainers, business-men
(And -women), dealers, entrepreneurs,
Lawyers, accountants, economists,
Bankers, financiers, speculators
Stock-jobbers, experts, specialists,
Consultants, spin-doctors, image-makers,
PR people, pollsters, media types,
All advertisers, promoters and suchlike,
All emotion-pushers, journalists, writers,
Demagogues and talking-heads, IT people,
Multimedia gurus, administrators,
Employees of multinationals, all
Developers, loggers, mining engineers,
Shooters, roughs and red-necks,
Racists and tap-room fascists,
Pastoralists and all bad farmers,
All analysts and statisticians,
All determined bureaucrats, go-getters
And ambitious types, all representatives,
Sales-people, agents, marketeers,
And especially all bad counsellors,
All missionaries, priests, bishops,
Mullahs, yogis and self-proclaimed
Holy men, all bad teachers and smug
Nobodies, all pimps and landlords.

And when you've scythed that lot,
Begin again and take away:
All dictators, despots and military-types,
All pushers of technology, explorers,
Exploiters, all exporters and importers,
All proponents of Free Trade
And anyone who talks of globalisation,
All crooked merchants, all dishonest
Dealers and middlemen.

In short,
Take away everyone who espouses
What is worthless, unconscionable,
Anyone who lacks common honesty,
And all believers in final solutions;
And leave behind just a few *people*.

John Leonard

Thousand Star Hotel, Hanoi

I.
Over the road from the three star *Galaxy Hotel* is our
hotel,
the old park on Phan Dinh Phung Street,
home to many and work place for many more.
A place where anything can happen
and happily usually doesn't.
People come and go as in an opera,
playing their respective roles
with their own music and destinies –
a Vietnamese opera where life is mostly
happy, not opulent for sure and it takes a war
or typhoon to introduce epic scale tragedy.
A lot of people stay all their lives.
Some are born here, some arrive.
There have been family lines, dynasties in this park
generation to generation doing what they do,
making the best of a hard life.
There's survival, love and many arguments –
it's no paradise living in a park.
You could call our struggles 'day to day'.
Too real for opera. A better metaphor would be
the park as island in a sea of traffic,
trading and communicating with other islands
and some of us look pretty shipwrecked at times.
Better still: *A vital node at street level in the new era
open-door state-sanctioned market economy.*
How many ways is it possible to say the same thing?
It's just the old park on Phan Dinh Phung Street.
Old Emperor what's-his-name built it
to graze a flock of golden turtles and the Dragon King
rested here while hunting nine-tailed foxes.
Some days the clouds re-enact the old stories
Almost yesterday the sky lit with the dragon's breath
we fired at American phantoms and bombers.
We were always bamboo, now we are also steel.

II.
By the time the shadow boxers, slow motion
sword fighters and tai chi exponents arrive
for their early morning workouts
we're awake and busy, setting up for the day.
Crafts people and traders keep the ancestors' way.
Blacksmith hammers out drive shafts
shoemaker mends Reeboks and plastic clogs
the shoeshine boys polish for a pittance,
the tinker adjusts tuners, videos, CD-players
and with a few twists of solder
the amplifiers piled on the pavement
will be seen to in no time flat.
The parasol and feather duster vendor
diversified into electric fans years ago
and is looking at new technologies
the man whose father fixed wagon wheels, his job
is to pump up flat bicycle and motor scooter tyres.
The traffic still flows like a flooding river
but its song has changed from bicycles and cyclos
ringing
to blaring car horns, engines, the smell of sweat to
choking fumes
that blot out so many of the night stars, a great
sadness
when the stars are all you will ever own.
There's a smiling idiot who talks all day into a mobile
phone.
Progress! I read in a paper there's one TV for every
nine Vietnamese.
The Phung Street philosopher's still here,
still like a statue, sitting straight-backed in a teak chair
pointing with a pencil to a page in his book
can answer any question of wisdom East or West,
parlays Français like a Frenchman
and though astrology's passé, he'll tell your future too
the children laugh when his thick glasses fog up in the
Hanoi stew.
"Enough things remain eternal."

III.

Hanoi-by-night – the park cloaks love's ardour
even in moonlight long shadows wrap sheets of
privacy
tucking in couples touching steamy nights.
During the hot season be careful where you step!
Daytime there's no time for serious romance.
Everyone works in the park. The Park Committee
has ensured that no one need beg and beggars,
asked politely to move along, get slipped a few old
notes.

As everywhere, we have our serious cadres,
with portable loudspeakers to amplify
their good intentions no one has time to listen to –
too busy, too busy. Marching music!
The children spend an hour or so selling postcards,
maps, pirated novels and phrase books then spread
their school on park benches, the tiny chairs and tables
brought out from under a canopy provided by the
council.

I remember the magic of learning algebra – equations
put worlds in balance, physical and spiritual,
running writing made words run like rivers.
And doing schoolwork in the park made it more serious,
you had to get on if you wanted out.
Several of my classmates went on to better things.
Some stayed. Some moved to different parks.
All of us did our duty for our country.
These days electric fans keep serious young heads cool.
(How many parks can boast power points?)
Most of the children who leave the park
come back to visit 'humble origins'.
Sometimes they'll come to me, I'm Huan
decorated veteran, part-time cyclo driver
but my fame rests on being the park's chief barber
and my young apprentices
cut hair better than anywhere in the city.
These days I mostly check the barber stools
are lined up straight, the mirrors hang
neatly from the wrought iron fence.
A manager! But I'm there when a young genius
gets his clippers jammed in a poor customer's ear,
I unclip, sweet talk and finish the haircut.

I'll take the pay when that happens.

The youngster can keep the tip
unless the tip is bigger than the fee
say when it's a businessman
or tourist letting their head go for a ride
on the wild side – then I keep the tip.
Today one park prodigy, the articulate and beautiful
news reader from VTV-3 my second daughter,
Thuy, has come home to see me.

IV.

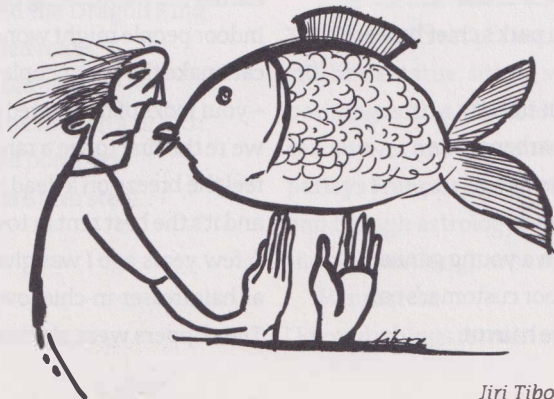
Don't ask me where the park's food comes from;
except in hard times the stalls near the old stone walls
overflow with the finest and we swap our change
for a good hot meal. As well as rice noodles and eels
there's beer, ice-cream and coca-cola, fruit from all over
Vietnam
and for the past week, apples and pears from New Zealand.
Must be the government doing something right
or someone high up who came from the park, whatever,
the dragon king has never forgotten us.
I'm not crazy, I go inside when a bad storm is on the cards
and every day wash myself and clothes in a hole in the wall
with a tap and a door, called 'public baths', four blocks away.
I really never could abide to be inside too long.
Three months working in a munitions factory
was enough I volunteered my way out and the action
I saw at the front was outdoors all right, down south
fighting invaders, fighting cousins,
where a ghoul let out of a bottle feasted on blood
where our battalion, well – and my wife back in Hanoi
worked on an anti-aircraft gun –
excuse my mentioning the war in this city of love.
Indoor people might wonder what kind of trick
can make the park people smile so much
– your looks of fascinated guilt are touching –
we're the first to see a rainbow and the stars – come out
feel the breeze on a dead hot night it's true,
and it's the best rent in town.
A few years ago I was given a job
as hairdresser-in-chief over at the Galaxy.
The clippers were electric, there were oils and shampoo,

tonics and concoctions from New York and Paris, crisply cleaned towels; not a speck of rust, not even dust marred the slick scissors – hell they gave me a terrible jacket and a room to sleep, but the air conditioning and pastel walls made me feel I was trapped in a dragon’s tomb. I quit with a bottle of whisky and went back to my residence in the thousand star hotel.

V.
“When real luck calls you must answer,” the park philosopher quoted some ancient wisdom. I always thought my next address would be a marble-roofed room in the middle of a rice field. But the next chapter of my story reads like the denouement of a Charles Dickens novel the state encouraged us to read, the part when the well-heeled come to take the wayward waif home as one of their own. Hence my daughter’s assignment. I must have mentioned she was brilliant at school and university, married well but she made her life in TV – I still find television foolish, people taking the parts better played by puppets interrupted by advertisements for things no one can afford but that’s where the brave and brilliant go these days. Anyway, Thuy hit the jackpot: two boys in a row

– *hai con trai ! hai con trai !*
The whole park shook my hand for a week when news of the second boy got around toasted good fortune with beer and snake wine burned incense and phoney money like it was going out of style and New Year had arrived six months early. Two babies now – Thuy’s executive husband and his family are too busy modernising the country to mind children and manage a knick-knack shop in the street. Her mother, bless her, can’t be there to help out. My little girl’s taking me home to a life with a comfortable bed, shiny bathroom, two scooters, refrigerator, a car – the life they advertise – to take care of my beautiful grandchildren for whose love I will gladly endure a happy ending. The neighbours wave and I wave goodbye. My kit and I fit fine on the back of Thuy’s scooter. When we arrive she goes serious and says “I forgot to tell you, as well as minding the children and the shop, you’re expected to tend the ancestors’ shrine on the roof, and . . .” and I’ll take the kids for a morning walk round the park, afternoons a cyclo ride and ice creams. Tonight I string my hammock on the roof – the penthouse suite of the thousand star hotel, a step or two closer to heaven.

S. K. Kelen



Jiri Tibor

Cath Ellis

A Strange Case of Double Vision

Reading Carmel Bird's *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*

ON 26 MAY 1997 (a day which will be commemorated annually as Sorry Day) the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families tabled its report in Federal Parliament. During its period of operation, the commission received a total of 777 submissions which included:

535 Indigenous individual and group submissions;
49 church submissions;
7 government submissions; and
500 confidential submissions.

Extracts from these submissions are incorporated in a book of nearly 700 pages entitled *Bringing Them Home* which was published by the Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS). The findings are described in the opening pages as “no ordinary report”.¹ It is an emotional reading experience. The AGPS made a print run of 2000 which sold out quickly despite the \$59.95 price tag. They did a second print run of seven thousand which also sold out.

The report details fifty-four recommendations, one of which (recommendation 8) refers to school education:

that State and Territory Governments ensure that primary and secondary school curricula include substantial compulsory modules on the history and continuing effects of forcible removal.

The publication of a portable, affordable and accessible version of *Bringing Them Home* aimed at a general readership and suitable for study in schools and universities was never going to be simple or uncontroversial. Reading the resulting publication, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* edited by Carmel Bird, fills me with the same ambivalence that I feel when reading

Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*. Drusilla Modjeska has aptly described this kind of response as “double vision” in her introduction to the 1990 edition:

Writing about *Coonardoo* afflicts one . . . with a strange case of double vision. On the one hand there is the radical and passionate view from 1926 . . . On the other hand there are the assumptions and procedures she accepted and we do not, the language she could use and we would not; and the lapses and silences that would not, and could not, have been heard then, but which startle us now.²

With the benefit of hindsight, will future readers view *The Stolen Children* with a similar diplopia? Paul Washington and Alex Segal suggest:

Childhood violence and childlike reasoning figure the frictions of emergence of the postcolonial world from its colonial origins. The child-native finds himself infantilised by the West – by the plenitude that appears less as a gift than as a theft, and through the paternalism that supervises him, sifting and dividing all that is his due and subjecting him to a continuing sense of alienation and displacement . . . In the colonial imagery the child is a figure of innocence, but an innocence that will inevitably be disfigured by the symbolic or physical violence of colonial and postcolonial situations.³

Jo-Ann Wallace extends this idea further when she identifies

‘the West’s’ continuing and contradictory investment in a vision of childhood as a universal unmarked by class, place, or history. For ironically, it is around representations of ‘the child’ – whether they are evoked by UNICEF or the Foster Parents’

Plan or famine relief agencies – that post-colonialist ‘guilt’ like colonialist aspiration, circulates.⁴

These two ideas – the infantilization of the child-native by the west as a figure of innocence that will inevitably be disfigured, and the circulation of post-colonial ‘guilt’ around the child – operate as two sides of the same coin.⁵ (To illustrate these two sides, it is useful to compare the four images presented on this spread.)

The figure of the child as innocent combined with the paradigmatic investment by the west in a universal vision of *childhood* is at the core of these images. It is also at the core of the overwhelming response from non-Aboriginal Australia to the *Bringing Them Home* report. The central image – the central focus – is not indigeneity, it is not colonial or imperial violence (although these are obviously fundamental) but rather the image of the child. This recognition of *childhood* as a universal and as an innocence renders this report desirable and accessible to the general reading public.

This is further reinforced by the title of the report, *Bringing Them Home*, with its associated notions of home and homecoming which in themselves are such integral concerns of children’s literature. As Heather Scutter suggests: “In children’s books, the homecoming designated intersects with national housekeeping, so that the child, colonised, grown-up and authenticated, is housed in a structure which contains crucial values. Outside the pale of the house and child are those values excluded also from the house of the nation.”⁶ We are offered, then, the overdetermined conflation of a colonial ‘motherland’, with an inquiry into the ‘theft’ of a generation of children and a report which emblematically enacts their ‘homecoming’. By following Scutter’s reasoning, this homecoming is more than a return to their parental or community home, it’s also a return to their ‘nation-home’. The irony here, of course, is the fact that the ‘house of the nation’ to which they are returning housed the perpetrators of the original theft. But the most profound irony or contradiction remains the strategic complicity of Romantic ideas of the child and childhood which, as the above images demonstrate, are still in circulation. This indicates that both *Bringing Them Home* and Bird’s publication are part of a current national concern or strategy which is still searching for an appropriate speaking position and idiolect.

To my mind, the most problematic aspect of Bird’s text is its readership and, in particular, the way that it positions the reader through the selective framing of

these stories of loss and recovery. It is interesting, then, to examine the connections between the act of reading and the act of apology. Indeed it is as children that we learn the rules of apology – that there is no point saying sorry unless you really mean it. As functioning adults, we understand that unless we are contrite and unless we are prepared to make honest and complete reparation, then apology is a meaningless and hollow act. Robert Manne accurately observes: “an apology forcefully extracted, like a rotten tooth, from a grudging government, blind to the moral meaning of its words and fearful of their financial costs, would be worse than useless.”⁷ As we are all well aware, the issue of apology is central to the politics of the stolen generation.

The back cover blurb of *The Stolen Children* affirms “This collection of stories and perspectives is redemptive. It is a step toward healing the suffering of the stolen generations and it urgently demonstrates the importance to every Australian of national compassion and a true spirit of reconciliation.” And in her dedication on the opening page, Carmel Bird indicates that she hopes the publication “will be regarded as an apology for the sorrows inflicted by white Australians upon Indigenous Australians for more than two hundred years.” These two passages are more than likely the first points of contact for any reader. As such, it is clear that readers are encouraged to apprehend their act of reading this text as an apology. I, for one, am not entirely comfortable with this. To me, such an act is little more than what André Bazin refers to as a “solemn hyperbolic *mea culpa*” which, he argues, “can seem psychologically improbable or intellectually superfluous to us if we fail to recognize [its] value as exorcism.”⁸ Bazin also offers an interesting equation which I think is pertinent to this issue: “As confession is indispensable to divine absolution, so solemn retraction is indispensable to the reconquering of historical virginity.”⁹ This notion of historical virginity is something which recurs throughout the non-Aboriginal discourse within this text. For instance, Carmel Bird looks



Nurse with two infants, Moore River Settlement, WA, undated

An image included in the *Bringing Them Home* report.

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An image taken from a promotional campaign for Medecin Sans Frontier (Doctors without borders)

forward to a time when "Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia are one", when "our differences are reconciled" and when "the past is examined and mourned, and we can move on". The issues of reconciliation, apology and the as yet undefined and unstable concept of sovereignty, are complex and outside the scope of this paper. But I want to make it clear that I am not for a moment advocating the kinds of ideas expressed by Kenneth Minogue in *Quadrant*. In his article 'Aborigines and Australian Apologetics' he argues, amongst other things: "Where really serious offences have been committed . . . an apology is inappropriate, indeed it may be positively offensive."¹⁰ Indeed, my position is at the other extreme to his. I am concerned that the act of apology be appropriate, contrite and honest, and not simply the kind of collective apologetics which Minogue interrogates in his article. But it is to our nation's deep and profound shame that an appropriate and honest apology has not been offered by our parliamentary leader to the Indigenous people of Australia. To return to Bazin's idea of reclaiming historical virginity, it is true to say that the concept of reclaiming or reconquering historical virginity is fundamental to the rationale of Bird's publication.

Other aspects of the discourse and format of Bird's publication are equally troubling. In her introduction, Carmel Bird claims that she "writes without sentimentality" but betrays this almost immediately with sentences like: "The courage, dignity and generosity, as well as the tragedy, of these storytellers shines out in their words, delivered from the heart and written in tears". And her stated purpose to provide a simple, small, portable, paperback storytelling tool so that readers can indulge themselves with a private reception of "the intimate and personal oral histories of these courageous and sorrowful people" endorses a voyeuristic reading pose and gaze. This voyeurism is, of course, nothing new. As Penny van Toorn has observed, many of the submissions to the commission were delivered behind closed doors, thus arousing the curiosity of the Australian public.¹¹ If we add to this the elements of sex, violence, organized religion and other scandalous combinations we have a formula for guaranteed newspaper sales and television ratings. Rather predictably, the media produced some sensational headlines.

But perhaps the most objectionable aspect of this publication is the insistent intrusion of Bird's editorial voice. For instance, in the introduction she asserts "White Australians need to read the stories of the people who suffered

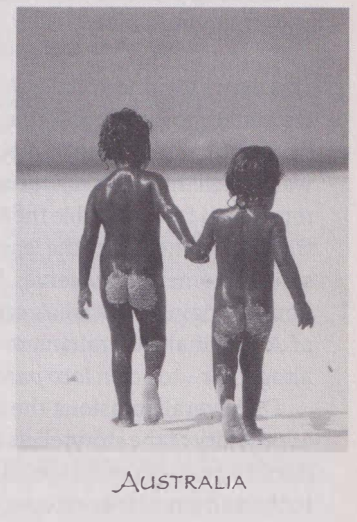
**RIGHT WRONGS
WRITE
YES**



for
ABORIGINES!
On May 27

A poster from the 'yes' campaign in the 1967 Referendum

A contemporary postcard – for sale through Australia Post Offices around the country for 90c. The caption on the postcard reads: "Locals enjoying one of Australia's pristine beaches"



systematically and in so many ways at the hands of white Australians". And at the end of the introduction she implores the reader:

The Indigenous people of Australia and the islands of the Torres Strait will never disappear. They belong here, they have an indisputable right to be here in the full dignity of their humanity, and to contribute in confidence and joy to the future of this country. Listen to their voices.

Bird's editorial voice does not allow the reader to do this. It consistently and insistently introduces, concludes and often interrupts the stories. It brings to mind something which Mudrooroo talks about in his book *Writing from the Fringe*. Here he is referring to Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke's book *Gularabulu* – but the point he makes is pertinent here. He suggests that the format adopted by Muecke and Roe, although careful not to tamper with Roe's original expression, inevitably barricades Roe's passages "between slabs of Standard English". As a result, the Aboriginal English is "reduced to language, or discourse as heard through the ears of a European". He suggests that these slabs of "Academic English" resemble

nothing more than the walls of a prison . . . The fringe soul of the Aborigine peers out of his prison and reminds me of a shuffling Beckett character uttering parables into the recording apparatus of white dominance.¹²

This draws to mind Ronald Wilson's statement (within his preface to Bird's book) that: "In an effort to be faithful to the courage and dignity of those who came forward to tell their stories, we have, in writing the Report, retained as far as possible the actual words as we heard them. It seemed to us the least that we could do". Wilson's statement only serves to remind the reader of non-Aboriginal Australia's capacity to alter the words of Aboriginal Australians or indeed to ignore them altogether – to act *in loco parentis* to the 'child-native'.

On several occasions the necessity to protect the anonymity of the storytellers is rehearsed in the introductory passages of this publication. But the reference to the authors of these stories contributes yet another problem. First, the authors are given assumed, anglo 'christian' names but are not offered the dignity of an assumed surname – once again, an infantilization of the Aboriginal narrators. In addition, they are not

contextualized with other referents which are included in the *Bringing Them Home* Report such as the geographical location or state in which removal took place, the place from which, the age at which and the year in which they were removed as well as other contextual information. The combination of these absences and omissions effectively denudes these stories of their authority, especially when they are adjacent to pieces with headings like: "John Howard: Prime Minister of Australia" and concluded with "From Hansard, 27 May 1997" offering – by implication – an occupation, a place, a date and a sense of authority.

Also – Bird's insistent reference to these stories according to the number of their confidential submissions is troubling, especially in light of the first line of the first story: "For eighteen years the State of Victoria referred to me as the State Ward no. 54321". Although she points out the significance – perhaps even irony – of this coincidence in her introductory comments to this story, it does not dissuade her from maintaining the practice.

These stories have to fight through so much of Bird's disruptive editorial voice in order to be heard. She seems to feel obliged to tell us what to read, what to look out for, what to be moved by and how to feel. In her introduction she writes: "when you read the stories of the stolen children you will begin to know and feel how life has been – how life is – for many of the Indigenous people of Australia . . . and you cannot fail to be moved". A little later she adds: "there are moments when the reader must pause, draw breath, re-read a sentence in horror and in the hope of disbelief". She appropriates and paraphrases the words of the narratives, to divorce the statements from the voices of their narrators and to retell them in her own words. In the introduction to Millicent's Story Bird writes: "The writer speaks of how she ate rat poison in an attempt to kill herself, and of an 'unrepairable scar of loneliness, mistrust, hatred and bitterness' that marks her heart". And in her introduction to Greg's story she writes: "In one chilling phrase Greg begins the story of his removal from his family and way of life: 'there was a knock at the door'". Why does she not feel the same compunction to introduce, conclude and interrupt the voices of the non-Aboriginal authorities who contribute to this text? Why does she not explain, paraphrase or re-tell the words of John Howard or Veronica Brady?

Finally, her choice of epigraph is puzzling: "They are a people to be treasured" from Kim Beazley. There are countless other quotable statements from emi-

ment Australians in this book such as: "If ever there was a report that lists the broken hearts of thousands of women, of thousands of families, it is this one" from Senator Crowley. Or why not the words of Lang Dean, the son of a Victorian policeman who, under orders, took children away from Cumragunga – a mission station: "Ms Hanson, Mr Fischer and Mr Howard, when you kneel down to say your prayers tonight, thank God you don't have a burly policeman and two welfare officers on your doorstep in the morning to take your children away".

Having said this – I remain ambivalent about this book. I found it a devastating reading experience. And I think that if Carmel Bird's publication offers a vehicle by which more people can become acquainted with the politics of the stolen generation then it must be a good thing. But at the same time I worry that this vehicle is indeed flawed: that the presumptions and appropriations in its construction, format and marketing in fact betray its own ideological project. And it is simply not good enough to say that, regardless of the flaws or faultlines which scar this text, it means well. This is, after all, one of the central issues in the history of the stolen generation: the fundamental misapprehension that, in the words of Rey Chow, "good intentions cannot result in cruel behaviour".¹³ This returns us to the concept of 'double vision'.

Katharine Susannah Prichard's 1920s novel *Coonardoo* was the first widely read Australian novel to include Aboriginal characters that were other than two dimensional, fauna in the landscape or simple caricature, but were instead thinking, emotional and sexual people. But, as Modjeska so clearly points out, regardless of the groundbreaking political, ideological and artistic achievements of this novel it remains a problem. Will Bird's text be similarly positioned in the canonical lists of Australian literature and history? If so, it will and should remain as a text of substantive political and artistic import but one which is nevertheless troubled by its flaws.

ENDNOTES

1. *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Canberra, AGPS, 1997, p.3.

2. Drusilla Modjeska, introduction, *Coonardoo* by Katharine Susannah Prichard, Sydney, A&R, 1990, p.vi.
3. Paul Washington and Alex Segal, 'Introduction: The Child in Postcolonial Literature and Theory', *New Literatures Review* 33, summer 1997, p.2.
4. Jo-Ann Wallace, 'De-scribing *The Water Babies*: "The child" in post-colonial theory', *De-scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*, eds. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, London, Routledge, 1994, p.182.
5. The significant parallels between the child and the colonized is a central concern for research into children's literature. For example Perry Nodelman, in his paper 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17, 1992, pp.29–35, draws a comparison between Orientalism and children's literature. And in his *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* he suggests "Children's literature . . . represents a massive effort by adults to *colonize* children: to make them believe that they ought to be the way adults would like them to be, and to make them feel guilty about or downplay the significance of all the aspects of their selves that inevitably don't fit the adult model." Similarly, Jacqueline Rose views children's fiction as a colonizing agent in the introduction to *The Case of Peter Pan OR The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, London, Macmillan, 1994, pp.1–11.
6. Heather Scutter, 'Housekeeping: From the House of Misrule to The House That Was Eureka', *New Literatures Review* 33, summer, 1997, p.51.
7. Robert Manne in Carmel Bird (ed.), *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, Sydney, Random House, 1998, p.142.
8. André Bazin, 'The Stalin Myth in Soviet Cinema', *Movies and Methods*, vol.2, ed. Bill Nichols, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p.37.
9. Bazin, p.37.
10. Kenneth Minogue, 'Aborigines and Australian Apologetics', *Quadrant* 42.9, 1998, p.16.
11. Penny van Toorn, 'Tactical History Business: The Ambivalent Politics of Commodifying Aboriginal Histories', unpublished.
12. Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Melbourne, Hyland House, 1990, p.151.
13. Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading*, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1998, p.23.

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Anne Galligan

Highly Charged

The Electronic Writing Environment in Australia

THE RELEASE OF THE *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy* in 1994 attempted to address the challenges posed by the information and communications revolution, and intensified the debate concerning the essential role an active and actively encouraged cultural industry plays within Australian society. This cultural policy embraced the new technologies as democratic and creative cultural tools that can "inform and enrich" Australian society.¹ The necessity of generating Australian content within a global electronic writing environment is recognized as a vital priority.

The emerging world of electronic publishing is inviting the creative activity of enterprising writers and publishers, as well as business and academic interests, as they respond to the possibilities, risks and limitations associated with the new frontier. It is recognized as a different world with different rules. This evolving writing and information environment challenges the traditional application of copyright law and raises serious social issues regarding equitable access to communication and computer facilities, and information resources. Electronic narratives or cyber-texts are providing opportunities to explore the nature of the electronic word-based text, the role of the 'virtual' author and authorial control of the narrative, and the empowerment of the reader as navigator of an electronic writing space.

The Jones Report (*Australia as an Information Society: Grasping New Paradigms* 1991) stressed the need for Australia to respond aggressively to the demands of the evolving and transforming information society. *Creative Nation* emphasized the strong link between economic prosperity and Australia's cultural industries:

Culture creates wealth . . . Culture employs . . . Culture adds value . . . The level of our creativity substantially determines our ability to adapt to new economic imperatives . . . It is essential to our economic success.²

As a result of the *Creative Nation Cultural Statement*, several significant changes were outlined in Australia Council funding, specific reviews of government policy and law reform were instituted, and substantial funding allocated to initiate projects, particularly in the multimedia industry. The 1996 Coalition Policy, *For Art's Sake, A Fair Go* does not have the same strong directional policies. However, many of the initiatives introduced in 1994 are retained, such as copyright reform and a telecommunications review, but with a change of emphasis and a reordering and/or reduction of financial priorities.

One of the critical areas that was targeted for review by both the major political parties was Australian Copyright Law. There is an urgent need to clarify and protect the rights of both creators and consumers in the increasingly complex communications environment where each new technology has the potential to subvert the control exerted by copyright legislation. Under traditional copyright law, "the rights of copyright owners can be assigned or licensed, with or without limitations (such as the type of use, or period of time), and with or without conditions (such as payment or attribution)".³ Within the electronic environment, territorial boundaries become irrelevant, since an author's work is instantaneously accessible throughout the world. The right to legislate and enforce systems of control is undermined by the 'placelessness' of cyberspace and the intangible identity of the user.⁴ Other problems centre on the changing roles of authors and publishers in this environment, and the fluid nature of the text. Terms of authorship need to be redefined for multimedia projects – is the author a text provider or a creative producer with partial or complete creative control over the project? Moral rights principles regarding the integrity of the text, appropriate attribution and fair use, are even more contentious in an electronic environment which allows the quick and easy dissemination and manipulation of texts.

Issues of copyright, intellectual property and moral rights are fundamental to the livelihoods of authors, and to the profitability and future existence of the Australian publishing industry. Michael Fraser, Chief Executive of CAL, the Australian copyright agency, is confident that "copyright will change dramatically over the next few years to accommodate the new technologies by introducing a technology neutral copyright act".⁵ Technologists claim that appropriate strategies to enforce copyright law will be found in more sophisticated technology, enabling the thorough monitoring of information use. The irony here is that the easy and efficient access promised by electronic information services is precipitating a wave of restrictions governing access and use of material. At this stage there is no immediate legislative answer being offered, although recent developments would suggest jurisdictional control might be possible by treating cyberspace as a separate and distinct social space governed by new regulatory institutions. The territoriality of cyberspace could be defined by legally significant borders, entered through a screen and password, and requiring definite action to cross into this unique place.⁶

Printed Page or Writing Space

The radical forces for change presented by these new technologies have generated heated debate about the future of the book and possible electronic alternatives. Some commentators remain reluctant to "welcome the microchip Messiah" or embrace "the Internet as Saviour", and defend the continuing centrality of the book and its writing culture.⁷ Crawford and Gorman argue a more balanced position warning against the "madness of technolust"⁸, and Brewster points out that, "even on the Internet, books are the second biggest selling item (after CDs)".⁹ Although there is some conflicting information in this area, there is ample evidence that in terms of Australian cultural and educational development, the demand for the book is not declining:

Each year Australians buy 94 million titles, worth more than \$800 million – 5.5 for each person. Slightly more than half of the books bought are Australian. This is almost as many as are borrowed from libraries – about 100 million.¹⁰

For many authors and readers it remains easy to dismiss the new electronic products; their intellectual and emotional commitment rests strongly with

the book in its traditional form.

In other circles there is a strong conviction that the book is no longer the primary means of communicating and storing intellectual property and information. According to this position, the book has been superseded and the literary culture that has been based around the book must adapt to the new world of electronic communication or risk being stranded and ignored as an irrelevant and outdated voice.¹¹ It is obviously significant that the Australian Publishers Association dropped 'Book' from its title at the AGM in 1996, as electronic and multimedia formats emerge and electronic replacements for books make their appearance. The rate of growth of the Internet in Australia is second in the world after America, and it is estimated that "by the end of the decade around four million Australian households will be on-line".¹²

Although there is some consensus that the two forms of publishing will coexist for a considerable period of time, there is little doubt that the emergence of a strong and dynamic electronic writing world is creating a cultural shift that is largely unpredictable and possibly uncontrollable in its implications for contemporary literary culture. Alison Crook, former NSW State Librarian said:

Whether we love it or loathe it, we can't ignore the fact that developments in technology, particularly in computing and telecommunications, are changing the future of the printed word and of all those individuals and industries whose work centres on it.¹³

For some writers, developments in electronic communications and the world of Internet are an exciting frontier. The electronic writing space offers new types of authorship, and opportunities for experimental styles of writing and publishing formats, different audiences and different patterns of reading. Academic and author Ilana Snyder comments, "It is probably a mistake to assume that a new technology will be used simply to extend, rather than to alter, existing practice".¹⁴ New methods of arranging and manipulating information and narrative have been developed to utilize the electronic writing space more effectively and enabling a non-linear networking of text. Hypertext, a term coined in the 1960s by futurist Ted Nelson to describe non-sequential writing "uses the computer as a medium in its own right both for the creation and the reading of texts".¹⁵ Hypertext allows a text to unfold through an interconnected series of

links between sections of text, individual words, ideas or references, so that there are multiple reading pathways through a work.

Enthusiasts of hypertext claim that this is "the operational realisation" of modern literary theory:

Hypertext compels us to reconsider the relationship between the text, the author and the reader. . .

The computer as hypertext undermines both the fixity of the text and the authority of the author.¹⁶

There are certainly obvious applications of literary theory when examining a hypertext document where every reading is different and the text is never complete because of an ongoing weaving of links to other texts. Although a little sceptical about some of the convenient parallels critics are drawing in this area, Snyder accepts that there is a "conjuring of critical theory and hypertext technology. It is a way in to look at the postmodern theories . . . It makes them very accessible".¹⁷ For Brisbane-based cyber-poet Komninos (who is striving to create a poetry "that performs by itself" in both on-line and CD ROM mediums), hypertext is the "perfect tool for the postmodernist". He regards this blending of theory and medium in the electronic writing space as a sensible and legitimate outcome.¹⁸

Writing her recent novel *Red Shoes* was an exciting project for novelist Carmel Bird, who planned the work in both book form and as a hypertext electronic version CD ROM. Bird enthusiastically describes the creative possibilities of hypertext in the electronic writing space as "very liberating".¹⁹ She believes her writing style has always contained this extended element, this potential for links and a multi-layered, more fluid structure; hypertext is a natural extension of her writing style. In discussing her work, Bird is careful to explain that it is not based on the choose-your-own-adventure model:

I'm not saying choose your own ending. I am saying here is the narrative and here is the research on which this narrative floats and you as the reader, if you wish to, may go into the research and take from it more than you ever dreamed.

Authorial control is maintained through a careful structuring of the narrative. There is the added dimension of graphic design and the integration of sound and video components included in Bird's project.

Children's author Libby Hathorn searched for the opportunity to publish in the electronic medium. She had been challenged by the idea of an electronic future that will be "readerless for some kids in terms of books in book format", and was concerned about a perceived lack of quality in the standards of programs being produced.²⁰ The potential for innovation offered by the electronic environment was intriguing and she determined that it should be possible to produce "a quality literary piece that still entertains, perhaps informs or perhaps is just a darn good read and uses all the tricks of technology to entice the reader". Hathorn has produced two electronic projects in association with Australian Multimedia Enterprises, an online mystery for adolescent girls, *Ghostop*, and a CD ROM for younger children, *The Lost Birthday*. She is delighted with the richness possible in the online presentation of *Ghostop*, where visual, audio, photographic and video elements are combined. Hathorn contrasts writing a novel for the printed page, a linear medium, and writing in hypertext where there are multiple layers of text that need to be plaited together: "Instead of writing the linear novel, there are five strands you are writing and they've got to interact. That's five times the time". *Ghostop* is designed to break out of the immediate text through a system of links into the wider world of the Internet, allowing the narrative as presented in the novel to expand in a virtually unlimited number of ways. It will also be possible for readers to communicate with other readers and to compare notes.

While many extravagant and glamorous claims have been made for the interactive medium, there has also been widespread criticism of the quality and structure of the new electronic products. However, these are evolving forms, shaped by a changing environment that is itself imposing its own restrictions and limitations. As Komninos admits, "the medium is determining the art". Other practitioners emphasize that it is only early days in the exploration of this medium of expression and there is an obvious enthusiasm for developing the quality product. There is also a growing acceptance of new electronic forms and an expectation that "today's sophisticated multimedia production equipment is tomorrow's standard educational and publishing tool".²¹ Komninos explained the experimental nature of his work: "People are creating tools and we as artists are just picking them up and learning to use them and applying them to our particular art form. Mine is words".

The Publisher

In the same way that authors have been challenged to move beyond traditional print forms of creative expression, publishers are urged to be involved in the development and delivery of new cultural products. It is claimed that unlimited opportunities open for cyber-publishers in the expanding space of the Internet. Although there has been some movement in this direction, traditional publishers are generally cautious, being either unwilling or unable to risk the huge development costs involved in exploring new and possibly unrewarding territory.

Susan Hawthorn of Spinifex Press regards it as essential to establish a publishing presence on the Net, but stressed that any full-scale electronic publishing at this stage is a matter of establishing priorities. A publisher has to balance whether the one electronic project is more important than the next twenty books: "There is much more at risk, it is ten, twenty, thirty times more costly . . . Everybody will have to look at it and gauge their own level of skill, expertise, passion and commitment".²² Spinifex has published an interactive novel online, *Building Babel* by Suniti Namjoshi, which is available through the Spinifex Web page. An unusual experiment was conducted here with an invitation to readers to contribute to the final chapter, "The Reader's Text", an activity the author called the "logical conclusion" to her work.²³ All contributions were treated like an unsolicited manuscript and approved selections included in the Home Page for the novel. In a measured way, this print publisher is stepping into new territory, experimenting with new texts and reader interaction, and quite effectively developing a base in cyberspace.

Describing the development of Infocis, an electronic publishing company in Brisbane, as "a long, hard process", Manager Trish Donaldson aims to establish a credible publishing presence with a quality range of Australian titles on the Internet.²⁴ The model being followed is similar to the print publishing model involving the same processes of selection, developing the author-publisher relationship and full editorial services, cover and book design. In the electronic environment, structuring and formatting material for publication is a more complex and intensive process than for print titles, and Infocis is also the bookseller.

Infocis has concentrated on educating authors and professional groups about electronic publishing and building credibility for the new industry. Developing

Publishing Contracts for the difficult electronic environment is an important priority and Infocis only negotiates for authors' electronic rights; authors remain free to sign contracts with other print publishers. Donaldson expressed concern that traditional publishers will insist on having electronic rights or licences, yet have no intention or capability of ever exploiting these rights. However, she believes that as the electronic publishing industry becomes more established, these issues will be understood more clearly, and a more realistic approach to electronic rights will be accepted.

Electronic publishing and electronic document delivery have been strongly promoted as an alternative to print-based scholarly books and journals, with their high initial costs and continuing high storage costs. Some advantages of electronic publishing include the global coverage, speed of distribution, and easy access to selected extension material or primary data. Many academics are aggressively promoting electronic publishing on the Internet as a way of bypassing publishers and regaining control of the communication of knowledge which, they insist, should be freely available. The electronic journal *Australian Humanities Review*, founded by Cassandra Pybus and currently edited by Elizabeth McMahan, was initially funded by the AV-CC as part of a pilot project exploring scholarly electronic publishing. There is no print version of this interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal; it is published only in an online format. The content is text only and there is a feedback and discussion facility for readers in the form of an interactive, moderated forum. Search tools and hyperlinks to other relevant Web sites are provided for users and previous issues are archived with restricted access, and are available by subscription. A sophisticated monitoring program has enabled Pybus to track the activity of users at the *Australian Humanities Review* site. As well as providing important feedback for this specific journal, this access data could supply valuable information on readership and the actual patterns of use of articles in a scholarly environment.

Access and Equity

The extraordinary and continuing developments in the electronic communications medium are demanding attention from government and regulatory organizations concerning policy initiatives and legal issues. The social issue of equitable community ac-

cess to computer technology and the information resources that it generates raises another area of debate since "every technology encapsulates social relations"²⁵ having potentially positive and negative effects on society, both programmed and unforeseen. Despite the widely publicised capacity for democratization inherent in the new world of cyberspace – the empowering of the individual and bypassing traditional channels of communications – the current information revolution does not necessarily bring greater knowledge and the subsequent improvement of lifestyles for all. Some analysts debate whether equality of information is possible given the present social imbalances.²⁶ At an international level there is a huge disparity in information wealth and the possibilities of gaining access to this information. Latin America, Asia and Africa account for a mere 5.4% of all computers and associated hardware, while 60% of all databases are in the United States. There are more telephones in Tokyo than the entire continent of Africa, and half of the world's population does not live within two hours' walk of the nearest telephone.²⁷ It is not surprising that IT is creating significant socio-political challenges in countries where the absence of effective telecommunications infrastructure, unreliable power supplies, and problems with high humidity, as well as limited financial resources, restrict access to international information networks.

Within the Australian community there is already a division between the information rich and the information poor, according to the Jones report, which recognizes the importance of information as an essential social and economic resource, and an immensely valuable asset. Access to information is described as "a basic right and a precondition to personal and national autonomy":²⁸ The information poor are often excluded from access to information being unaware of the types of information available and the methods of accessing this information. Traditionally, public libraries have played an active role regarding the community's right of free access to information and knowledge.

Research has shown that the acquisition of relevant information can have important implications within a community, contributing to a sense of "human dignity, confidence and self-help".²⁹ Some libraries and community access centres are recognizing the importance of developing life information services. The library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, for example, is a research library which vigorously promotes its facilities among indigenous

people. The library provides bibliographies on Aboriginal subjects, names, areas and languages. Staff have developed an Aboriginal Biographical Index to answer growing numbers of queries on family histories. This restoration of family history is of particular importance to a people historically dispossessed and subjected to destructive and obstructive government policies. Material is also made available to Aboriginal community centres and 'keeping places'. This institution is providing that link between the information, information technology (actively developing data bases) and the community.

At all levels of the Australian education system there is generally an enthusiastic embracing of computer technology, providing opportunities for enhanced learning with computers in classrooms, training the next generation of computer-literate readers. Academic and library networks are in many ways spearheading the development and provision of information services. However, these services require huge levels of government funding and subsidization and sections of the community with free and easy access are privileged. Devotees of the Internet point to the freedom of access to the world store of information, but realists counter that the Internet and the necessary computer facilities are not free, and that "future digital communication via the I-way will not be free":

The Internet has been free for most people affiliated with universities, but their institutions may be writing six-figure annual checks to pay for their portion of the network and the government and its agencies have spent megabucks on creating and maintaining it. None of this stuff is free – not now, not ever.³⁰

This right of access to information is threatened by the increasing acceptance of the user pays principle for information services. After initial trial periods, systems of payment for information services or Internet and e-mail access are being introduced within both the public and academic library systems. This policy immediately divides a community, favouring the economically privileged sectors and restricting access to disadvantaged groups. Even when library and information services are freely provided, many potential users have limited capacity to access and effectively use these services. There is a growing danger that the rich will be better served by these technological innovations, and the poor will continue to be disadvantaged.

Conclusion

The information revolution – that convergence of developments in computer technology and telecommunications – is inevitably bringing radical change into the Australian community and the writing environment. The complex social, economic and political factors involved in a full engagement with the electronic world of the future are consistently confounding attempts to control developments. Issues such as copyright, intellectual property and moral rights, and effective law enforcement across the global networks remain unresolved. The Jones Report highlighted social and economic issues of equity and access that these socially transforming technologies can automatically impose within society. As a Labor policy initiative aimed at constructing the clever country, *Creative Nation* strongly endorsed developments in electronic communication and publishing, aligning cultural strength and versatility with economic success and future prosperity. Although this is still an emerging communication medium, individual authors are determined to explore this cyberspace, crossing cultural and intellectual boundaries, and/or pushing the limits of form and language. The Australian literary environment remains both dynamic and fragile, destabilized by continuing social, economic and technological changes. Within this essentially creative ecosystem, however, these conditions of change can combine to produce a metamorphic process where authors break through traditional restrictive roles, and the written text breaks boundaries, either real or presumed, and new creative forms can develop.

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fiction

Sugar

Craig Ensor

DAD ALWAYS SAID THAT ON ANY TRIP you lose something in the arriving. This time was no different. When we arrived at the campsite along the Salmon Haul River there was a caravan in our spot. I thought Dad was going to turn back right then and there. His eyes said as much. It was a caravan like ours, only bigger and was being towed by a red Ford station wagon. As we pulled by I could see all the bugs mashed into the front vent and windscreen. The plates on the Ford said that it was from interstate.

– Damn. This is *our* spot, Dad said fisting the steering wheel.

For years our family had been coming to Salmon Haul, on the elbow of the river, under an old Moreton Bay fig that had both mine and Dad's initials knifed into its trunk, and for as long as I could remember whenever we pulled up the spot would be empty. Dad gripped his hands high on the wheel, arms locked, and stared out in front of the car. Someone behind was giving him the horn. He was in an adult world now. I could tell that because the glasses would come off and his thumb and forefinger would work at his eyeballs like he was making room to see clearly. Other times he would put his hands to his head and keep his thinking cap down. The horn barked once more.

– Yeh, I hear yah, Dad yelled back out the window.

He shifted the gearstick and turned the wheel and backed the caravan into the spot beside the red Ford station wagon. Turning the wheel was hard and veins as thick as licorice popped on his neck. When he parked the caravan we both got out and took everything in. I remember thinking that it wasn't the same, that the four or five metres to our old spot felt like half a world away, that the light, the view of the river and estuary, the smoky blue mountains muscling off the downs into the canefields, were changed. Dad was trying not to think. He unpacked the boot like the boot was the only thing that counted.

Until dusk we waited, for the heat to drag over the mountains with the sun, and the moon to open up the night for prawning. Dad gave me the bucket and he himself took hold of the prawning net and lit the wick of the lantern with a match so that a stub of orange throbbed on the wick. For a couple of hours we prawned in the estuary. Dad told me where to go with the lantern and I did what I was told. He dragged the net through the shoals and the lantern picked up the tightness of the muscles in his forearm. I wondered whether I'd ever have arms that strong. At the time I thought those arms could make the world turn the other way. I got this feeling of calmness, as calm as the water that lapped and rolled on my shins.

– Those people ... they're not even out on the river, on a night like this ... I can't understand that ... I cannot understand that, Dad said.

He said it over the top of my head.

Dad looked back towards the Moreton Bay fig and the fluorescent lights coming out of the caravan. The lights shimmered on the river, moonlight diced into pieces. I knew that tone in his voice. I'd heard him take that tone with Mum. It told me to keep quiet. We prawned until the pink and orange ochres over the mountains had given up on the day, until there was darkness everywhere, moving in on the lantern, and cicadas buzzing out of the unseen eucalypts like a dentist's drill. Dad held the lantern to the bucket and tossed the small prawns back into the water. Then he gave me back the lantern and pointed me towards where we came. Along the river we walked and when we got to the red Ford and caravan under the Moreton Bay we both looked in to see what could be seen. There were four of them, a Mum and Dad and two children, a boy and a girl, seated at a table under a fluorescent light, playing some card game. There were fishing rods, inflatable rafts, bodyboards, flippers and snorkels racked up on the back step. They had the bodyboard I

didn't get for Christmas. The Mother in the caravan yawned and looked out the window and caught the two of us looking back. Then Dad's hand took in my hand whole and my little hand rattled inside his as he led me up to our caravan. Dad made me fix a salad as he fried the prawns up shells and all in a wok and went about putting a sauce together.

– Damn it. Sugar. Your Mother didn't pack the sugar.
– Is it in here?

I looked through the box of food things we brought.

– No. It's not there. I've checked. I can't use honey either. She's forgot the honey. We'll have to borrow some. I'll have to go next door.

Dad left and he was gone longer than I thought it would take to borrow sugar. His large body plugged up the fluorescent light at the back door. When he came back he had a green tupperware bowl full of it and he didn't say anything but went about fixing the sauce, adding soy and garlic and chilli, and then putting the tupperware bowl in the middle of the table in a place I couldn't get to without jacking myself up with a chair. All the prawns we bolted down and Dad said it was late and that I should go to bed. He put me under the sheets and went back out into the living area and as I lay there I could hear the bourbon cap unscrew and the click of ice on glass.

The smell of eggs frying smoked me out of sleep. I got up slow and went out into the living area. The table was set and the bottle of bourbon was away somewhere. I sat down and rubbed the sleep from my eyes and when they opened they fell on the green tupperware bowl full of sugar sitting on the table where Dad had put it last night.

– Sure is bright in here, I said.

– And hot.

On two slices of toast Dad served up the eggs. I could barely see the eggs for the glare.

– The morning sun comes right in on this lot. There's no shade. All the other times we had the old fig cooling things down. Dad looked out the window at the caravan in the shade of the fig. See, they haven't even woken up yet. The sun was knocking on my eyelids at six. Six-a-bloody-clock. Can you believe it?

Dad sat down in front of a mug of coffee and reached over to the green tupperware bowl and spooned two full teaspoons of sugar into his coffee and stirred it in with a hand that shook a little when he quit stirring. I'd made coffee for Dad before and he had only ever wanted one teaspoon. Then he reached over and took

another spoonful, a third, and stirred it into his coffee so that it brimmed and slurped veins of brown down the side of the mug. Dad told me that he was going to stay inside for a bit and that I could go out onto the river and play. He didn't look well. I'd seen him like this before, always after the bourbon. I'd tasted some, like medicine it tasted, one day when he and Mum were out, and I couldn't see why someone would want to drink a whole bottle of it.

The empty bourbon bottle I found in the bin. They were good for sending messages out. I wrote on a bit of paper that I was marooned on a desert island and that I was running out of food and water and I put the bit of paper in the bourbon bottle, screwed the lid, and armed the bottle out into the river. It bobbed up and down and then got caught in the current and floated out towards the estuary.

– Who you writin' to? came a voice, girl-like.

I turned around and it was the girl from last night seated at the table. She held a hand up to her eyes to catch the glare like the glare was a ball thrown at her.

– No one.

– It can't be no one.

– Everyone then.

– What's your name?

– Sam. Yours?

– Becky.

She was older than me by a few years. Little breasts were pushing at her shirt and the nipples were dark underneath the whiteness of it.

– So, what do you do around here for kicks?

– Fish. Me and my Dad went prawning last night.

– I saw you. You looked silly. Carrying that light thing.

– I did not.

– You looked silly.

– What would you know?

– More than you.

I looked at her and could tell from the look she gave me back that she did know more than me. She was older, I could tell. But she also looked like the type of girl who had done a few things.

– We could sunbake and swim, Becky said.

– In the surf?

– Where else?

I wasn't allowed in the surf by myself, without my Dad or an adult, but I couldn't give her that to feed on. I looked back up towards her caravan and the bodyboard with the triple fin.

– Is that yours?

– What? The bodyboard? No, it's my little brother's.
Do you want to use it?

– If I could.

– Ask me nicely.

– No.

– Then you don't get it.

– Can I use your bodyboard please?

Becky looked around her caravan. It was quiet and dark under the fig. It looked like no one was up.

– Kiss me.

– No way.

– Then you don't get the bodyboard. Kiss me.

She puckered up her lips so that they screwed up like those sea urchins go when you stick a finger in them. I kissed her quick. She took the kiss and tried to give some back, the nob of her tongue, but I was out of there like I am when I'm kissing relatives. On the way to the beach I carried the bodyboard under my arm and it was quiet between us and I got to thinking that it was worth it, the kiss, and that I'd do it again if I had to.

Asleep face up on his bed Dad was when I got home. I woke him because he promised to take me fishing and I'd made up my mind that now was the time. Dad hired a boat out at the marina, a tindingy that chopped blue lawnmower smoke, and made our way into the estuary. The man at the marina who smelt of prawning said that flathead and tailor were biting. Dad hushed the engine where the river sucked into the estuary and baited my hook with some worms he bought from the marina. He showed me in a way that I could do it myself the next time. A breeze tacked in off the sea, cool and baited with salt. Dad sat there as brown water slushed in the hull of the dingy and thought adult thoughts. After a time the dingy drifted and Dad ripped the engine cord to chug it back to where the fish were said to be biting.

– Sam. I spoke to Mum this morning. Everything's right at home. She says she misses you.

I gave Dad a nod. I didn't miss Mum but that wasn't so bad because I'd never missed anyone in my life, not even when Dad left for that time. I knew he'd come back. Something tugged at my line and I got interested in that.

– I've been thinking, Sam. It's not the same. I think we'll make tracks early. Tuesday.

Dad chewed into his eye sockets with his fingers then hooked his glasses on his nose. His eyes were the same colour as his temper normally went. Beads of salt pimpled on his glasses.

– Why Dad? You said Thursday.

– No discussion on this Son. Tuesday. You got something there.

The line unreeled from my rod and I grabbed it and winched slow like Dad had said giving the fish a little ray of life before taking it away with a swift coil of the reel. I waited for Dad to step in to help me but he was looking out over the mountain ridge and the reef of coal-black stormclouds rearing out of the south-west. The sun was playing hide and seek in the clouds. It was playing games with Dad's eyes. Dad didn't like games. He punched the sun away. Then the sun slipped behind a cloud and the water turned dark, the wind drove some coolness through my shirt. Murky, the water looked. I could feel myself losing the catch, it stitched though the water, under the boat, skimming on the water knifelike in the sun. Then Dad's hand came from nowhere to grip the reel and spin the catch in. My hands were lost underneath. I remember looking at those hands, as big as my head, and thinking what he could do to me if he wanted to, what he could do to anyone. A story was attached to each scar on his knuckles but the stories were all in the past. Mum said they weren't to be told in her house.

The catch, two flatheads, one bigger than the other, fried in a pan of butter and lemon juice. Dad ground some pepper on each fillet and served it out to me on a chair by the river with the bits of a salad that I liked, tomato and lettuce, no cucumber. We sat there and ate without talking as the sky choked up grey. Dad was looking over at Becky's caravan. They had gone out for some reason. The whole family. Dad threw back the last chunk of fish and put his plate on the chair and walked over to the caravan. The muscles in his calves went angry hard as he looked into the caravan window. I was behind him but I couldn't see high enough. We walked around the caravan together but with Dad not really knowing that I was with him. He looked through all the windows and he tried the back door but it was locked. Then he saw the old Moreton Bay fig and sat against it and felt the trunk like he used to do with Mum's thigh when I weren't meant to be looking.

– Your grandfather planted this tree when he was a boy, Sam.

– I know, Dad. He'd already told me that.

– It's our tree, Son. There's your initials. And mine. Here's your grandfather's. One day you can carve your son's name in the tree.

Flying foxes rustled in amongst the dark limbs above. Half chewed fruit lobbed down onto the caravan roof and the grass. Thunder peeled out from beyond the mountains and I looked up and could see patches of crayons black forming in between the fig leaves and the wingspan of flying fox. Raindrops smacked the leaves and we both sat back and listened and smelt the rain as it drummed on the tin of the caravan and the fig and the skin of the river.

A good while we sat there, silent, not a movement either way, before the red Ford stationwagon pulled up short of the caravan. Becky got out of the car first and she was the only one to see us. By the time we got to our caravan we were soaked. Dad ran a hot shower and put me in it and told me more about the tree which I didn't understand, stuff about what weather it liked, how big it could grow, where it came from. Afterwards Dad fixed some coffee and asked if I'd like to try some. Mum would never let me back home and that made me feel like an adult even though I knew I weren't because the coffee went into the mug that I'd been drinking out of since I was three.

– How many sugars? Dad asked.

I'd heard this question asked before and I thought back to how it should be answered.

– One, thanks.

– One? Sweettooth like you? Try two.

Dad lumped two large teaspoons of sugar into my coffee and we sat there and listened in to Becky's family next door fighting over something or other. Dad was nearly going to go over there and tell them to keep it down but just as he was about to the fighting stopped and there was no need for it.

That night I couldn't get to sleep. Neither could Dad. He was up in front of the television all night and I got to a point that I too got up and asked Dad if I could watch some television because I couldn't get to sleep. He said that he shouldn't have given me coffee but pulled up on the couch enough for me to get in. A bottle of bourbon and a single glass sat on the table. Some ice cubes had turned to water in the glass. We sat there and watched a late movie, listening to the patter of rain on the tin roof, me nestled between the fork and limb of his legs, until my eyelids grew too heavy to hold up.

The next morning Dad woke me and said someone, a girl, was here to see me. I was in my bed. Dad must have shifted me in the dead of night without my know-

ing. It was Becky. She wanted to know if I was coming out to play. The weather had cleared up. The sun poured in bright at my eyes still half asleep and all I could make out was her brown hair flaring golden at the tips and I said yes without really knowing her meaning of play. I dressed and had breakfast and went outside and found her wading in the river dressed in a blue string bikini.

– The tide's coming in, she said. Look. A piece of driftwood bobbed and floated at pace on the river.

– So?

– Do you want to ride it in?

– Yeh. Where from?

– Let's go up the beach and catch the current down the river. See if we can make it all the way into the estuary.

– Okay.

Up along the bank of the river we walked, me tailing her and watching her ankles and the glint of a gold chain on her left ankle as she walked. She gave me her brother's bodyboard without having to kiss her which I thought was good though I got a feeling that maybe she was tired of me and had nothing better to do. Once up at the mouth of the river I splashed some water in her face but she didn't come back with any splashing of her own. She looked kind of sad. I thought back to last night, and the fight in her caravan, and the fact that her voice was mixed up in it. She drifted on her bodyboard ahead of me and turned circles using her feet dug into the sand as an anchor. We floated all the way down the river with only quiet being said between us until the estuary opened up and we were pulled by a channel onto the opposite side of the river to where the caravans were parked. Becky dragged herself up onto the bank and laid down on her bodyboard, face up.

– What are you doing? I said.

– Sunbaking.

I kept my body in the water and looked up at her. I didn't like that idea much. I wanted to see how far the current would carry us into the estuary.

– What would you do if I took my bikini top off? she said.

– What? Like the women do on the beach?

– Yeh.

– You wouldn't.

– Want to have a bet?

– How much?

– How much you got?

– I'm not bettin'.

– Okay. If I do it you have to kiss me.
– No way.
– Okay, then. You have to kiss me if I pull my costume up my bum like the girls do on the beach.

Becky rolled onto her stomach so that the blue bikini bottom was hit by the sun. She put a finger under the elastic and teased it out a little.

– No. You wouldn't.
– Why wouldn't I? There's nothing wrong with it.
– Yes there is.
– What's wrong with it?
– I don't know. Something. You're not a woman.
– What? You're no fun.

The elastic slapped back onto her skin.

Becky stood up and started to walk back to the beach, the way we came, the bodyboard roped to her wrist dragging in the sand behind her. I took off after her.

– My Dad wants to know when your Dad's going to give back the sugar.

– Sugar?

I thought back to the green tupperware bowl in the middle of the table.

– Dad says you've had it for two days and you only needed a teaspoon. That's what your Dad said. I heard him. He came in and said your Mum hadn't packed the sugar and he needed a teaspoon for a sauce. Dad said we let you have it out of our own goodness. Now you've got the whole bowl and we haven't got any.

– We haven't finished with it yet.

– It's not yours to finish.

I wanted to leave her then and there but I kept on walking because I had to walk that way anyway. She didn't say anymore to me. I walked behind her along the river bank and across the beach and mouth of the river where the tide looked like it was in a panic. Then she made a turn up to the grocery store where some older boys, one smoking, the other two flicking skateboards, hung. She talked to them and toyed with the gold chain on her ankle as they talked back. I kept walking towards the caravan park and when I got back I put her brother's bodyboard where it belonged and found Dad eyes closed out in the sun on a reclining chair, swatting flies away from his face with an open hand.

Later that afternoon Dad and I went into town to buy a new prawning net and do some grocery shopping. Dad showed me the town and how it hadn't changed since he was a boy but I already knew that because he

told me last time we were down here and the time before that. Sometimes I got the feeling that I was just a microphone that he talked into, other times he was talking to me straight, father to son, and it was then when I loved him most. It was a hot day. Huge fans the size of propellers moved slow on the ceiling of the department store. I stood there and a fat lady came up and talked to me about how hot it was and how under the fan was the best place to be. I remember she talked down into me slow like she was recording what she said. Sweat beads welled out of the heavy coat of makeup. I couldn't tell whether she worked there or not but she was dressed like she did.

In the end Dad didn't buy the prawning net and decided to keep going with the old net. He took me by the hand as he walked past and he asked me what the fat woman said.

– She said it was hot.

– Did she ask you to move?

– No.

– That was probably her fan you were under. I won't be shopping there again.

Before dusk Dad let me strike a match and put it to the lantern wick. The smell of kerosene lit and burned and the smell of it tossed around in my mind all the other times I'd gone prawning. The sun had almost set but the day was still hot. A change was coming some time tonight. Dad was hoping to get in a couple of hours of prawning before it hit. As we walked by Becky's caravan and the old fig I noticed the red Ford stationwagon was gone and the caravan was all locked up and dark and quiet.

– It's got me beat how you'd come to a place like this and never use it. I just don't understand some people, said Dad.

Down along the riverbank we walked side by side a little slower than the tide which was pulling out to the mouth of the river and to a full moon yellow and overweight about a thumbnail above the sea. Already there were other prawning lamps glowing at the mouth of the river. It was Monday night, our last night, and I hated that feeling of things coming to an end. Dad told me we were going to try somewhere different tonight and he pointed to a place that was hooked in baylike behind sandstone rocks. There was still enough light to make out where he was pointing. It was then that I heard voices on the other side of the river. It was Becky and two boys carrying skateboards, maybe the two that I saw earlier, but I couldn't tell for

sure in the dark, on the other side of the river. Becky was still wearing her blue bikini and she was talking to them. Then they headed up into the bushes, her leading the way, up into the National Park, a place Dad told me I could not go. I could just make out their pale skin stepping through the bush and then nothing. Then there was only bush.

In the catch that night there were prawns, big green prawns, cuttle fish and squid and shrimp that you could see right through to how their bodies worked. Dad cooked it all up in a pan and had me set the table with knives and forks and pepper and salt and some tartare sauce that Dad picked up from town earlier. I set the table around the green tupperware bowl. I got to thinking about what Becky had said.

- Dad?
- Yes, son.
- Do you want me to take that sugar back?
- No, son.
- Why?
- Because.
- Because why?
- Because I don't want you to take it back!

Dad's voice had a punch to it like it does before I get sent to my room, so I quit then and there. We ate all that was on our plates and Dad had a second helping and I followed and had a second helping myself so as to prove I weren't all kid. Dad smiled at me when I was done. After we cleaned up the dishes Dad put me in bed, earlier than normal because tomorrow was Tuesday, and we were heading back home that morning, at the crack of dawn.

The next morning, when the sun was still in the ocean and only a hint of light coloured in the caravan, I could hear Becky crying and car doors slamming. There was quiet and whispers and her sobbing all through it.

- Just get in the car, said a voice, fatherlike. Don't say another word.

I lay there and listened until my room was bright. I felt kind of sorry for Becky. In bed I lay half asleep and got to thinking about those two boys and Becky stepping into the bush and what went on once they were deep into the bush. Then the car engine kicked over and the last door slammed and the sound of wheels rolling over dewy grass fed into my window with the lorikeets' screech and the other sounds of morning. I looked out my window. The old Moreton Bay fig sat there alone. There was a knock and Dad came into my room.

- Get ready, son. We're going.

Dad didn't give me long to get ready. I was still putting on my clothes when the engine choked over. Then the caravan started to move and my balance went and it was like I was on one big wave surfing the floor of the caravan. The caravan rolled slowly from where it was parked. It threw me a bit because Dad had a rule that no one stayed in the caravan while it was being towed. Dad normally kept to his rules. I waited for us to hit speed but it didn't happen. The caravan didn't go far. It rolled forwards and then backwards and forwards and backwards again and when it stopped the car engine quit soon after. I went to the side door and opened it and Dad was smiling on his way in. Behind him was the trunk of the old Moreton Bay fig, almost close enough to touch, and the initials there to read, and Dad smiling a big smile that had no end to it.



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dialogue

Populism, Disillusionment and Fantasy: Australia Votes

Stephen Alomes

IN 1887, a young Sydney writer expressed his disgust at the 'loyalist' behaviour of his fellow Australians. After a town hall meeting at which Australian republicans were assailed by monarchists celebrating Queen Victoria's jubilee the young Henry Lawson, who had watched republican dissent being repressed, lamented that "my countrymen are cowards".

Over a hundred years later, from London to Launceston, from Perth to Parramatta, republicans expressed their horror that the lucky country should not, in the words of later republican Kylie Minogue, be 'so lucky' as to become a republic. After the votes from the 6 November 1999 referendum were counted, they could not believe that Australia was to remain one of the last British imperial outposts, rather than choosing formal independence as expressed in an Australian Head of State...

Why did Australians choose the status quo, leaving them in the eyes of many peoples of the world, mere British colonials? Was it because of John Howard's tactical mastery, both

the slow process from constitutional convention to referendum and the addition of a second confusing question – the more questions asked the more likely they are to fail? Or his own role as the last of the Queen's men, on the sidelines, but not quite... phrasing the question in a way guaranteed to create uncertainty? Had he, in the best British tradition, confounded the "knavish tricks" of the enemies of Britannia? Was it because the monarchists did not have the courage of their convictions, preferring tactical cleverness to public fealty to the House of Windsor?

The experience might confirm the views of those explorers and early settlers who saw Australia as "a land of contrarities", of weird mysteries, paradoxes and absurdities, a land where everything was upside down. There, watering his plastic four-leaf clovers in his suburban backyard, was Phil Cleary, the only ersatz Irish supporter of the British monarchy. On each side was wealth. While in the popular imagination the Republicans were seen as personified by the silver-tongued barrister and Sydney merchant banker Malcolm Turnbull, the (Kerry) Jones woman, from the wealthy Moran (health care network) family, was not quite your ordinary Australian. Perhaps soon, as in the caricatures of the kind the

radical press used about the principals of the Federation debates a century before, other fantastic scenes would follow. A slimmer Kim Beazley would lead the way to the republican nation of the new millennium, if Peter Costello, mouth now turned upwards, didn't pip him at the post. And before that, in a last colonial fantasy, John Howard would lead the way backwards into Menzies' Australia as, dressed in a colonial corgi suit and wearing a deputy sheriff's badge, he would open the Sydney Olympics. Like republican dreams such scenes would be deferred.

The major reason for the rejection of the republic lies in the third force in Australian politics, the force which once underpinned the colonial radical press's scepticism about monarchy and republic alike. Populist scepticism about the 'silvertails', the 'silver-tongued politicians' and the 'money men' and the grovellers who prostrated themselves before English royalty and aristocracy was an often forgotten sub-theme of the 1890s debates. Some radical critics of Federation then expressed the third force in Australian politics, the one which transcended the simplicities of Left and Right.

That third force is populism, the most strange and complex of political beliefs. We often associate

populism with the extreme Right, racism and nationalism. Overseas, its practitioners include Le Pen in France, Zhirinovskiy in Russia and Ross Perot's Reform Party in the US. In Australia, we associate it with Pauline Hanson's One Nation or with populist demagogues such as Joh Bjelke-Petersen 'standing up' for Queensland. This cluster of attitudes is more pervasive than these versions of distaste for "foreigners", however, whether they are found on boats in the Indian Ocean, at the UN in New York or just wearing suits in Canberra.

During the Depression populism expressed a distrust for the 'big end of town' as ordinary Australians were told to take cold showers and forced to suffer. Populism underpinned support for Jack Lang in NSW then. Later, it has been used by several 'strong man' premiers who claim to transcend politics and link it with 'Canberra-bashing'. At its simplest, populism in the Australian version means 'knocking'.

Today, populism pervades the cynical talk radio of a John Laws, Alan Jones or Howard Sattler, the rural romanticism of Ian Macnamara's *Australia All Over* (often endorsing that anthem of populist vagueness 'We the people ... shall be heard') and the tabloid television of *A Current Affair*. This story is only partly about populism as expressing the voice of the dispossessed. Scepticism about politicians is reinforced by frequent tabloid radio and television stories about 'Canberra' fat cats and insensitive bureaucrats in Spring St or Macquarie St or St Georges Tce. Elites and bureaucrats and the taxman (as well as individual 'comment'), 'rip off' ordinary Australians. In this conservative formulation government does not build a better

Australia. It is a burden on ordinary Australians, from small business to the 'battlers'. Even John Howard identifies with the latter, although usually the small, or not so small, business version.

Populism has two main elements. The first is a celebration of the ordinary people, who are seen as dispossessed by the elites. Once those elites were royalty, and the upper class elites who crawled before them in search of titles, honours and admission to social functions at Government House. Wearing their economic, rather than social hat, they were Collins St and Pitt St farmers (many of them also bankers). As such distaste towards them appealed even more to ordinary Australians in rural areas and to citizens in those states which felt most dispossessed by Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. Not surprisingly, in the republic referendum the 'No' vote was particularly strong in Queensland and Tasmania.

In the extreme right version the elites involve the UN, the Zionists and other forces conspiring against the people. In this formulation, the solution is not politics, for populism expresses disillusionment with politicians and is a form of anti-political political thought. The solution is a leader (a Joh or a Pauline) who expresses and embodies the will of the people. Populism is about expressive emotions rather than instrumental results. It is a vehicle for the voice of the dispossessed rather than a practical political movement aiming for certain specific reforms.

The referendum campaign on Australia becoming a republic with an Australian head of state did not emerge from a political tabula rasa. It came after nearly three decades of

globalizing change carried out by both major political parties. As a result distrust in politicians is all-pervasive. Their 'Trust us. Change will be good for you ... in the long run' formulation brings to mind J.M. Keynes' conclusion that "in the long run we're all dead". Perhaps subconsciously, one more restructuring proposal reminded many voters of the instability that has become the norm. In New South Wales, populists did have evidence of the untrustworthiness of the elites. The politics of recent months had been dominated by the SOCOG ticket scams providing tickets to the wealthy rather than to the great unwashed general public and by the NRL (the de facto Murdoch Super League) and its rejection of the battlers' rugby league club, South Sydney.

Nationally, 'Say "No" to the Politicians' Republic!' was not just the product of an unholy alliance between the Phil Clearys of the world (desperately trying to extend his use-by date) and the monarchists. It was the perfect negative side of the populist ideal. But what of the positive side? Where was the 'great man' who would save the people from the conniving political and business elites? In this populist fantasy, a people's president will be our redeemer, some kind of American-style president, a Bill Clinton without the personal vices, who will be elected by the people and transcend politics. The populist great man was even more surrounded by an aura than the usual populist leader for he didn't exist, except as an idealized opposite to the president chosen by the politicians. (Ignorance did play a role. Up to a quarter of people surveyed in opinion polls assumed that an elected president would be on some sort of American model.)

This American-style model is even shorter on evidence than logic. As was apparent from those other political campaigners, Kerry Jones, Malcolm Turnbull, Ted Mack and Phil Cleary, if you campaign in politics you become a politician, even if you grew up in the garden of Eden. However, populism is not about logic. It is about emotion, or at best about emotional concepts of virtue and vice. The fact that even politicians are elected by the people was somehow omitted from the populist calculus of decency.

Populism today appeals to those who feel dispossessed or have been hurt by the structural changes of the last third of the century. Those who voted 'No' were strongest in working-class and rural areas. Many of those who voted 'Yes' were those with greater experience of Australia and the world: those of European, Asian and other immigrant extraction (the more 'ethnic' Labor seats), the educated and travelled who felt embarrassed at the vestiges of colonialism in Australia's situation with an English monarch as also our Head of State. Except for some older conservatives, such as the entertainer Clive James, Australians overseas also feel strongly the symbolic need for Australia to choose autonomy over the British monarchical connection.

The constitutional monarchists (from the royalists to the fantasy 'real republicans') outgeneralled the republicans. Preferring tactical skill to the courage of their convictions, they ran a ruthless fear campaign. Based on negativism, the rejection of a politicians' republic, they addressed popular anxieties (founded and unfounded) in an Australia in which support for the monarchy was as low as ten to twenty per cent. Even celebrities,

who normally dominate the Australian media in an era of the 'dumbing down' of public life, were a negative. Whereas a century before, some popular and populist opinion in the radical press dissented from the pretensions of Government House and above, now, due to the monarchists' cleverness in not mentioning the 'M' word in the campaign, the pompous rejected silvertails and snobs became the Sydney 'chardonnay republicans'. What greater inversion, in the land of colonial paradox, could there be!

Even worse than celebrities were politicians. The Australian Republican Movement's invocation of politicians guaranteed that their case would be rejected. Once it would have mattered, at least to the politically interested, that Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser could finally agree that 'It's Time'. Today, to a larger, alienated electorate, two politicians added up to two politicians. This was the powerful emotional logic felt by those who had seen Australia become a more divided society than three decades before, between rich and poor, or had just lived with growing insecurity. Or, perhaps, the roots of the decision were also national and cultural. On the day before the once British colony opened the new film studios dedicated to Hollywood rather than Australian film, Fox Studios, Australians didn't have enough faith in their own culture as well as in their politicians. As Henry Lawson, republican and writer, might have lamented were he alive today, 'Shame Australia Shame'.

Stephen Alomes is the author of When London Calls (1999), a study of expatriate Australian artists in London, from the republicans John Williams and Kylie Minogue to the royalist Clive James.

Community Broadcasting

In Its Twenties Now

Vincent O'Donnell

IN AUSTRALIA, it's called the third tier of broadcasting but that grand name suggests a solidarity or uniformity that community broadcasting does not have, perhaps should never have. Better described as the community broadcasting sector, it was known as the public broadcasting sector until the Broadcasting Services Act of 1992, when, by legislative fiat, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation claimed the title 'public broadcaster' as well as 'national broadcaster'.

In simple economic terms, community broadcasting is minute. The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) estimates the turnover of the sector as \$20 million, but the figure is misleading. Most labour in community broadcasting is voluntary. If one applies the ratio between the cash cost and the capitalized cost of the community radio program Arts Alive (with which I am associated) to the whole sector, then the capitalized value of economic activity of this tier of broadcasting exceeds \$400 million, economically significant in the national scheme of things. Indeed, such an estimate would be in line with financial needs of the 145 stations with permanent licences and the 217 aspirants awaiting or operating on temporary licences,¹ when the turnover of their commercial counterparts is considered.

The idea of tiers in broadcasting dates back to the inception of radio broadcasting in Australia and was set in legislative stone by the creation of the Australian Broad-

casting Commission in 1932. This ended a decade of inept legislation and corporate chicanery whose modern parallels can be found in the introduction of pay television to Australia in the 1990s. Sixty years earlier, radio broadcasting was firmly divided into two tiers. The ABC, modelled on the BBC, was to be funded from licence fees. It was to take a national perspective even if the service was delivered on a region-by-region basis. The commercial stations were to be funded by the sale of airtime for advertising and would serve local markets. Only in the largest towns and the cities would several commercial stations compete within the same market.

So for forty years, Australian radio broadcasting, policy and practice was to remain as static as a bug in amber, though the introduction of television broadcasting was to transform content. There was, however, one blip in the stasis. In the early 1960s the first university based educational station, VL2UV, at the University of New South Wales, was licensed to transmit on 1750kHz just outside the official broadcast band. The station could be received however, on a standard broadcast radio if the set was subject to some minor retuning.

It has been fashionable to credit the Whitlam government for starting the radio broadcasting revolution of the 1970s in Australia but the social, commercial and consumer pressure for change could not have been ignored by any government. What the Whitlam government did was make a virtue out of a necessity and get credit for it. It could say, for example, that it was responding to the Mass Communications Council's declaration of 1969 that the airwaves belonged to the people and that the

broadcasters were, simply, lessees of a public asset.

Interestingly however, most of the important licensing changes, as they affect community radio, were implemented by the succeeding Fraser coalition government under the stewardship of the (then) Minister for Posts and Telecommunications, Tony Staley, ex-national president of the Liberal party. Staley was, until late 1995, the chair of the Public (now Community) Broadcasting Foundation. This is just one example of how the traditional polarities of Australian politics do not fit easily the politics of community broadcasting.

More recent examples were the generous pre-election promises of the Coalition, in 1996. Labor's then minister for Communication and the Arts, Michael Lee, had little time for community broadcasters. He made that clear throughout 1995, repeatedly declining invitations to meet with the CBAA and only grudgingly attended the annual conference at Monash University in late November of that year. At a doorstep press conference he rewarded the assembled journalists and wanna-be journalists, with glib and opaque replies to serious questions concerning the sector.

Thus, at the level of the broadcasters and journalists at least, the sector was ripe for influence by Labor's opponents. Sure enough, the shadow minister Senator Richard Alston was there with an open ear and an open cheque book. The Coalition offered a total of \$6 million over three years to get community stations on-line and "to develop a *National Community Satellite Network* and an internet radio station providing 100 per cent Australian programming".² Even community stations that were

seriously politicized against the Coalition had to re-assess their position, had to wonder, perhaps just for a fleeting moment, about the possibility of a Coalition government, and of the prospect of an additional \$6 million for community broadcasting.

If the promise of \$6 million influenced the votes of people in the community radio sector, it no more than confirms the sector's largest and continuing problem, that of finance. While the first two tiers of broadcasting had (and for the most part still have) clearly defined money streams – the public purse and the advertising dollar – the third tier has always had to juggle a cocktail of sources. Stations originally closely affiliated with tertiary institutions like 5UV in Adelaide or 3RMT (now 3RRR) in Melbourne were relatively well off, mixing commercial and listener sponsorship with institutional support.³ Others seeking greater ideological purity, like 3CR, put their faith, with some success, in almost exclusively listener-based sponsorship. Either way, it is a hard and unremitting grind to raise the money to keep a station on-air, let alone provide the capital to update equipment, and grants from the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) are vital in this latter matter.

Last year's federal budget saw the CBF receive a core grant of \$3.3 million, a sum the chief executive of the foundation, Beth McCrea, says maintains the level of support of recent years. The new technologies initiatives of the 1996 election have been refunded to the tune of \$1.5 million a year for the next three years. This is less than the original sum, but the initial three years required considerable one-off expenditure on computer hardware.

One new project, the Australian Music Initiative, details of which are contained in a soon-to-be released discussion paper, has been given \$0.5 million per year for three years. Finally, an \$80,000 per annum compensation scheme has been created for those community stations that use the transmission facilities of the privatized National Transmission Agency and will now be charged full commercial rates by the agency.

The financial difficulties encountered at 2GCR in Goulburn, NSW in late February, leading to the dismissal of the only paid member of staff, refuelled the debate about what actually is community radio. The debate occurred almost exclusively in the electronic forum of the community radio 'campsite', a list server hosted by Radio 4EB in Brisbane, and was a timely reminder of the increasingly diverse nature of the sector.

The traditional view of community radio was put by John Martin, Vice-President of the Community Broadcasting Foundation. "A community radio station is a community based organization. It is not a business [and] it is non-profit. Community broadcasting is a sector of broadcasting with a specific role and objectives, as set out in legislation, and further developed in the [CBAA] Code of Practice."

This view is broadly shared by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), whose chairman Professor David Flint, outlined the principles used in allocating community licences at the CBAA conference in Adelaide in December 1998:

"Firstly, the ABA will focus solely on the needs of the community within the licence area – both the existing needs and the perceived

future needs. Secondly, that it is in an applicant's interests to define its community interest in broader rather than narrower terms. Thirdly, the concept of a particular community interest must refer to a community interest within the licence area of the proposed service."

"Fourthly, where an applicant proposes to serve a particular community interest, for example a Christian or an Aboriginal interest, the applicant should demonstrate that the greater part of that community interest will be served. And fifthly, where there is more than one applicant competing to represent a similar community interest, the ABA would prefer them to try to find a cooperative arrangement, particularly where public resources will be required to ensure the success of the application."

The reality is, however, that since the deregulation of 1992, new community radio services have sprung up that bear some, if not all, of the characteristics of commercial operations. More than ever, a 'community' can be defined to suit the ambition of the operator: it can be defined geographically or socially, can be distinguished by age, gender, ethnicity, political or sexual preference, by religiosity or by music preference. Selecting a community to serve now looks more and more like niche marketing.

When HITZ-FM went on air in Melbourne for a ninety-day test broadcast, it didn't take long for the commercial rock music stations to notice the slump in their ratings. HITZ-FM sounded terrific and programmed for a community that was not well served, the youth dance music market. Importantly, it was well backed, so it went on-air as it planned to continue. It gave FOX-FM and other commercial

competitors a real shock, so much so, they took their complaints to Canberra. A similar youth oriented station in Sydney, WILD-FM enjoyed such success that it was rumoured that the station was secretly financed by a commercial FM network to get a Trojan Horse inside the community radio market, a claim the manager of WILD-FM, Anthony Gherghetta, vigorously denies. Given the meagre financial resources of most community stations, these youth oriented music stations are relatively well off. WILD-FM estimate their sponsorship potential in the Sydney area to be between \$3.5 and \$4 million per annum, and would employ more than fifteen people full time, if they had a permanent licence. However, Gherghetta claims that the program makers associated with WILD-FM are broadcasters first, not businessmen, and the revenues would not support a commercial operation.

Nevertheless, WILD-FM was sufficiently cashed up to bankroll a sister station in Brisbane. This second WILD-FM has also enjoyed success but, after researching their market, is targeting twelve- to thirty-year-old listeners, a wider demographic than in Sydney. Nor do they see in Brisbane the same potential for sponsorship, but, unlike Sydney, management was not willing to discuss their revenue projections. Meantime in Melbourne, HITZ-FM was being challenged by KISS-FM, a second community station, chasing a similar demographic, so, clearly, there is money in them-there-dials for this class of community station. More recently, those behind KISS-FM have taken their format to Sydney, leased a narrowcast commercial licence and are going into business as Rhythm-FM.

These new music stations program for a minimum of chatter and a maximum of music without totally eclipsing the role of the presenter. Tracks flow one into the next and spoken-word segments rarely exceed three minutes. In that respect, they resemble the very first licensed community stations, the Music Broadcasting Society stations, who specialized in fine music and have maintained their popularity. Sponsors seem easier to find for music stations as the station has one single identity and an audience that listens for extended periods.

Another example of increased diversity in community radio is Radio Rhema. These are a group of stations operating not so much as part of a network but more like franchisees. The use of the name 'Rhema' is controlled by United Christian Broadcasters Limited (UCB) of Springwood, Queensland, which "is made up of Radio Rhema New Zealand – a twenty-station network; UCB Europe, which broadcasts via satellite to a greater part of Europe and the United Kingdom; UCB Pacific – two stations, one in Auckland, New Zealand and one in Tonga, as well as UCB Australia".⁴ Approved stations are supplied with a common philosophy and mission statement and an overseas product mix that may be augmented with local material.

While franchisees share on-air formats and ideologies, each station is financially independent and the financial arrangements for the use of the name and the supply of programs are confidential. There are more than twenty-seven aspiring Rhema stations in eastern Australia, from Bowen Queensland to Geelong Victoria, but not all have progressed to trial broadcasting.

The most successful of the group

seems to be Rhema-FM in Newcastle, now on its fifth successive Temporary Community Broadcasting Licence, a proof of the power of prayer, according to their web site. The station claims 8 per cent of the Newcastle and Central Coast radio audience, impressive for just two years' broadcasting. The figure is based on a subscription base of five thousand and a community radio rule-of-thumb that estimates ten listeners for each subscriber. In commercial terms, that is a significant share of the market, especially as the station makes no attempt to ape the pop music format of the commercial stations. Perhaps that is its strength. Rhema-FM broadcasts 100 per cent Christian music, acquired from Christian music wholesalers, and subject to individual audition, a guarantee that all programming accords with the station's strict moral standards. The adult lyrics of The Whitlams or TISM are never heard on Rhema-FM and local boys-made-good, silverchair, probably miss out as well. With 8 per cent of the Central Coast audience, the station is attractive to sponsors. Phil Hale of Rhema-FM says that the station looks forward to any increase in the four minutes per hour limit for sponsorship acknowledgments on community stations, as it will have no trouble filling five minutes per hour. He laments that their commercial competitors can run eighteen minutes of advertising per hour.

In some ways, stations like WILD-FM or Rhema-FM are virtually commercial operations, but both claim close engagement with the community. Indeed, WILD-FM is developing web-based tools to allow audience programming of the station, perhaps the ultimate in community participation. Rhema-

FM sees the whole of the Newcastle audience as its market for Christian radio and points to its membership-base as proof of community engagement. Given the large volume of imported content on the station however, the opportunity for community engagement in programming or production must be very limited.

Many of these new community stations are light years away from the traditional community station, one that programs to appeal to many sectional interests within a community defined, in the first instance, geographically. Thus the station will divide its programming matrix into time slots to be shuffled by management among competing programmers. Thus the station has multiple identities and may capture any one audience for as little as half an hour per week and would seem more like a serial narrowcaster than a broadcaster.

The next year or two will see the completion, by the ABA, of Licence Area Plans for the Broadcasting Services Bands right across Australia. These plans will influence the allocation of the last remaining high-powered capital city FM licences. The licences are the jewels in the crown of community broadcasting and competition between interested groups is intense. Completion of Local Area Plans will also mark the last major development in analogue broadcasting in Australia, and will resolve the uncertain future of so many community stations presently operating on temporary licences. It will provide for a time for consolidation in community broadcasting until the introduction of digital radio next century reignites once again the debate over the role and characteristics of community radio.

POSTSCRIPT

On 22 November 1999, the Australian Broadcasting Authority allocated a permanent community licence to Newcastle Christian Broadcasters Ltd (Rhema FM) to operate a service on 99.7 MHz on the FM band from 1 December 1999. Rhema FM beat three other contenders, VIP (representing the print handicapped community), Beatz Community Radio Broadcasting Inc. (representing the youth interest) and Hellenic Australia Radio Inc. (representing the Greek community).

ABA considered that, in comparison to the other three applicants, Rhema FM would better meet the needs of the Newcastle community and that it has the capacity to provide its proposed service to a more significant degree.

In the wake of the ABA's 'Cash for Comment' inquiry and a fall in audience and station interest in the John Laws program, 2UE's syndication arm, Radio Active, has been pushing the show to community stations. This has raised questions about how several community stations, including, allegedly, 2WEB and 8TOP, have been taking the program for some time. Laws' on-air reads and clandestine plugs would seem to breach the licence requirement to limit sponsorship announcements on community radio to four minutes per hour and to tag them as such.

Mike Thompson, chief executive of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, has reminded us that, unlike its predecessor the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, the ABA is complaint driven. If no complaints are made about the Laws show on community radio, no action would follow. Watch this space.

ENDNOTES

1. Australian Broadcasting Authority, <http://www.aba.gov.au> [4 & 12 March 1999].
2. *Liberal Party of Australia, Highlights of Government's Achievements*, <http://www.liberal.org.au/election98/policy/communications/communications.html#_Toc431203391> [14 October 1998].
3. One of these pioneer stations, 2NCR, established by the then Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education (now Southern Cross University) has been put on notice that the University will be withdrawing its support and 'gifting' the station to the local community. The staff expected to get formal offers of redundancy on 25 July. See <<http://2NCR.bigtree.com.au>> [2 June 1999].
4. Rhema FM website, <<http://www.rhemafm.com.au>> [4 March 1999].

Vincent O'Donnell is a postgraduate student at RMIT.

Christmas Day in Chittagong

Lyn Riddett

THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY SOME men spent the whole day clearing water hyacinth from the paddy next to my residence. It took two men almost the whole of the day, and I thought of so much valuable time and effort being spent to get rid of the dammed plant which chokes ponds here and the wetlands in the Northern Territory. There in Australia, however, people are seeking a chemical fix for the problem. Here in Bangladesh, manual labour does the job. Yesterday the men were back, planting rice. Yesterday was Christmas Day.

I began the day by trying to sleep in, but my plans went awry as the plans of others began to shape my

time. Theirs had germinated, I think, a day or so before when colleagues at the NGO where I work began to organize a program for me so I would not be lonely on Christmas Day. My first visitor was Shahalam. He was making his second attempt to sort out with me what time he should come and pick me up to go to Purabi's for the afternoon's events. Altogether, five attempts were made by various people, over the twenty-four hours from morning time two days ago, to sort this out; four people all told, that I knew about. I suspect there were one or two others in the background.

Later, as I was having morning coffee, Jahanara, our 'maid servant', appeared at the window with a bunch of bright yellow flowers. Did I want to cook *mishti kumra phul* (flowers of the sweet pumpkin vine) today? As I explained why I did not, and where I was going, or rather where I thought I was going, because that part of Purabi's plan was not at all clear, we discussed the front door key and how I should leave it with her, so she could come and cook *iftar* and dinner for herself and her husband.

Iftar is the Bangla word for the sweet and savoury snacks served at sunset to break the Ramadan fast. This is the month of Ramzan (Ramadan). Begun on 21 December it will continue until 21 January when the holy days of Eid-ul-Fitr will be celebrated. The rhythm of daily activity has changed noticeably since the beginning of Ramzan. The neighbourhood noises, and their pattern, is different. I had become used to waking in the morning to the sound of the cook upstairs chopping and slicing and pounding and grinding on her kitchen floor/my bedroom ceiling, but since last week she has been quiet. Now, people rise

early to eat before sunrise, sometime between 4:00 and 5:00 am, then they go back to bed to sleep. This meal, called *sehri*, is prepared the night before.

In the evenings also there is change. The common pattern has been for men to go out from their homes at about 5:00 pm to visit the *bajar*: they go to the tea shops for gossip, and to the produce stalls to do the family marketing. The women stay and cook the family meal which is eaten late, sometimes not until 10:30 pm. Everyone eats together, so the sound of children's voices is an element in my evening activities – reading, writing, listening to music and silently observing life around me. Since the beginning of Ramzan men stay at home, or visit the Masjid in the late afternoon. People wait for the siren to announce sunset, and then the call to the fourth prayer and then they take *iftar*. Jahanara told me she takes *iftar* for Allah, and then, later, she has dinner.

Iftar snacks, individually, are eaten at other times of the year, but are served together at the break of the fast each day during Ramzan. There are *samosas*, *chatpoti*, a chick pea dish, *peaju*, which is quite like Lebanese falafel but with a lot of green chilli, *alu chop*, which is a potato cutlet, and a range of deep-fried vegetables. Then come the sweets, *mishti doi* (sweetened yoghurt) is my favourite, and dried dates, and *shemai*, a dish where semolina is cooked with milk and sugar and sultanas. The Bangla word for sultanas sounds lovely – *kismish*. Only small amounts of food are served, but everything is eaten with great relish, a welcome break to the fast.

People have been generous about inviting me to join in the *iftar* meals, and in the household of one family I

am also able to watch and learn in the kitchen. Obviously not everybody follows the strict rules of the fast which enjoin no swallowing, even of saliva, so I observed with interest what Liza does when she is cooking. All good cooks taste the food they are preparing. Liza is a good cook, so how to taste without swallowing? The answer is simple, but the practice of it cannot be. Liza tastes, then takes a sip of water, rinses her mouth and spits the lot out. When the time comes, she breaks her fast, along with the rest of her family, with a glass of water first, then with the *iftar* food she has prepared. Jahanara sometimes uses me as a taster.

This year is a winter Ramzan in the northern hemisphere, but of course a summer one in the south. I have been thinking particularly of the Bangladeshi family who came to meet me during the Overseas Services Bureau induction in January 1998, a month or so before I came to Chittagong on my volunteer posting. They traveled one evening from the outer suburbs of Melbourne into Parkville to spend time with me, and to orient me a little into Bangladesh culture. They were fasting, and because they had slept through the pre-sunrise meal, the *sehri*, had had nothing to eat or drink since the night before. Over the years Ramzan moves through all the seasons and everyone has to face the summer fast sometime or other. Long Melbourne summer days may be a boon to Christmas holiday makers, but have to be a difficult test of the Muslim community's respect for their religious practice.

I noticed in Chittagong that people were slowed in their pace for the first days of Ramzan. Some complained of headaches, others told me they coped quite well with the fast, but the broken sleep left them

feeling uncomfortable. One or two spoke of stomach upsets, maybe an effect of all that green chilli on an empty stomach. Shahidila, one of the NGO drivers, told me on the fourth day he had not been too well, and had not bathed because of the cold. I thought he seemed a little ragged and spaced out when he came to deliver my laundry (he is a most multiskilled, multifaceted person – he started a laundry as a hedge against his contract not being renewed).

Shahidila was my third visitor yesterday morning. He came to the window beaming, bright and handsome, clearly feeling much better. We had a funny cross-purposes conversation about my jeans which had not come with the other laundry. "Jeans??" he asked. "Yes, jeans pants, they are mine." He said "Oh I know what jeans are ...". Then I realized he was surprised that I wore them. We signed off cheerfully, he went to get the micro-bus cleaned and thence to his laundry for the day. His shop, I gather, is quite a social centre of the Bajar.

I went back to my quiet activities, doing things I might not normally do on any day back home, let alone on Christmas Day. Oiling my hair with warm coconut oil was one such task. I ate a very late breakfast/brunch so as to space out my food, not knowing yet when I might eat during my program with Purabi. Later, I boiled two kettles of water so I could shampoo my hair and have a 'bath'. I aired a party shalwar kameez to wear in the afternoon. I wrote to a couple of friends, and at different points of the day tried to figure out what my family back in Sydney might be doing – drinking champagne appeared in my calculations.

Then at 3:00 Shahalam came to take me out. First we went to Purabi's

residence in an old part of Chittagong city, a trip I always enjoy. The narrow winding streets, lined with high walls, some covered in quite spectacular murals, are lively and always there is something to watch. The streets there are so narrow that it is not unusual for a traffic jam to occur, most frequently caused by vehicles getting stuck negotiating tight corners. I have become used to sitting and watching the people of the area going about their business. It is possible to watch a tailor working on blouses to be worn with women's saris, a man having a shave at the barber's, or people bargaining at fruit and vegetable stalls. All of this within my reach if I stretch my arm out from the micro-bus. Sometimes I am the one being watched.

Purabi's house is an apartment on the top floor of a four-storeyed building. She was watching for us, standing on a big open balcony overlooking the street. Purabi directed us on further to two more homes and we picked up two of her friends who were part of the program which at this point was still taking shape. Where would we go next? Chittagong people like to go out on a Friday afternoon and walk in the fresh air. There are no large public parks in the city, so favourite spots are the peaceful gardens at the War Cemetery, Foy's Lake or Patenga Beach at the mouth of the Kharnaphuli River on the Bay of Bengal. We went to the beach.

A few months ago, driving down to the beach along this same road, shaded by many Casuarina trees, I noticed a number of animals straying, goats, cows and calves. There were animal turds all along the way. I must have been in a half conscious state at some point, because I recall thinking "My God that's an enormous one, what could

have done that?" and looked ahead. There was an elephant being taken to the beach, for its recreation I supposed. No elephants yesterday, only the memory, but I saw one two days ago in the main road of the residential area where I live. That was the third elephant sighting since I arrived here in Bangladesh nine months ago.

We did not stay very long at the beach because we had an obligation to the Muslims in our party to find a restaurant back in the city which was serving *iftar* food. It was necessary, therefore, for us to be back in the city just on sunset. We left the beach at about 5:15, heading back through streets which were becoming quite busy as others also joined in the return trip home. It is, however, possible to buy *iftar* food at covered stalls set up on the grassy verge at the beach. In a scene somewhat reminiscent of the Mindil Beach sunset market in Darwin (minus the chilled white wine), Chittagonians can sit and watch the sun go down over the sea as they snack. We decided instead on the *Sayemen* Restaurant where we found people sitting quietly, plates of food in front of them, waiting for the sunset siren and the fourth call to prayer. In the dim light of the restaurant, such a contrasting set of impressions: food promising company and enjoyment, and the still silence of the diners waiting. Even when the time came to eat, it was accomplished silently and with solemnity. Then men got up to pray. They spread on the floor the individual white cloths provided by the restaurant.

Later we went to visit some other friends, Hindus who, as is the custom in Bangladesh, gave us snacks. While we were sitting chatting, two young girls, dressed in

brilliant Christmas Day shalwar kameez came to share Christmas cookies and cakes with us. It was in some ways a food focused day!

WHEN WE WERE CHILDREN we were taught at school to finish a composition 'Tired but happy, we began to go home.' I remember often I baulked. Sunburnt and sandy, hot and cranky was the way I remembered the day's end of family picnics. Later, more grown up, I felt that the imposition to enjoy a day's outing was frequently enough to put me out of sorts. I used to think "at what point do I begin enjoying this?" Did I know then that it is best to let days come and go, not too planned, not too many expectations of enjoyment, leading in my case to disappointment and ill-humour? I rather think not. This letting go of days has been a more recent development. Letting go of days, especially the big ones, can lead to enchantment.

I notice even here in Bangladesh, the need to plan for enjoyment, and, under pressure of the competitive material spirit, to spend and spend on new clothes, food and gifts. The day of all that enjoyment will come three weeks after Christmas at the end of Ramzan, during the celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr. An advertisement in the English language *Bangladesh Observer*, asks us to "Choose from Singer's vast array of products. Sit back and enjoy their company with your family. Not only this Eid, but for years to come." We are reminded that "Festive days are here again. And, it's time to brighten them up with Singer." We are invited to purchase a microwave oven to help with Ramzan food preparation, especially the early morning food, *sehri*. Bangladeshis might wonder if there would be enough energy – here

people are accustomed to hours of power shedding (a black-out really) every day, and in any case these advertisements are aimed at a very small section of this country's 123 million people. Most are too poor to even consider such a purchase. Most would not have electricity.

For the poor, this time might bring hazards. An editorial in yesterday's edition of the *Bangladesh Observer* described the effects of cooking *iftar* foods with tallow instead of palm oil, a practice being followed in this city by unscrupulous food traders. The editorial urged enlightened consumers to wake up and organize the rest "including those at the lower rungs of society who do not have the means to reject substandard edibles". It went on to make the following comments: "In this month of Ramadan, specially, food traders are doing extra bursts of business, but is there any question being asked about the quality of what they sell? All kinds of colour and condiments, and ingredients are used to make *ifteri* items attractive and nobody seems to worry about their bona fides."

This year, being neither a Christian at Christmas, nor a Muslim at Ramazan, I feel free of most of these pressures. For a short time I have slipped into a quiet place where the days come and go, and the mix of elephant watching, paddy worker observing and *iftar* enjoying, leaves me feeling, finally, not tired but happy, simply sleepy and relaxed.

Home time, more quiet time, reflection time, bed time – I pulled out the pink pyjamas just returned from the laundry, starched so stiffly that the pants stood up by themselves. Not in any way a customary Christmas Day, but one to be remembered for a long time.

Letting the Birds Fly – Chiangmai, Thailand

Laurie Hergenhan

THIS TIME I DECIDE to bypass Bangkok and fly to Chiangmai in north-east Thailand. Not yet over-touristy it still has a country feel about it, by comparison. The old centre is surrounded by a moat and crumbling red brick walls.

One day I visit a temple or wat called Wat U Mong, 'the forest wat'. Before I realize it we are there. Romantically inclined, I am prepared for deep jungle, but the taxi picks its way among tall trees into what seems like a park-like break in the suburbs, rather than a place apart. There are a few buildings here and there, nondescript and unintrusive, with none of the coloured splendours – blues, reds and golds – of other wats. And no parking lots.

The place seems deserted and I wonder how to get in touch with a friend of a friend who is a monk there. My shy Thai driver, after thinking at first I am looking for monkeys and looking unhelpfully up into the trees, wanders off to enquire. Suddenly I see someone in a monk's orange-yellow robes, we wave simultaneously: it is Phra Tut on the lookout for me. As it is time for the daily late-afternoon ceremony he invites me to it.

I sit on a chair at the back while the monks settle themselves for chanting and meditation on the floor of what resembles a pre-fab hut. Electric fans strung up on the walls stir the humid air around. The monks' chanting begins, making me more aware of the cicadas' loud antiphonal hum outside. The forest moves indoors, the monks' chant ripples outwards.

Through a window I see the odd

tourist or visitor – hard to tell which – wandering through the trees. Inside, the chanting sets a tone of formality but the human presences assert themselves as monks stir, readjusting their postures as limbs grow tired and sore. A young boy, aged about ten, fidgets and looks out the window.

After the brief silence of meditation, Phra Tut walks around the dusty grounds with me. No flower beds – just trees, earth, well swept earlier, though already strewn with large brown leaves. All is open to the sky and the elements, overlooked by what Phra Tut points out in the distance as the foothills of the Himalayas. The air is heavy, hot and smoky from faraway forest fires in Burma. Pervading the place is a strong sense of the dwellers here letting nature have its way.

The ancient Wat U Mong has been reclaimed from the forest only recently – or at least its Chedi and underground tunnels have been – yet it looks as though it could still blend back. Some of the tunnels, which have always been a central part of the complex, are still in use. A beehive is comfortably attached to a chedi, some pigeons roost in eaves. As we stroll around, some children on bikes ride up, dismount, and kicking off their thongs go inside to pray at the Buddha shrine, candles flickering in the gloom. Families who visit the wat sometimes make a picnic of it, Phra Tut says. Helmeted cyclists from the city occasionally ride in to look around, stare at the miniature lake or feed the turtles and catfish in it. At dusk monks also feed the creatures with leftovers from their begging bowls; these are replenished early each morning after a night of fasting. Dogs, lying about in the dust, look at home if scruffy.

Dug up bits and pieces of the past, some beautiful, lie scattered among the leaves and bushes, as if growing out of the earth. One of the better preserved sculptures is a stone Buddha, head enfolded by an inverted lotus bloom, suggesting how enlightenment can grow out of the mud and slime of human life. I must not take up any more of your time, I say to Phra Tut on leaving. "This is my time," he replies.

Later, at the airport, some women approach, carrying small wooden cages, some containing crickets but mostly birds. Buddhist merit is earned by those who buy the creatures and release them by pulling up one of the wooden bars, and earned also by the collectors-vendors themselves. This lacks western logic, but here it feels in place – a reaching beyond the edge of reason. 'My' sparrow shoots out through the narrow gap the moment I lift a bar, as if it had known exactly when this moment would arrive.

Laurie Hergenhan is the editor of Australian Literary Studies.

Snapshots

Ian C. Smith

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH trouble in my family, and my early life was studded with problems which sometimes seem to linger on, even now, like an old-time London fog. I would like to change things, head towards improvement despite the wrong turns already taken by me and my family, so I have tried to piece together my family's past, track down the events which subverted our course and under-

mined our future hope.

I was born in England but grew up mostly in Australia after my parents emigrated. My father's mother died when he was a small boy and he lived for a while with his uncle's family in the slums of London. When his father remarried my father went to live with him again. But he hated his new stepmother and he left home for lodgings above a bakery where he had found a job. I have a snapshot of my father's brothers standing beside a bread van with an oval window in the side of the cabin. One brother holds a large bread-basket across his arm. The brothers smile – they look like cheeky cockneys – their smiles holding the innocence of youth that has yet to consider death.

One of my earliest jobs as a boy, after my father had hounded me from home, before I had started to get into trouble with the police, was in a bakery. I remember scraping trodden pastry from the floor on my hands and knees, and the shock of the ovens' heat. The smell of baking bread can still quieten me for long moments.

When my parents married they rented a flat about twelve miles from London, far enough from the city then for my mother to disown Londoners. She associated Londoners with cockneys, and she had this idea that cockneys were common. She wanted something better, she wanted to jump a class. I think she never had a boyfriend before meeting my father. Her mother drank, her father was a domestic tyrant, and she had worked grudgingly hard since her childhood when she had looked after her younger siblings, attending to many of the household tasks her mother had neglected. Later, before her marriage, she earned her living as a cafe

waitress. Much later, she still wearied herself with drudgery even when this was no longer necessary, as if suffering had become a habit.

I believe both of my parents were sexually inexperienced before marriage. But I never asked my father about this, not even when he was old and he might have told me in a hesitant voice about his youth, how he had been an unhappy ex-serviceman when he met my mother. If I had asked her about her early sex life she would have puffed up with indignation.

A year after their marriage my sister was born. One third of my father's bus conductor's wages went on their mortgage repayments. My mother could manage on a small housekeeping budget but she was dismayed when my father accused her of having affairs with any men he saw in the area: the bread carter, the milkman, anyone. Nothing had prepared my mother for this. Nothing could have offended her more.

As the mortgage repayments continued to be met and the marriage wobbled into the future despite my father's jealousy and my mother's brimming anger, a son was born. My mother refers to this baby as being 'placid' or 'good'. My brother frowns into the sun in my memory, of one snapshot and appears to have done everything right for six months. Then he became ill with gastritis. Three days later this brother I never knew died.

My mother borrowed the money for the funeral. A casket of that size is carried by one man. There was no headstone, and those grieving parents had to borrow the money for their baby's funeral. How did they tell their relatives and friends of the loss? Did my mother walk to the nearest public telephone? Or did

they wait at the bus stop, together, before visiting with the dread news? I can't believe they did this. Perhaps my mother sat with pen and paper as I do now, searching for the right words. I cower from thinking about the shock, their tears, the slicing pain.

There is a sequel to the story of that baby's death. I can't remember where I heard about this incident but it makes sense that my mother told me. I might have made up the scene. This tale might be part truth and part invention. When my father returned home from the funeral he carried his dead son's cot outside and reduced it to firewood with a tool I remember from the garden shed. We called it 'the chopper'. It looked like a small machete. My father hacked and smashed and splintered without saying a word.

This attempt to discover what caused my family's troubles was the reason I went from trying to bring the past to life by staring at snapshots in albums, to scanning census and other records in musty offices after travelling back halfway across the world to a country that seemed in so many ways to lag behind Australia. In this landscape of black chimneys outlined against a grey sky I found a cousin of my grandmother, her memory clear despite her great age, who described my father and his siblings, children of a regular soldier, arriving back in England after my grandmother, the soldier's wife, had died on his overseas posting. They were met at the wharf, these motherless children who must have wondered what would become of them. The boys' heads had been shaved because of lice. They looked foreign. This was shortly before the First World War. Sometimes, but not often, we are fortunate enough to

see beyond the shadow cast by the wall separating the living from the dead, hear the murmur of vanished secrets, distant prayers.

But it was not straining my eyes squinting at microfiche, nor sipping bladder-bloating cups of tea while gently questioning cautious relatives, that had the biggest effect on me. It was standing outside places where my parents had spent parts of their young lives. I stood outside the house where my father lived after his mother died. An underground public toilet, its sour smell mixing with the heavy traffic fumes, was near the house, not far from a cheerless pub on the corner of a busy main road where perhaps my father's uncle, a man notorious for his drinking, met his cockney mates whenever he escaped from that overcrowded house.

In another street, named after a far-off battle which took place in a forgotten part of what was once known as the British Empire, I stood in the cold, shivering and blowing my nose, looking at the house where my mother grew up. The houses were identical in this old, grim part of London where my mother had dreamed her girlish dreams. Imagining stories of the past, I tried not to look too obvious, yet I wanted to see right through to the inside, see the shadow of that woman-to-be toiling at those tasks which seemed to mark her for life.

I managed to get invited inside the house where I was born. My memory of this house, at least the main memory I cling to when I am alone and I fall to thinking about the events of long ago, is not from this more recent time, or from any of my snapshots which tell me nothing, but is a memory of an earlier time when I was growing up. My father wrestles with me. We pretend. He

pretends. I straddle his chest and we laugh. Up close, I see mirrored in his blue eyes which are a match for mine, my own image in miniature. Then my father tricks me into letting him go and the game has ended.

Even though I have nailed together the fragments which constitute my knowledge of the personal past into a rudimentary framework of understanding, I can never know enough, and the thought that perhaps everyone, including my parents and their parents before them, does the best they can, despite the way we fail and fail, nags me. Sometimes a fury which I recognize with dread, overtakes me, momentarily obliterating all that is good about my life, and I curse those I love the most. Then the fury passes and I am calm once more. I always regret these lapses and I wish I was better at controlling my feelings. And I wonder what my children will search for when they are no longer young, wonder what music they will bear in their hearts long after the sound is heard no more.

Pamela Hergenhan: Recent Paintings 1999

Thomas Shapcott

TO WALK INTO a roomful of paintings by Pamela Hergenhan is to recognize, instantly, that you are in the presence of an artist consumed – or commanded – by a vision.

These are works of immediate identity. No matter how varied the themes of her paintings – 'Remembering My Lai', or the Kosovo series or the recurring images of mother



'A Penetrating Gaze', mixed media on paper
58cm x 79 cm

and child – they all share a unifying vocabulary. That vocabulary is suffused by a sense of vulnerability and unprotectedness, as well as by a sort of openness, a willingness to explore and discover, even if discovery is often dangerous or uncomfortable.

It is this openness to the imagination and to intuition that pushes the edges of the paintings themselves beyond the apparent limitations of closed forms: the framed limitations of canvas or hardboard. These are works almost at the nerve edge of experience yet transformed by grace and a ready sensitivity to colour so that they glow, even when the viewer is harrowed.

Hergenhan's concern with colour is central. Often it is the tension generated by colours in juxtaposition that provides the emotional clue to our entry into the world of flooding imagination and those recurring images or scenes which are almost immediately recognizable but which deflect themselves (and us) into the unexpected and the disturbingly subliminal.

This is a world of locations beyond location, of floating space and time. It is a world not so much inhabited as permeated by presences and absences. And it is through the use of colour that the dynamic is begun.

Sometimes a particular colour (as in the Lime Series) is set in action to displace and subvert expectations, or to engender the inner dramatic tension that then inhabits the whole painting. Sometimes colours seem to be there to invite the painting itself to explore new or surprising possibilities and tensions. It is as if the painter is still willing us to move with her into the process, rather than to stand back and distance ourselves from the outcomes. Outcomes are only incidental to this engagement. We are swept into the immediacy of the exploring mind. That is what I think of when I use a word like 'vulnerability'.



Lime Series I: 'Odalisque',
acrylic on canvas
94cm x 68cm

If colour is the catalyst, and the overriding energy source within the paintings, image remains with its own permeating capacity to haunt. Pamela Hergenhan's images are fluid and often ambiguous, but they tease the eye with the very edges of possibilities and inferences. They are what give the paintings their meditative quality, even – despite

the energy and fluidness of the works – their essential stillness. The eye is the mechanism by which the onlooker approaches the painting, and the characteristic quality of Hergenhan's art is the visual tease and temptation: in the midst of movement we are stilled; in the clash and collusion of colour we are broken into with our own inner associations and references, as much as by the artist's suggested illuminations.

In her previous exhibitions Pamela Hergenhan has displayed the recurring and often consistent elements of her own visual preoccupations and this current series of paintings builds upon those references. The celebration of female cycles (birth, maternity, ageing) haunts these works, and certainly the pervasive image clusters invoke again and again that generational resonance of mother, daughter, child. Such resonant images stick in the mind and will not be forgotten. But it is in the way the artist allows them entry, not as bald statements but as allusions or echoes out of the collective unconsciousness, that marks the way in which image, for this artist, must be approached.

The human face or head dominates the works in this show. More often than not it is a single face, isolated yet often enough understood as sharing (with us, with others) intense aspects of the human condition. Sometimes it is an individual pushed to the extremes of pain or suffering. Sometimes it is a face floating in its own inner world of thought or retrospect. But always the face is more than just itself, it is an icon as well as an individual. This universalizing aspect is an addition, not a subtraction, in the metaphor of self: we are

invited in to participate, not to judge or to even pity. The deployment of colour is an important element in transforming the image to unexpected but inevitable worlds that surprise us with a sort of disturbing recognition. The sudden line of gold in a dark world of submarine blues ('Woman of Kosovo', but also 'The Universe' in the Kosovo series), the vibrant arc of a red-tinged sunhat that turns us from the darkened face to the endurance gleaming from the slitted eyes ('A Penetrating Gaze'); the introspective quality of lime-green that shadows the face into retrospect or memory ('One Touch') or to suggest old earth secrets ('The Mouth of Wisdom'), or the subtly jostling dissonances that undermine expectations in 'Harlequin'.

Often, though, there are secondary faces, or a counterpoint of faces, in these works and the more you look, the more they are what generates the layering of implication. Sometimes these are echoes, as it were (family is implicit always), but sometimes the imagery is more threatening, more disturbing – the rupture of the external into the vulnerable world. The first of the Kosovo series ('Kosovo, March, 1999') is one of the most terrifying and dramatic images Pamela Hergenhan has painted. Colour, here is almost unrelieved, and even the use of white is almost a scream. In the painting titled simply 'Abstract' the head shape is there, but the Buddha outline of the jowls and ear is threatened ambivalently by the energetic interweave and interaction of colour (reds, blues, violets, yellows) and line. The result is a painting both radiant and deeply disturbing.

In 'One Touch' and 'The Centre Holds' the larger and pervasive

features of human faces glow and hover behind more sharply articulated and tinier humans, who are placed at the side or the edge, so that we are in a sense pervaded by dream and its burgeoning resonances, which can be turbulent and crowded, or simply float with a sort of expanding sense of immanence.

The five paintings in the 'Lime Series' have a sort of lyric energy of their own, and this is partly achieved through the very nature of the exercise, which explores the variations possible through the use of the one colour, lime green, as a spur to the responses that other colours provoke in the artist. Sometimes the lime green dominates, sometimes it is the irritant, the prankster, and other times it holds the painting still, or releases it.



*Kosovo Series IV: 'The Universe',
acrylic on canvas
59cm x 77cm*

In 'Something about to be Hurlled', ropes of colour streak across the pervasive haze of blue, so that the lime green within the playfully grotesque figure in the foreground suddenly stills the action. Whereas, in 'Birth Painting' it is almost a watching birth mother figure in



*'Abstract', mixed media on paper
78cm x 102cm*

green that is indeed the Earth Mother, who quietly attends the child within the crescent moon of the uterus. In the left hand corner is another green-tinged figure, somehow more recessed and attendant than participant. The playful and the grotesque also meld in 'You Really Do Paint your World', the last of the Lime series, where the green colour has become almost dominant, as if inviting the artist to lighten its introspective tinges with elements of sympathetic humour or fantasy.

In Pamela Hergenhan's world of the imagination images of continuity (birth, renewal, childhood) will not be suppressed. They are hinted at, or emerge, even in the more terrible meditations on war and oppression. And it is through the subtleties of colour, and colour juxtaposition, that these images, however fleeting, gain foothold. For Hergenhan, colour has lyric rather more than dramatic potential. At the heart of this lyricism, there is the artist's willingness to allow the

unconscious rather than the conscious mind to become the leader. The result is work that retains its fluidity. This fluidity is moored to key constants in the imagination and it is these constants that enable us, the viewers, to find foothold and entrance to Pamela Hergenhan's world.

Like dreams, there are certain images that, once encountered, will not be easily shaken off. Pamela Hergenhan's art both beguiles and disturbs. That is its strength.

From the Territory

Marian Devitt

SOME OVERLAND READERS may have followed the saga of *Northern Perspective* in my 1999 dispatches and wonder how that is proceeding. A number of meetings with the Northern Territory University last year indicated that there was very little that could be done to save the journal. However John Muk Muk Burke was adamant that we should appeal to the subscribers, explain the situation and enlist their support. Despite the fact that John was intensely involved in opposition to the recent 'restructure' of the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies (which has subsequently lost thirty positions) he made a valiant effort to engage the support of the university and the subscribers to keep the journal going in some shape or form. John approached a number of faculty deans and managed to enlist their support and raise some funds in an extremely tight funding environment. He has also negotiated a deal with the NTU Printery to take on the administration of the journal. John

has received a very encouraging response from old subscribers who are keen to see the journal continue. We have managed to keep the journal in existence with the publication of the annual NT Literary Awards and will try during 2000 to produce two other issues and regain the commitment of subscribers and hopefully expand our subscriber base as well. John would like to rename the journal 'Northerly' and is currently working on an issue which focuses on how Darwin was affected during the East Timor refugee crisis and the military build-up of Interfet troops. Anyone interested in contacting John about the journal can ring him at the Northern Territory University on (08) 8946 6666.

Meanwhile a publication of poetry, *Landmark: Poetry from the Northern Territory* is available for \$10 plus \$2 postage per copy from the NT Writers' Centre (GPO Box 2255 Darwin. 0801. Ph & Fax 08 8941 2651 or email: ntwriter@octa4.net.au). This attractive publication features eighteen Northern Territory poets from Darwin, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. It is the first major collection of NT poets and highlights the cultural diversity and uniqueness of writing from the Northern Territory. A number of poets featured have won awards and are currently achieving publication in national and overseas publications.

Another publication, *Red on Red*, is soon to be released, a collection of poetry and prose featuring short stories from around the Territory, including a number of writers in remote areas. Make enquiries in March through the Writers' Centre for copies of this publication.

We anticipate another active year for the NT Writers' Centre with a number of interstate visitors and

another mentor program, this time in keeping with the Australia Council focus on young and emerging writers and writers for children and young adults. We are very pleased to have two excellent mentors in Jenny Pausacker and Gary Crew and look forward to their visit later in the year. We have planned a Writers' Weekend for August and have been successful in acquiring funding for a series of literary events throughout Darwin and the rural area in 2000. This will hopefully revive the tradition of readings and literary events that has previously been a strong element of the Darwin writing scene. We are also excited at the prospect of hosting Michael Buckley for a series of workshops on CD Rom technology. I first saw Michael's work at the NT Multimedia Symposium in October, organized by Mary Jane Overall from QANTM. This symposium was very stimulating and has enthused a number of artists in the NT about incorporating new technologies into their art form. The NT Writers' Centre will also host the OzWrite Conference in May 2000, the collective of Writers' Centre Directors and State Literature Officers. This conference generally raises a number of important national issues for writers and Writers' Centres that I will report on in the June edition.

Aussiecon Three

Rosaleen Love

AUSSIECON THREE, the third World Science Fiction Convention, took place in Melbourne from September 2-6, 1999. Science fiction conventions are noted for their good

humour and camaraderie, which in this case spilled over from the Melbourne Convention Centre along Southbank as the 1700 attendees escaped the organized program.

The two preceding weekends had seen the Melbourne Writers' Festival, with its super-slick programming and sharp demarcation between writer and reader. There was none of that at Aussiecon Three. Fans write; writers read; media fans meet filmmakers; editors and publishers mingle and chat with professionals (the pros) and those who want to be. Big name editors and agents freely give their time to new writers in writers' workshops. Aussiecon Three had something the Melbourne Writers' Festival would dearly love – a roughly 50–50 gender balance, with attendees of all ages from children to fans of more than yesteryear. Sometimes it still seems as if the men are from Mars and read 'hard' science fiction, and the women are from Venus and read fantasy, but it's the mix that matters, as Xena Warrior Princess look-a-likes rubbed shoulders with those for whom a dragon-encrusted T-shirt made high dress sense.

The hustlers' room allocated space to specialist booksellers, dealers in dragonalia, and the odd teller of the tarot. Overseas conventioners descended on the various Australian small press publications in the SF field, and bought up big. Booksellers wore happy smiles. That's just the Con I saw, as a writer and reader. Elsewhere fans had their own space, where they organized bids for upcoming conventions and promoted fanzines ranging from the amateur hand-stapled job to the glossy semi-prozine.

A few years ago, the Australian writer George Turner was invited to AussieCon Three as guest of honour. Turner accepted, but died in 1998. That didn't faze the organizers: to SF and fantasy writers, mere death has little dominion. Turner remained guest of honour, with a chair left empty for him at the opening ceremony – a gesture he might well have scoffed at, while grinning with secret glee, had he but known.

The US guest of honour, physicist and novelist Gregory Benford, swiftly brought science fiction to bear on science fact. How best might humans communicate with others in the future, e.g. to issue a warning about a radioactive dump that has to last at least ten thousand years? In this period of time, much can happen in terms of cultural discontinuity. Benford and his NASA committee set out to design a deliberately ugly site that would cover the surface hectares beneath which the dump is located. It will not be enough to mark it: 'Don't dig here'. Suggestions include: a wailing wall, curved so the wind blows noisily and eerily through it; sculpted faces inspired by Edvard Munch's *The Scream*; jagged, fallen granite columns, and more. This listener asked herself the question, is the world mad, or am I? Is it possible to create a deliberately ugly and terrifying object? The simple solution – don't create high-level radioactive waste in the first place – is the wimp's cop-out for the NASA team. Benford thinks Central Australia is the ideal place for a site. He hasn't convinced me.

In the SF and fantasy field, many Australian writers are doing well in highly competitive international markets. Sarah Douglass, Greg Egan, Garth Nix, and Jane Routley deal

with overseas agents and publishers with an ease and familiarity that few mainstream Australian literary writers enjoy. As I attended Aussiecon Three I reflected on the gulf that exists in Australia between the literary mainstream and the genres. Good and bad writing exists in both camps; that can't be the defining difference. The mainstream, I conclude, takes itself deadly seriously. It lacks the spirit of fun and inclusiveness of genre reading and writing.

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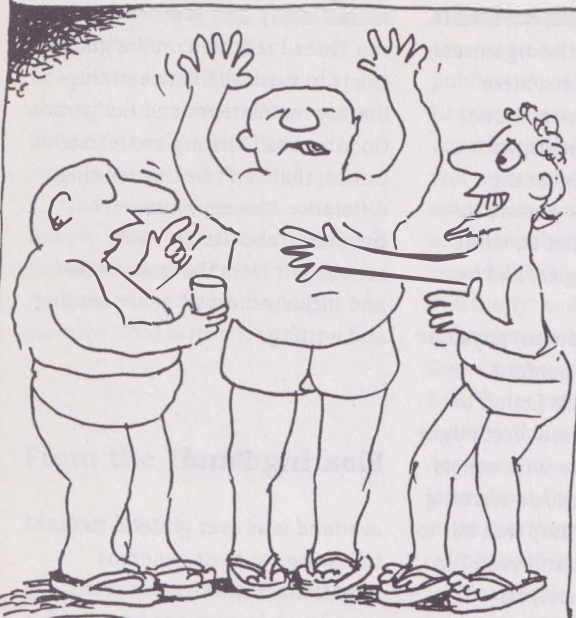
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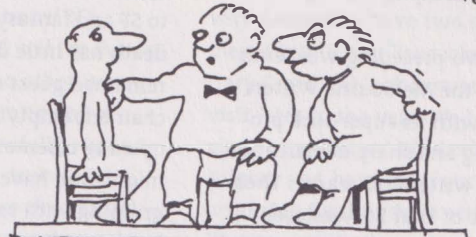
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White words on Aboriginal lives

Melissa Lucashenko

Sandra Le Brun Holmes: *Faces in the Sun: Outback Journeys* (Viking, \$27.95).

Peter Read: *A rape of the soul so profound: the return of the stolen generations* (Allen & Unwin, \$19.95).

Raymond Evans: *Fighting Words: Writing about Race* (UQP, \$29.95).

Scott Bennett: *White Politics and Black Australians* (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95).

Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus: *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights:*

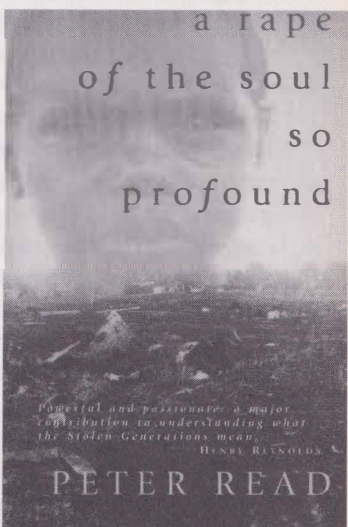
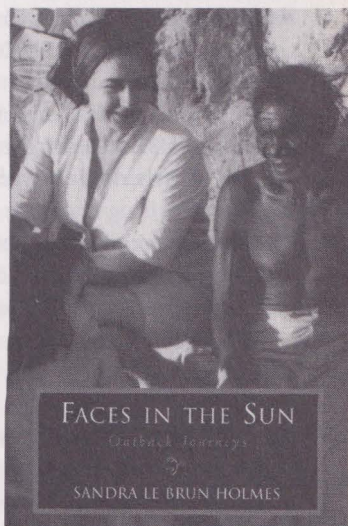
A Documentary History (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95).

HERE ARE FIVE BOOKS on Aborigines or Australian race relations. Every one is by a non-Aboriginal author, with all the potential for misrepresentation and silencing that that fact brings. Of the five, one book is outstanding, three make an overall positive contribution to Indigenous studies (one of these three – Attwood and Markus' documentary history – is really a presentation of Aboriginal voices only), and Sandra Le Brun Holmes' *Faces in the Sun* is such a mix of the outlandish and the admirable that it almost defies description.

To take the best first, Peter Read's feeling for the stolen children and our communities is palpable in his meticulously crafted *A rape of the soul so profound*. The title comes from the late Kevin Gilbert, Wiradjuri poet, who said that after the sustained historical raping of the Aboriginal soul in Australia, "the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today". *A rape of the soul* is an attempt to show just how this blight is manifesting itself now, as a result of the assimilation policies of successive white governments.

The text is an edited collection of Read's writings over twenty-two years, some of which were spent working with Link-Up, the Aboriginal organization which seeks to reunite Aboriginal families. He begins with the evidence, oral and written, which proves the unpalatable facts of removal over decades in every State and Territory. Then the Link-Up stories, from establishment of the organization in the late seventies to an examination of clients' experiences of coming home. Lastly, Read reviews the sorry business, the grief and the necessary calling to account of white governments for their acts.

The best thing about this book is that it never loses sight of the pure, simplistic racism which led to the removals. Read understands the critical essence of assimilationist policies – that they were underpinned by "a deep, sometimes unconscious groundswell of conviction" that "Aboriginality itself was worthless". Removal was seen as a 'generous' gesture, since the children were, after all, offered some sort of dirt-level place in white society, despite their filthy Aboriginality.



Cited as one of many pieces of evidence, J. Devaney's *The Vanished Tribes*, was required reading in the 1941 NSW Sixth Class curriculum:

I say, Dick, he called, Who's this greasy old buck nigger outside here?

That's old Koorooma, one of the local nigs... He's the last of his tribe, a crazy, harmless old coot, but one can't do anything for him, that's the trouble.

Cadging tucker of course, said Sitherly. Darn the abos, they were always but a confounded nuisance everywhere, and it's best for us and themselves that they're just about finished.

Required reading for our young scholars of yesteryear. Take out the 'buck nigger' – leave in the rest – and this attitude rings true of much Aboriginal policy being made by whites in Australia today. Can't do anything with us (to us, for us) that's the trouble. Darn the abos indeed.

Included in Read's written evidence is an analysis of what institutionalization did to removed children, presumably in NSW where most of his work has taken place. He argues that once removed:

Not a single child remained, in character, behaviour or intellect at anything like the first optimistic levels of the early institutional reports. The primary material is sparse, but lacerating:

Herbert

1947: 'a very satisfactory type of boy'; 'of good conduct'

1951: 'erratic, somewhat irrational and a little violent'

Clem

1943: first in a class of six

1947: 'a very good worker by himself'

1953: convicted of assault and robbery

Elsie

1946: 'good conduct'

1947: encouraging school reports

1949: 'very poor intelligence'; 'special abilities nil'

Claude

1946: 'intellectually good'; 'fair'; 7th in a class of 12

1950: 'unsettled' after running away to join his mother

1952: 'certified insane and placed in a mental hospital'

Halfway through this book, I found myself shaking with the anger Read has disguised as scholarly English and put down on paper for his readers to share. A white academic has managed to do what so many hundreds of white officials never did – to see the Aboriginal people as individu-

als whose hearts broke again and again under the policies of genocide. As girls systematically raped by 'employers'; as children driven insane by life in white institutions. The bland, well-meaning sympathy offered by many sincere Australians to the stolen generations is absent in this book. Read has enormous compassion – and couldn't have written *rape of the soul* otherwise – but has gone way beyond sentimentality in unpicking what happened and why. He uncovers and gives serious attention to the political impact of assimilation; to the losses which underlie those of immediate family. He sees individuals, but at the same time writes chillingly of the broad historic effects upon the Aboriginal nations; he bears witness to the pain of those of us who remain Aboriginal without family, Aboriginal without identity, Aboriginal without roots.

After working with Aboriginal people for decades, Read knows, in a profound way, exactly why the stolen generations fill the asylums and jails of Australia and he has written it down for everyone else to know the damage done. He also underlines the ultimate irony of the removals – their failure to destroy the Aboriginal nations, and the return of many of us to our communities, years and generations later. A provocative and important book.

Raymond Evans' *Fighting Words: Writing about Race* is another passionate account of what a white man found in Aboriginal Australia. This book looks mostly at Aboriginal/European interaction, but also at the nasty treatment dished out to Chinese and German immigrants in early Queensland. Appropriately, since the book is described as 'a personal journey', Welsh-born Evans begins with a dissection of his upbringing in suburban Brisbane where he knew "of Aborigines if not about them". Schoolyard racism was inevitably present. The Welsh immigrant quickly learned that:

Jacky jacky he no fool

He puts rinso on his tool

and certain other useful bits of information about the blacks, but he also encountered a teacher ablaze with enthusiasm for heroic Aborigines resisting invasion. Combined with an upbringing by socialist parents, the seeds were easily sown for a lifelong obsession with black people and their politics.

Evans is appealingly clear about his place in the Australian body politic and he has what strikes me as a very Aboriginal outlook on the whole business:

my Welshness and my Australianness have a history; and so does my whiteness and maleness. My class

background and position have a history... in fact, over time, history has become the only sensible way I can understand anything.

Me too, Raymond, me too. Only trouble is, this jumped-up Migloo knows my history better than I do. We've all learnt about firestick farming these days, but who knew that Aboriginal people in the Brisbane area constructed large and elaborate huts prior to white contact, eighty feet long with arched passageways? Similarly, it's no surprise to read that the first German missionaries at Nundah gave up, despairing of their 'indolent' Aboriginal neighbours ("Handt soon found that even vice-hardened convicts were a more propitious field for military endeavour than the Turrble"!). But the result of their Christian proselytizing was less amusing when it did take hold. The naturalist James Craig reported in 1876 that "to this day, in Brisbane... there are some blacks... who for a glass of grog, will kneel down, clasp their hands and say the Lord's Prayer without a mistake".

Queensland being Queensland, it was only a generation or so before the Lutheran missionaries and their descendants were copping it themselves. (Who first said 'I'm not a racist, I hate everyone'?) In 'Our Vengeant Hand' Evans tells how the Germans were miraculously transformed by 1915 from clean, upright white folk, to dirty Bosch, even 'germ-dogs' and 'beasts to be exterminated'. The outbreak of the First World War found wild theories circulating about the origins of Queensland Germans in European 'wolf-tribes'. The citizenry of Gayndah even took its attention off the Murris long enough to comment: "If you had lived three years here, the animalism displayed at Brussels and Louvain would have caused you no surprise." These sentiments ring especially ironic given the habit of my ancestors a little further south, of running to German settlers for shelter from the murdering British. The very sight of Germans was enough for one outraged Brisbane *Courier* reader: "Must I walk about and see smiling Hunnish faces about me?"

In retrieving these images of anti-Aboriginal, anti-Asian and anti-German bigotry, Evans has done the struggle for racial respect proud. You get the sense, as you read, of an encyclopedic knowledge underpinning his analyses of Australian racism. This would have been a more memorable book, though, if it had been edited with a heavier hand. The language is fairly academic, and borders in places on the impenetrable. What a waste of terrific source material and sharp insights to hide them, even occasionally, in overlong sentences or jargon.

Attwood and Markus have compiled an eclectic and illuminating documentary history of Aboriginal politics, from very early Tasmanian records, through the 'citizen-

ship' movement of the early twentieth century to the contemporary sovereignty and native title debates. The two hundred documentary sources included make fascinating reading. The authors state that this "collection seeks to document the history of Aboriginal politics by recovering Aboriginal voices" and by and large they have succeeded. No doubt most of their sources would have remained invisible for a long time but for this collection. Unfortunately, the authors have weakened their contribution with a rather pious plea in the foreword to have the work judged on its merit rather than on the ethnicity of the authors, as if the two issues were unrelated in some apolitical Utopia. This strange statement makes me wonder exactly where Attwood and Markus are coming from. Do they think it irrelevant that they are non-Aboriginal, and if so, why have they then compiled a book solely of Aboriginal voices? Despite this glitch, the letters, petitions and articles in *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights* are well worth a browse, and the book has great historical photos too.

Attwood and Markus' collection would make a good accompaniment to Scott Bennett's *White Politics and Black Australians*, which is in sore need of a few more Aboriginal sources and perspectives. There are some good points to this text. It's comprehensive, technically accurate for the most part, and thorough. If you want to know what CDEP is, or exactly when and by whom the DAA was formed, this is the book for you. Just as important, it's easy to follow, with no tortuous neo-Marxist phraseology to put off the budding student. But for every illuminating point:

Even the most cursory glance at the referendum figures suggests that not all Australians had been carried away by the excitement of the occasion, and that there were some who were still not prepared to grant Aborigines an equal place...

there is another more dubious. One oversight is that individual and institutional racism, which surely form the backbone of Aboriginal policy to date, are not defined, nor are they differentiated from prejudice or discrimination. This failure to define terms is compounded when contemporary anti-Aboriginal racism is put down to historic and continuing 'incomprehension'.

"Incomprehension led to conflict... Attitudes formed in the first generations of settlement... helped form responses that endure to this day". If we understand this, the political difficulties faced by Aboriginal people in Australia become much clearer.

See, it wasn't about invasion at all, it was just a silly

misunderstanding. Of course contemporary racism has ignorance as a key contributing factor; but anti-Aboriginal racism in Australia stems directly from the *realpolitik* of the European invasion of Aboriginal land. I wonder if I went to Mr Bennett's house, found it desirable, and then forced him out at gunpoint, whether he would consider our resultant conflict the result of 'incomprehension'? The invaders knew what they were doing (as Henry Reynolds has quite clearly shown in his latest book).

Leaving aside the above silly statement, this book comes close to being a reasonable, if rather conservative, introduction to Aboriginal politics. But if only Bennett had been able to bring himself to include some real, live Aborigines in his recommended readings at the end of each chapter! Chapter Two, 'Being Heard' contains six references for further reading – only one is by what may or may not be an Aboriginal writer (from the Office of the Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner). Most chapters have no Aboriginal further reading at all. Attwood and Markus found six hundred documents to compile their book from – Bennett seems hard put to find thirty-odd Aboriginal references in a thirteen-page bibliography.

A good introductory text on Aboriginal politics is badly needed in Pol.Sci One, but it would be easy to conclude from this one that virtually the only Aboriginal politics worth reading has been set down by whites. The Cuneens, Nettheims and Brennans no doubt have much to say that's worth hearing. This isn't an argument to exclude their work, but they aren't Aboriginal, and they don't speak for us. By privileging their writings over those of Aboriginal people to the extent he has, Bennett has done his readers, and his text, a disservice.

And one last quibble – the title. In writing of Aboriginal affairs, the full phrase 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is clumsy and too long. 'Indigenous' is handier and more accurate. 'Aboriginal' is acceptable if Torres Strait Islanders aren't under consideration, as in Bennett's book and this review. But "Black Australians" covers everyone from the grandchildren of ni-Vanuatu in Mackay, through Sydney's Tongan community to the African-Australians of Adelaide and Darwin's East Timorese descendents. 'Black' is an inadequate (and often confusing) description of Aboriginal people alone. I'm not immune from using it where the context makes it clear exactly who I mean, but in a title it strikes me as particularly unfortunate.

From academic discourse on Aborigines, to the biography of a woman who has lived her life in Aboriginal communities, Darwin identity Sandra Le Brun Holmes has produced a mind-boggling life story wherein she first plays with Aboriginal kids in a poverty-stricken rabbit-eating

childhood, then takes up amateur anthropology, only to be shot at in later chapters by the cowboys of the Northern Territory mining industry for her opposition to their invasion of Yolgnu lands.

It is difficult to know what to think of an elderly white lady who can write without apparent irony of 'her' Aboriginal dances, and includes in her biography a photo of herself blacked up as an Aboriginal Kadaitcha ('clever') man, complete with feathered hat and string belt.

The only part-time employment open to me was occasional bookings at clubs and at the Hotel Australia, where I would perform my Aboriginal dances and songs, in costume. I had performed my Death Dance on Kevin Shine's dance program on ABC TV.

Could there be any more offensive, or indeed dangerous, act, in the eyes of remote-area Aborigines? Probably not, short of destroying physical (as opposed to intangible) sacred objects. Yet this same woman – a classificatory relative of some Tiwi Islanders – also fought alongside Yolgnu people for decades, a constant thorn in the side of racist NT Administrations and equally racist missionaries. She refused to shut up or heed the police warnings:

I was ordered to get into the front seat of a van. As I walked slowly towards it I received a heavy blow in the small of the back... All the way to the station they elbowed me on either side and next day I was badly bruised... As we walked up the steep steps at the police station I heard someone upstairs call out "Eh, they've got the white nigger."

Standard stuff for Yolgnu, of course, but not for white women in the Darwin of the fifties and sixties. Le Brun Holmes was largely responsible for keeping a valuable store of Aboriginal art in Australia at a time when the Christian churches were flogging it off to overseas dealers as fast as their 'employees' on the Northern missions could produce it. She worked in conjunction with many Aboriginal artists to try and buy their art from her scanty means, often given it for free, on the understanding that she would keep it safe from the dealers. She had to fight the missions every step of the way; much of the art was smuggled out to her, or done in secret at her home.

Yirawala, a Croker Island ceremony man, had painted fervently for years in the belief that the church was safely storing his sacred stories, as an encyclopedia of his culture and religion. It was Le Brun Holmes who broke the terrible news to him:

For ten years or more he had been adding to his sacred book, in the form of a series of bark paintings, believing the mission kept them in a big shed somewhere. I said, "Yirawala, nothing is saved. All those years and now, all your Dreamings have been sold to the Darwin and interstate dealers, who mostly sell them over the sea."

For fully a minute he stared at me in stunned silence, then asked me to repeat it. His voice sank to a whisper as his family sat in silence, too shocked to speak. Yirawala . . . hurried outside . . . "All my law, my power, finish, no more. All my year, my eye, little bit no good now. I lose 'im whole lot drawing."

Le Brun Holmes spent much of her life trying to undo such injustices. Her collection is now preserved for posterity in the Darwin Art Gallery, while the church has never compensated the Aboriginal artists for their stolen labour, or apologized for the cultural genocide. But at the same time Le Brun Holmes was not averse to making a living from Aboriginal people herself, charging tourists admission to her Aboriginal museum, selling dubious film stock to the ABC and the Aboriginal Institute in Canberra, scraping by with the occasional newspaper article and so on.

Even without the excruciating poetry she has included, Le Brun Holmes' amazing life scarcely fits into this 460-page book. Since her first encounters with white injustice, she has fought, and filmed – usually with the support of the relevant communities – and sung, and listened, and written, and protested, all across the Top End and beyond. After surviving the beatings of the police, the attempts by the NT Government to have her locked up in a mental institution, after her husband left her, exasperated by her devotion to the Aboriginal movement, she remained in Darwin, and fought on. The cowboys couldn't drive her out, nor could Cyclone Tracy. Tiwi people took her into their homes and lives, and embraced her as a sister.

In the eyes of a contemporary urban Aboriginal woman, Le Brun Holmes' attitudes are tinged with patronage, possibly exploitation, even racism. But it's not my community which has embraced her, or which has to live with her. The only sensible conclusion I can come to after reading *Faces In The Sun* is that the popular Aboriginal axiom that only three types of whites have ever been interested in us – the missionaries, the Marxists, and the mad – is not yet in urgent need of revision.

Melissa Lucashenko is a Murri author and critic. She is the author of Steam Pigs and Killing Darcy. Her most recent book is Hard Yards. (All books UQP)

Polemic without Principle

Sean Scalmer

Michael Thompson: *Labor without Class: The Gentrification of the ALP* (Pluto Press Australia, \$20).

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE LABOR PARTY? In the 1920s, the question was posed by socialists, pondering the viability of the parliamentary road. In the 1980s, it was asked by social democrats, disappointed with the fruits of sustained Labor Government. Now that question has been posed by Michael Thompson in a ragged, messy, and duplicitous polemic.

Thompson's thesis is that the ALP has been hijacked by the tertiary educated, who have driven the working class out of the branches, annexed the organizational wing of the Party, vanquished those concerned with responsible economic management, and imposed the agenda of "special interest groups" in their place.

Thompson claims a working-class background. He likes economic rationalism, and dislikes policies that respond to the new social movements. He thinks that the Labor Party has adopted too many policies that target the latter, and not enough of the former. As a result, his argument associates economic rationalism with workers and with past Labor policy, and special interest groups with the tertiary educated and with the "hijack" of Labor policy.

At times this allows for a powerful rhetorical performance, but the book remains a very poor version of Labor history. The apparent bias of contemporary Labor policy is not demonstrated. Neither is the dedication of the tertiary educated to special interests, or the love of workers for good old economic rationalism. Perhaps because Thompson was born in Balmain, and likes economic 'reform', we can trust that all workers share his beliefs. But why the tertiary educated are opposed to economic 'responsibility' is not explained.

The means by which the "hijack" of the Labor Party was organized are also hopelessly unclear. At times, Whitlam is a key suspect, because he "embraced" the tertiary educated by addressing issues such as education, health, cities, housing and the environment. Apparently "iniquities" naturally flowed from such issues. On the other hand, Thompson admits that when Labor was led by Hayden and Hawke, the message of 'balancing the books' definitely "did take hold within the parliamentary wing". Equally, Keating's 1987 view of the role of Labor Governments is lauded by Thompson. So if this was a hijack, it must have taken over the parliamentary wing under Whitlam, been

bumped away to the organizational wing for ten years or so, and then moved back to dominate the politicians during the period of the Keating Government. How or why the hijackers would have accomplished such a feat is intriguing, but then again, they are very "aggressive", "assertive", "philosophical", and "way-out" people, Thompson assures us – not at all "ordinary".

The book offers no analysis of the policy of Labor Governments, no account of important Party battles, no attempt to offer original research on when and how the connections between Labor and the working class have shifted. Instead of analysis of Party policy, structure or context, Thompson investigates only Party debate.

Indeed, the book ranges through a number of contributions to Party debate over the last twenty years or so, among them works by Marian Sawer, Lindsay Tanner, Stuart Macintyre, Andrew Scott, Carmen Lawrence, Mary Owen, and the ALP's own 1979 National Committee of Inquiry. It is by quoting these writings that Thompson attempts to demonstrate and contest Labor's apparent "hijack" by the tertiary educated.

In this quest, he uses five basic techniques. First, he attempts to 'cut and paste' huge slabs of their arguments. This gives the authors he cites a sense of power, as if their ideas about Labor policy, often published in obscure journals or by small publishing-houses, and rarely referred to by Labor leaders, were somehow omnipotent. It also excuses Thompson from doing much of the argumentative work himself. He is coolly reactive, comparatively powerless.

Second, he uses frequent italics, to emphasize particularly sinister words or phrases within the material he quotes, such as "*constructed*" (Sawer), "*suggests*" (Lawrence), "*eventually*" (Tanner), or "*activist*" (Farrar). We therefore get a sense that his cited authorities are simply buzzing with agency.

Third, he attempts to portray his cited authorities as patronizing or hateful towards workers. For example, he argues that: "Tanner and Scott do not believe that working-class people know what is best for them" and makes similar claims concerning Mary Owen.

Fourth, Thompson adds heavy-handed directions for his readers, so that we know his cited authors have dark motives. He suggests at one point that: "Macintyre's 'lecture' is in code; it is intelligible to his audiences" to make sure that we can grasp the Professor's evil intent.

Fifth, he opposes the arguments of those he cites. He does this either by quoting another (usually academic) authority against them, or by posing questions of the text, that frequently involve the use of inverted commas, and that imply woolly or conspiratorial thinking. Witness: "But

who are the 'ordinary Australians', and what is the 'mass political culture of the 1990s'?"

Clearly, *Labor Without Class* is both unpersuasive in its account of Party change and unfair to fellow participants in debate. It is a poorly argued, tendentious and mean-spirited book. Not only that, but Thompson's own understanding of class is confused and unstable. Indeed, the nature and size of the working class expands and contracts to fit the needs of Thompson's argument.

On the one hand, he is keen to emphasize a wide conception of the working class, that includes all those who work in routine jobs, irrespective of whether they work in manual or non-manual occupations. On the other hand, he sometimes opposes white-collar workers, such as school teachers, with blue-collar workers. At times, the dimensions of the working class seem to contract further. There is almost no reference to the unemployed. There is a defence of married women who are not in paid employment, but an attack on working mothers. The argument is put that workers "share their suburbs and jobs with migrants", so workers born outside Australia might not be 'real' workers either. Even the cultural characteristics specific to the working class are constantly shifting under Thompson's gaze. He suggests working-class values include "family, hard work, independence and patriotism", and yet he also labels "patriotism" as a new social movement. He assures us that workers are "loyal to their country and to Labor", and yet he argues that workers have defected from Labor over the 1990s.

The book is a narrow polemic. It markets itself as a work that aims to reassert the welfare of working-class people, and to champion the cause of labour in politics. However, its challenge to contemporary Labor is insubstantial; its drive for change is piss and wind. It does not make any suggestions for Party reform that would attempt to give working-class people a greater role in Labor decision-making. Neither does it quibble with the major direction of Labor's economic policies until the last Keating Government. Indeed, all Thompson seems to want is a Party that is economic rationalist, vigorously pro-family, and watchful of the new social movements. Thompson claims to be responding to the success of the Howard Government from a Labor perspective, but it is hard to see what quarrel he would have with our current rulers. On the contrary, just as Howard has attempted to use 'the battlers' to claim wide appeal for his pernicious agenda, so Thompson would like to use 'the working class' to justify his own, very personal, political desires.

Sean Scalmer is a Sydney labour historian.

Your federation and mine

John Rickard

Brian Matthews: *Federation* (Text Publishing, \$17.95).

MOST AUSTRALIANS DO NOT know the name of the nation's first prime minister. Will the numerous books marking the centenary of federation, which are now beginning to materialize, make a significant impact on our national ignorance? Brian Matthews' *Federation* is associated with the thoughtful and engaging television documentary produced by Film Australia and shown on the ABC. It is a modest publication, a mere 136 pages of text with illustrations, and is clearly aimed at a general readership which it is assumed knows little about the making of the Constitution, but might be stimulated by the centenary to find out something about our federal origins. But Matthews himself seems none too sure about the appetite for enlightenment: he remarks on "the extremely lukewarm attitude to celebrating our hundred federal years".

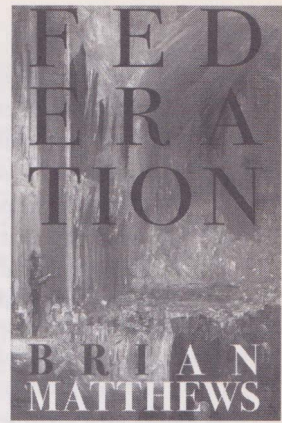
Acknowledging our historical forgetfulness, Matthews decides that to make sense of the federal story "we need to start back a bit, take a run at it". So the story begins with 1788 (with appropriate recognition of the Aboriginal presence) and takes us through potted histories of the separate colonies. Matthews also feels an understandable need to enliven the politics of federalism with some contextual social history. There is a colourful survey of the products and brand names of everyday life, and we are kept up to date with the cricket tests against England. Near the end there is an extensive and enjoyable twelve-page account of the celebrations of 1 January 1901.

Relevant, of course, but the result is that there is space only for the merest sketch of the politics of constitution making. We are suitably introduced to the leaders of the federal movement, but the actual deliberations of the 1897–98 Convention are covered in a mere four pages. More attention is given to the referenda which followed, and to the part played by George Reid in extracting further liberal concessions from the other premiers, but the losers in this telling of the story are those who persisted in opposing the Constitution Bill. Were they merely the representatives of parochialism? No mention is made of the role of H.B. Higgins, who, having contributed significantly to the writing of the Constitution, nevertheless opposed its adoption, not only because of its democratic shortcomings but because of its rigidity which he thought – rightly as it turns out – would make modernizing amendment diffi-

cult. Missing, too, is any sense of the influence of the American precedent, and the challenge facing the makers of the Constitution of integrating the English tradition of responsible government into the alien structures of a federation.

Of course, it is easy enough to complain of omissions in such an introductory text. Brian Matthews' narrative maintains a lively flow, and it is refreshing when his own opinions, as on Gallipoli, burst through. But I sense a slight edge of desperation about the need to make the narrative 'interesting' or, to use a word in current favour, 'accessible'. Is it that deep down we still fear that the politics of federation is dull stuff? And if we persist in this view, are we ever going to be able to persuade Australians that it might be important to know that our first prime minister was Edmund Barton?

John Rickard is honorary professorial fellow at Monash University and the author of Australia: A Cultural History.



The material at the heart

Rebecca Pelan

Thomas Keneally: *The Great Shame: A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New* (Random House, \$45).

A FLAIR FOR THE ART OF STORYTELLING has long been recognized as an Irish national characteristic – one that was easily and comfortably adapted into the form of the Australian yarn. Until the early part of this century in Ireland, the *seanchai* – a wandering tale-teller who begged his way from parish to parish – served an important role in the society by disseminating great legends and local lore. In this mammoth work on the connections between Ireland and the New World of the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Keneally performs the same kind of role – though clearly these days he has to beg for very little (except, perhaps, forgiveness for that awful 'ode to football' series of television advertisements!). The sub-title to the work: *A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New* suggests a wider focus than it actually contains, although Keneally acknowledges the boundaries of his interests in the Preface. He wanted to:

try to tell the tale of the Irish in the new world and the old through the experiences of those transported to Australia for gestures of social and political dissent. The suppression of dissent in Ireland of course marked both Ireland itself, the point of departure, and Australia, the shore of exile. But Australia's place as a zone of sub-Antarctic political punishment would also influence the intense and fatally riven Irish politics of emigrant societies in the United States, Britain and Canada, and I wanted to try to tell some of that tale as well.

Accordingly, some of the connections between Old World Ireland and North America are examined, but the story is principally about certain central figures in modern Irish history who were instrumental in both the birth of the new Irish nation and in their connections with Australia – men such as Thomas Francis Meagher, Thomas Davis, John Boyle O'Reilly, John Mitchel and William Smith O'Brien and, of course, John Keneally, the author's ancestor, a Fenian from Cork who served time in Western Australia as a political prisoner.

By weaving solid and extensive academic research with the stuff of folk legend, Keneally has produced a great (if lengthy) yarn which is both impressive in its knowledge and slick in its appearance. The narrative is seamless and smooth and, as always in such cases, there is the very grave risk of making the whole project seem more like a piece of 'faction' than it perhaps needs to be. There is also not one sentence of revisionist history in the whole book: Keneally has no interest in the imperialist role played by the Irish in the New World, in relation to the indigenous people of Australia, for example, which means that the book generally conforms to a long-standing, stereotypical and homogeneous view of the Irish in Australia as clear-cut victims of British imperialism, as anti-authoritarian rebels and as political exiles. It is not insignificant that the front cover of *The Great Shame* includes, just below the author's name, the words "author of *Schindler's Ark*", though I think the connection between the two stories ends with the author's name and his own particular interest in making great stories out of the horrors of history.

For anyone involved in Irish or Irish-Australian Studies, much of the material at the heart of *The Great Shame* will not be new and, in fact, Keneally acknowledges the assistance and support of a number of people and places associated for many years with academic research into the historical relationship between Ireland and Australia: research into convict women, Irish orphan girls, William Smith O'Brien, Thomas Davis, the Irish inheritance in Victoria, in South Australia, in Tasmania, and so on. What Keneally

has done, though, is bring much of this research together in an effort to investigate the broader political and social connections between Ireland and Australia and, if that was the aim, then I think he has succeeded admirably.

Keneally's ability to use highly emotive and, arguably, totally specious material (certainly in a study such as this one) is best seen in the discussion of his wife's ancestor, Hugh Larkin, which opens the book. Transported in the 1830s for "assaulting habitation and being in arms" (being involved, in other words, in a physical attack on the home of his landlord who had refused to heed the warning to raise wages and lower rents), Larkin is used as a personalized launching pad for a discussion of a political system which saw Australia become the political dumping ground for Britain's 'Irish problem'. By referring to him as 'Hugh' during sentimental descriptions, while using 'Larkin' for the more overtly political passages, Keneally manages to make Hugh Larkin an entirely knowable and likeable character as well as one connected in mind and body with an ancient tribe which looked to the (non- or pre-commercial) land for survival:

Hugh was by now aching for familial squalor. He would never again feel the warmth of cottage peat smoke or smell the turf fire, turf being a large element in the peasant view of earthly paradise. Turf or peat, cut with spades called loys, is composed of ancient trees, fallen into Ireland's primeval swamps and partially carbonised, on their way to becoming coal . . . Convivial turf warmed the Irish family in a land where the woods were owned by landlords and unavailable as legal fuel . . . But all of it, house, fire, peat-reek, pig, child, song, sportiveness, painfully dear to Hugh!

Structurally, *The Great Shame* is in two parts or books: Book I includes Chapters 1 to 16 (approximately 295 pages) and Book II, Chapters 17 to 31 (approximately 337 pages). Ireland, as a source for the men who ultimately become the central figures of the narrative, as well as its and their political origins, is focused on in the first two chapters only. The story begins in 1833 and ends at the time of the Easter Rising in 1916. The book also contains four sections of illustrations made up of a mixture of photographs and drawings and there are forty-seven pages of Notes revealing an impressive attention to detail and documentation. However, as mentioned, the book is not, despite all of this, an academically based narrative. Keneally also includes a good deal of local lore into the historical narrative, such as the way the Irish ate the accustomed peasant dinner, "sitting in a circle on stools or on the floor around a basket of pota-

toes, with a mug of buttermilk at the side of each of the diners and a little bowl of salt conveniently placed": the kind of meal commonly called 'dip-at-the-stool'. And such detail as the way the Irish peeled their cooked potatoes – with a thumbnail grown long especially for the task – contributes not only to a lively and interesting story, but to the construction of the Irish as a people with pride, customs and origins.

I could write a great deal more about this book – in both glowing and gloomy terms. Suffice it to say that if you have any interest in Irish or Australian history, or in the idea of origins and connections between places and people, or if you just love a damned good yarn, then you should read *The Great Shame*. But please do yourself and the Irish a favour: believe every word of Keneally's facts and figures in the book and only every second word of all the rest.

Rebecca Pelan is based in Brisbane. She has written extensively on Irish writing.

Rockin' the Detectives

Michael George Smith

Dave Warner: *Murder In The Groove* (Pan Macmillan, \$15.95).

AFTER TWO VERY CLEVERLY CONSTRUCTED NOVELS, I have to admit that, for all the plot twists and turns, I found the characters in this third crime thriller from pop singer/songwriter and (sadly far too lightweight) chronicler of the history of Australian independent record label, Mushroom Records, Dave Warner, surprisingly, disappointingly clichéd, and that's a pity because, as a musician himself, he could have, no, should have, done his best to demolish rather than reinforce a few of the stereotypical caricatures that so hamstring any real understanding of the music industry as it really exists in this country, with *Murder In The Groove*.

I say that because, for me, those caricatures undermine a basically clever bit of crime writing. The main character/amateur sleuth in the novel, for instance, is one Andrew 'Lizard' Zirk, former rock god (dinosaur?) and very comfortably wealthy town-layabout, who is drawn into the investigation of the possible murder of fellow 'rock god', the embarrassingly nauseating Sydney Melbourne (in name as well as personality portrayed – no *real* aspiring rock god would allow his manager to dub him something so obviously naff). Both characters are drawn with such stereo-

typical gusto that you have to wonder which music industry they're supposed to be part of – Sydney or LA! It wouldn't matter if the novel had been set up as an obvious satire of the whole silly, self-serving industry, but it's not. The whole point is the neat jigsaw puzzle surrounding two not very funny deaths, and while Warner tosses in a couple of moments where he seriously questions the whole 'rock drugs' culture and the sad plight of 'street kids' (and these are points all too necessary in the making), the stereotypes tend to undermine the cleverness of the plot and those obviously important 'serious moments'.

At least Zirk is drawn as unreconstructed enough a chauvinist to make his attempts at 'reprogramming' his attitudes towards women a little easier to accommodate, while his wealth is thankfully (and more realistically) *not* achieved as a result of his period as a rock god. There are, however, the inevitable rock drug party scenarios, the groupie 'porking' and dumb roadie characters, but after two really truly gripping crime novels with absolutely no rock'n'roll connections – *The City of Light* and *Big Bad Blood* – I would have expected (hoped) Warner might have attempted a more realistic and gritty portrayal of music industry characters, characters he has known intimately enough in a twenty-plus year career in that industry, than this, as funny as they occasionally are in *Murder In The Groove*. And it's not just the caricature 'rock' stars. It's the stereotyped PR person, the record company executives, the band managers, even, sad to say, after some pretty convincing characterizations in those previous novels, the police detectives. What could have been a really powerful 'rock'n'roll' tilt in the direction of the excellent ABC-TV series 'Wildside', ends up occasionally getting perilously close to tipping into 'All Together Now', commercial television's sorry attempt at selling poor comedy around the idea of an aging 'hippie' (Jon English) who hasn't quite given up on peace, love and hippie beads.

The problem is, I suppose, that the money these characters are supposed to slosh around with, that allows them the 'lifestyles' they ostensibly live or aspire to just isn't there in the local Australian industry, so there has to be some poetic license which allows the mystery to evolve in a way that reality might not necessarily allow. Even though in *Big Bad Blood* there was a millionaire's son involved in a particularly nasty way in the unravelling tale of murder, the character was at least halfway plausible. And while we do have in Australia some pretty feisty larger-than-life rock god types, and they're certainly not averse to the odd "python of cocaine" (see, for instance, sixties pop and seventies Aussie Pub Rock icon, Billy Thorpe, owning up to just such hefty drug abuse in his latest memoir, *Most Peo-*

ple I Know [Think That I'm Crazy]), perhaps they're still a bit too 'real' to fit the requirements of this particular plot, whatever they might imagine of themselves.

Murder In The Groove, if you can ignore these shortcomings in character portrayal will keep you turning the page. It certainly works on that level and that's obviously the litmus test for any writer in the crime-novel genre. But it's not Warner's best work by any means. But it *might* be the book that scores him a television series, so perhaps that's the (undeclared) subtext. It's obvious he's set Zirk up for at least one sequel. Perhaps too, beneath it all, there's the reality that intrudes as that little nagging worry (or more likely dead certainty) that writing about those you know all too well could instigate not a little litigation for the privilege (come on down, Bob Ellis). Still, it's hopefully just a hiccup. For me and a lot of other lovers of the genre, Warner's first two novels nonetheless signal the arrival of a major new player in gripping, intelligent Australian crime fiction.

Brought to Book

Vane Lindesay

Fergus Hume: *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*
(Text Publishing, \$22.95).

PREMEDITATED MURDER in some shape or form has been, from the beginning, a part of the human condition, but the fascination of murder as a literary theme is a quite late development in the culture of European civilization: as a legitimate literary exercise the subject of this now prolific industry is not yet two hundred years old.

From the start it was not murder alone that fascinated readers of the first crime stories, but the hunting down of clues to the crime, and the eventual bringing to justice of those responsible.

Edgar Allan Poe has the historical distinction of creating the crime and detection story. Incredibly, in his *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, published in Paris during 1845, Poe actually wrote what turned out to be the correct solution and by literary detective work gave clues resulting in the arrest by New York police of the real-life murderer of Mary Cecilia Rogers whose life was brutally ended in that city. Later of course, the British writer Conan Doyle was to create an immortal detective character modelled on Doyle's medical teacher who by observation and deduction could,

before his patients opened their mouths, diagnose their ailments, tell them their past symptoms, and give details of their early lives and of their occupation and character. Dr Joseph Bell became, then, the model for Conan Doyle's detective, Sherlock Holmes, introduced to a future clamouring public in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887, and the following year as the novel *A Study in Scarlet* – since when, to the present day, a steady list of both famous fictional detectives and of crime and detection literature has been created, not only by journeyman writers but by many authors of international note in other areas of creative writing.

The period from the mid-1920s through to the outbreak of the Second World War was one in which the crime and detection mystery story developed both maturity and high skill in construction, produced by such writers as Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, E.C. Bentley, John Creasey Freeman Wills Crofts, Ellery Queen and many more, creating a tradition and an enormous world-wide readership that Australian writers of the genre must envy.

But initially, a spectacular and in every way amazing Australian success followed the publication in 1886 (thereby preceding Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story) of "A Sensational Melbourne Novel" *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* by Fergus Hume. It was not only the first major Australian mystery thriller, but a novel, announced as "a startling and realistic story of Melbourne" which was to become a sensational success, although its author made very little money from its publication.

The story opens with the hailing of a cab at night in Collins Street, Melbourne, where two men, one supporting the other, enter the cab and proceed along St Kilda Road away from the city. One man alights a mile or so along the road, across from the Melbourne Grammar School. On arrival at the given address in St Kilda the other person is found to be murdered. This mystery, and the solving of it, is separated by some melodramatic narrative and action of the kind that has a heroine indulging her frequent habit of falling in a dead faint, and characters going down on their knees to thank God – or sob convulsively.

Notwithstanding some melodramatic prose the mystery, and the solving of it moves along with excitement, interest, and pace. Modern critical opinion of the book has varied from "underrated" to "full of errors and contradictions".

Initially Fergus Hume had difficulty finding a publisher so he decided to publish at his own risk. *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was first printed by Kemp & Boyce at South Melbourne, and in three months five thousand copies were sold. Another three impressions, each it is said, of

ten-thousand copies followed. At this stage Fergus Hume foolishly sold his copyright to the book for fifty pounds to a sharp businessman named Trischler, who, with a group of associates formed The Hansom Cab Publishing Company, setting up their office at Ludgate Hill, London. From here in 1887 they ordered the printing of around twenty-five thousand copies of *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* every month, a total, we are told, that barely kept pace with public demand.

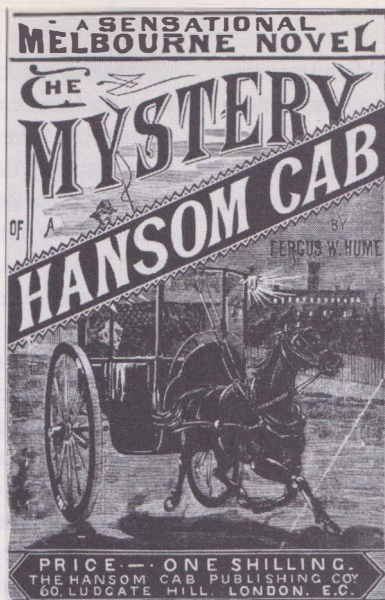
New editions were published by Trischler in 1891, and by Jarrolds right into the twentieth century. By the turn of the century twelve foreign translations of this “startling and realistic story of Melbourne” had been published.

Such astonishing sales success and the complicated multiplicity of various editions and impressions – particularly those of the Hansom Cab Company – have in recent years aroused the suspicions of serious book collectors. The suggestion that circulation figures printed on the title pages of the earlier editions were deliberately faked to boost further the enormous sales is not only plausible but highly likely.

The first London edition was similar to the Melbourne Kemp & Boyce book, crudely printed on paper of the poorest quality, and with flimsy wrappers using the original Kemp & Boyce cover design. *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, one of the most successful crime and detection stories of all time, has been republished by Arrow Books, England, in 1959; by Arno, New York, in 1967; Sun Books, Australia, in 1971; Remploy of Newcastle, England, in 1979; the first hard-back edition by Curry O’Neil, Melbourne 1982; the London edition by the Hogarth Press, 1985; and the current 1999 Text Publishing, Melbourne, edition. Apart from minor corrections to spelling and punctuation, this edition for the first time reproduces the original Melbourne impression printed by Kemp & Boyce in 1886. Other reprints have been based on versions for which Fergus Hume, at the request of Jarrolds for the 1896 reprint, was obliged to modify the language, and some of the seamy Australian references were omitted.

In his excellently studied introduction to this latest printing, Simon Caterson observes:

Over the past hundred years Hume’s remarkable achievement has been outshone by the work of his



contemporaries and, like other pioneering works, his novel has been eclipsed by subsequent developments in the genre. *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* is nevertheless significant historically and more importantly, it remains highly readable.

Such was the enormous success of Hume’s “Sensational Melbourne Novel” one can only wonder at its influence on other authors of the time.

Around the turn of the century, an Australian, Adelaide-born Guy Boothby, made something of a reputation as a writer in London. Most of his books relate to Australian themes or have local connections. His best remem-

bered works are the five Dr Nikola novels, all of them evocatively titled – such as *A Bid for Fortune or Dr Nikola’s Vendetta*, *The Lust of Hate*, and the chilling sounding *Dr Nikola’s Experiment*. Although murder is part of the plot, it is not the major theme of this series; rather mystery is the dominant quality.

From the beginning of these early experimental thrillers the central character emerged as a detective with the Police Force. Later, when non-official private detection became part of American life, the fictional hero was known variously as ‘sleuth hound’, ‘private eye’, ‘gumshoe’, and ‘shamus’. Meanwhile across the Atlantic back at ‘The Yard’, humble Police Sergeants and Inspectors went about their investigations into crime as staid family men – a far cry from the tough, cynical, chain-smoking, hard-drinking, hard living ‘private dick’ image created initially for American readers, and for the world’s cinema screens.

Since 1953, Carter Brown, a pen name for Alan Yates, born in England but calling Australia his home, has produced tough, private-investigator fiction about murder and involvement with slick broads and taffy-blondes in bikini swimsuits for the American, then a world-wide market. More than seventy million copies of his books carry titles like *The Lady is Murder*, *The Flagellator* and *Sin-sation*.

In Australia, as elsewhere, writing crime detection is not the exclusive preserve of male authors. In fact it has been established that the first woman to write Australian detective fiction for print was Mrs Fortune, who, as W.W., one of her several pen names, wrote her detective stories for the *Australian Journal* during the 1860s. In 1871 a collection of these was published as *The Detective Album: Recollections of an Australian Police Officer*. Thus,

as the first Australian book of its kind, it predated by seven years *The Leavenworth Case*, written by the American author Anna Katherine Green, generally regarded as the first woman writer of crime and detection fiction. In this century Australian women writers, for example Pat Flower, Gabrielle Lord, June Wright and Elizabeth Slater have written excellently constructed and plotted detective fiction in the British realistic tradition. Not the least of their appeal, often, is the intriguing and quite compelling titles – *Faculty of Murder* (a crime mystery set at Melbourne University), *So Bad a Death*, and *A Wreath of Water-lilies*.

Perhaps the most fondly remembered Australian crime-mystery writer is Arthur Upfield who was not, as is commonly supposed, an Australian by birth, but an Englishman who lived and worked in this country since the age of twenty-three until his death in 1964 aged seventy-six.

Upfield's fame, and rather late success, rested on his creation Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte BA, the son of a white father and an Aboriginal mother. Upfield's stories, about twenty-nine in all, were invariably set outside the big cities – a rare exception, *The Great Melbourne Cup Mystery*, written in 1933 as a newspaper serial and recently re-discovered to be published for the first time in book form. Most of his crime stories, because of their outback or central desert settings, still make fascinating evocative reading. Bony never failed to solve the involved and cleverly constructed crime plots, principally by observation, deduction, and infinite patience.

Upfield's originality has not been fully recognized. Certain limiting factors for Australian writers of crime fiction are handicapping: local cities are not as romantically colourful as London, Paris, Istanbul, Moscow – wherever, although Leonard Mann, Seaforth Mackenzie, Peter Corris and others have effectively chosen Sydney as their settings. By any world standard Australia is a society small in number, and lacks powerful millionaires in quantity, numerous princes or monarchs, numerous strongly organized gangsters and all the multifarious trappings of European detective stories. Australian writers have to make the best of the situation – Upfield found, and gambled on, his solution to the problem. Since the first of his stories in the late 1920s, consciously or otherwise writers of Australian crime and detection have moved away from what they may feel is the outback legend that was so significantly a part of this country's literary genesis that gradually became little more than a gumleaf-and-wattle sentiment by the end of the Second World War. Consequently internationalism has appeared as a more acceptable and modern direction, utilizing urban settings and situations.

It seems a far cry, and is, from Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, Leonard Mann's 1937 *A Murder in Sydney*, Dal Stevens' *The Wide Arch* published in 1958 to the tough-guy fiction by Carter Brown and the current highly popular Peter Corris.

What may prove to be a developing direction has been taken by Martin Loran, the pen name of two Australians, writing science fiction with crime and mystery as the central theme.

As the matter stands, only in a general sense can Australian crime and detection fiction be seen as an indigenous national segment in the broad international culture. Even so, much quality work in the genre continues to be created, forming an interesting part of the Australian book publishing industry.

Vane Lindesay is a Melbourne designer and writer.

Mysteries of the Mundane

Jack Bowers

Michael Meehan: *The Salt of Broken Tears* (Vintage, \$17.95).

OVERLAND 144 (1996) contained the short story, 'Where Mr Singh Put His Foot'. It concerned a woman on a farm in western Victoria; the arrival of the hawker Mr Singh, bringing goods and exotic smells and, on this occasion, illicit love; his disappearance, and her search; the ruination of her marriage and her lonely letter from Melbourne. It is a masterful short story, suggestive, delicate, compact and haunting. Michael Meehan's first novel is based on this short story, and is also much more.

When I finished reading *The Salt of Broken Tears*, I read it again, knowing there would be nuances I'd missed, textures untouched, scenes not fully appreciated. There is a confidence here, a sense of cadence which marries image to rhythm in the ebb and flow of tension. The resonances with William Faulkner and James Joyce are unmistakable, not simply because of the multiple narrators or the taut, densely packed language, but because of the author's fascination with the mysteries of the mundane.

Other comparisons can be made with Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* and with David Foster's recent novels. *The Salt of Broken Tears* is an accumulation of stories in which the people and the land create each other through the stories they tell. Each character is a facet of the land, sometimes a familiar track, at other times a rocky outcrop or a broken

fence, each adding to the passage of a boy towards the great saltlake and the man they know as Cabel Singh.

Cabel Singh is the heart and soul of this novel. Hawker, storyteller and prophet, he is known by all, though little is known about him. For the boy who is the unnamed protagonist of this novel, Cabel Singh's arrival at the farm is always an interesting time:

In a few deft motions Cabel had set up his camp, staking out a hessian windbreak, recovering from the blown sand a small circle of stones and a nest of coals, piling together handfuls of sticks and shreds of mallee and broom and lignum that the winds had trapped against the brush. Within minutes he had lit a fire, at first in clouds of white and then in a darker smoke, with blackening pans soon cracking and spitting oil against the glow, with the dog sitting, its ears uplifted and its eyes catching in flashes the motion of the flames.

Then Cabel unwound the long and dusty cloth from his head, untying and unwinding his hair and shaking it loose and letting it flow about his shoulders, and he, the boy and the dog sat down beside the fire. From a drawer beneath the cart he fetched his bubble pipe, and added to the embers some dry cowpats from the crate in which he carried his chaff. The pats took fire and smoked and smouldered and teased away the insects that rose up with the cooling of the day, and together they watched the sun go down, and saw the red lights flicker and run out in rivulets through the dust that hung in the west.

When Cabel Singh's departure coincides with Eileen's disappearance, the boy embarks on a search for both of them. Eileen is a mysterious, carefree young woman who "blew in off the track" and who has stayed on with the boy's family. As different episodes of Eileen's life on the farm are revealed, either by the omniscient narrator or by first person narrations given by a number of the characters, the intricacies of the relationships are drawn against the hardships of rural life during the 1920s.

Across the land are saltlakes – the dried tears of the land – and a great saltlake lies at the land's centre. The setting is the mallee country of north-western Victoria but, as the boy's search takes him through forest to scrub and across desert, he might just as well be travelling the whole continent. The people, too, reflect a diversity of struggles, from the Debt Adjuster whose arrival at a property is always a cause for dread, to the group of Aborigines in constant fear of retribution, to the Italian woodcutters who prefer the isolation of the forests.

Everyone on the road seems to have seen Cabel Singh recently, although none has seen the girl. Chasing after Cabel Singh is pointless, they say; better to stay in one place and wait, than to search endlessly for the elusive hawker. From the ruined lives he encounters while on his odyssey across the mallee and beyond, the boy begins to understand why he must find Cabel Singh, and why Cabel Singh is fundamental to the boy's life. As readers, we too are imbued with a sense of what it means to travel across the land, and encouraged to see ourselves and our land in new ways. Many novels are praised when a begrudging recognition of their mediocrity would be more appropriate; this one, however, is truly something great.

Jack Bowers is a Canberra writer and reviewer.

Bobbin Back

Ralph De Boissiere

Dorothy Hewett: *Bobbin Up* (Vulgar Press, \$19.95).

BOBBIN UP was first published by the Australasian Book Society in 1959. Virago reprinted it in England in 1985, but it was not reprinted in Australia until The Vulgar Press brought out a 40th anniversary edition in 1999. With the original cover illustration, the edition also contains critical essays and commentary by Stephen Knight and Nathan Hollier. An important bonus is its inclusion of two essays by Hewett, written for the 1985 and 1999 editions, showing not only her changing attitude to the book over time, but general developments in her own thinking as a writer.

Bobbin Up is a novel about women in a textile factory during the fifties. Each chapter focuses on the life of one or two of the women, some old, some young, with their differing thoughts, hopes, fears and dreams as they struggle to find security and even satisfaction in their everyday working life in the mill. What emerges is a bleak picture of capitalist oppression of the Australian worker, in a novel that Hewett describes as moving from "straight reportage" to "poetic symbolism".

Many of the women are married, with their fortunes, family situations and relationships shown to be mercilessly tossed about by their employers' practices. The husbands and boyfriends are kept in the background overall, but their efforts to express themselves – at work, on the streets, sexually or politically – show their frustration in

trying to travel their own roads in their own way.

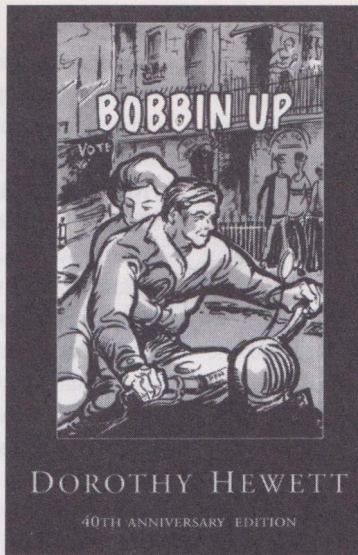
It is a harsh novel and painful to read. Indeed, if this were all there were to it, it would be infuriating, but alongside the cruel realities and the coarseness there are glimpses of compassion which has not been smothered by conditions, breaking out unexpectedly like light dispelling darkness. While this reminds the reader that each of the characters is an individual seeking to pursue their own fortunes and dreams, the novel creates the greater consciousness of solidarity between the overburdened women before the word 'solidarity' ever came into popular currency.

Each of the characters, twenty or more individual women and a smattering of husbands, is affected in the same way. In an episode which allows political argument to come to the fore, Stan Mooney spells out his knowledge of the effect which new laws would have on the union, and saves the union at ultimate cost to himself. He is the husband of Nell Weber, Party spokesperson amongst the women at the mill and leader of the strike which is the novel's climax.

Bobbin Up is set in the fifties, a time during the long reign of the Menzies government which in a succession of elections was always returned to power because of the split in the Labor Party. The Democratic Labor Party, a product of the cold war and the world-wide fear of socialism and atomic weapons, worked strenuously to keep the Labor Party out of power. Members of the DLP were motivated by an almost religious hatred of the Left. This was a time when Sputnik, the Russian satellite, had appeared as a star in the night sky in a demonstration of the achievements of which the Soviet Union was capable, an assurance in many eyes of greater things to come, but a source of suspicion and fear for non-believers.

And it was a time when, following the invasion of Hungary, communists in Australia were suffering the first collapse of faith in socialism, setting in motion the creeping disintegration of the Communist Party; a time, too, when Khrushchev had revealed the horrors of Stalin's rule, the Soviet Union had set up missiles in Cuba to defend the island against the United States, and China's radio was hysterically calling on Cubans to defend their homeland to the last.

Great conflicts, great revelations, true and half-true, were creating emotional and intellectual cross-currents



from which no-one could escape, and which form a psychological background to the expectations and doubts of Hewett's characters.

Throughout the novel, two images loom over the workers: that of Sputnik, symbol of Russia's great achievement now passing over Australian skies, and the fear of a coming recession. Each woman, from Shirl with her blue dress, pregnant and about to be married, ancient Lil and loyal Betty, betrayed by her long-time employers, to mean, difficult Mais, ultimately has to make a choice:

that Maisie ... She works two jobs in two mills and she's hungry. Got twin

babies ... She lives on Bex and is she cranky! Wouldn't like to be her ol' man. Bet she rules the roost. Works through the tea break and all. She's real bonus-happy ... 'I'm not goin' to be branded in every mill in Sydney ... I'm a good worker. Might make an exception for me ...'

While Hewett nowadays sees *Bobbin Up* as depicting working-class life in Sydney with "uncanny verisimilitude" and a "lasting memorial" of her years as a middle-class bred Party member who had deliberately chosen to work beside others in a factory, she herself had left the Communist Party in 1968, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and conveys her dismay at the naivete of their beliefs and her disgust at the betrayal of dearly held ideals.

She was criticized at the time of publication for not having ended the novel with a greater, more clear-cut triumph for the workers.

I was one who expressed such reservations. Forty years on, having left the Party myself in 1967 and with it my original communist idealism, I now read the novel as ending on a different kind of high note, one which reveals, in effect, the great potential in people, as individuals and as mass. At the turn of this century and millennium, the novel has ongoing interest in examining people in their frightening diversity, their even greater powerlessness and their potential to expand what it means to be human.

Ralph De Boissiere reviewed *Bobbin Up* in *overland* #16 when it was first published in 1959. He is currently writing his autobiography, a section of which was published in *overland* 156.

Feral, Fearless and Out There

John Jenkins

Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman (eds): *Performing The Unnameable: An Anthology of Australian Performance Texts* (Currency Press/Real Time, \$35).

People purchasing (second class) tickets will be given a black slip as they enter. In gender segregated areas, they will be expected to change into these slips (retaining only their underwear). They will be given a paper carry-bag in which to keep their clothes. PLEASE DO NOT PURCHASE A TICKET UNLESS YOU AGREE TO THESE CONDITIONS.

THIS NOTICE, POSTED ABOVE THE BOX OFFICE, greeted audiences who had come to be emotionally mauled by the Sydney Front's highly-charged 'First And Last Warning', which was first performed in Redfern's Performance Space in 1986. The implied threat – of being made to feel vulnerable – was not an idle one. While a few lucky (and fully clothed) 'first class' patrons were given champagne and shown to their plush seats, hapless 'second class' ticketholders changed into light cotton coveralls before being assaulted by what sometimes bordered on a mild form of aesthetic terrorism. Starkly cruel and unequal power relationships were set up on stage, and patrons invited to feel seduced by, complicit in, to take responsibility for, various shocking and 'forbidden' actions that then took place. In the sardonic words of Frontman John Baylis, "(we) created a space in which the pleasures of submission could be enjoyed and reflected upon". Obviously, the Front's investigation of our implicit social contracts – of cruel class, gender and power inequality – remains a long way from a comfortable evening at the opera.

Other pieces sampled in *Performing The Unnameable* – seventeen in total, all devised in Australia since 1981 – similarly push the envelope of radical performance and audience discomfort. For example, the panic-edged *Quick Death* by Richard Murphet and the harrowing *Situation Normal* by the All Out Ensemble – a dramatization of a police rape case based on cut-ups of actual police statements. But what unites these works is not emotional tone or content. Rather, all these works resist being experienced as conventional theatre. They are intended to be performed before an audience, rather than read on the page. All are hybrids or fusions; and all enlist strategies and styles drawn from various genres and sources – from interactive multi-media to circus and spectacle; from performance art to contempo-

rary dance. Editors Pearlman and Allen say they wanted to make "a set, but not a category, of works which might otherwise be defined as 'not plays', 'not librettos', 'not scores', 'not poems', 'not anything you've seen before'."

The pieces are 'sampled' because no complete versions are given. Instead, we have a scene or two from each, plus performance histories, biographical information, artistic statements and visual documentation. In the words of the editors: "The publication of these fragments is not meant to prescribe their uses, but it does make it possible for them to be analysed, studied and used ... for new works or ... even ... reconstruction."

The book's umbrella, and ambitious, project is outlined in the Introduction: "Innovations in performance practice, by providing platforms for writing in new ways, create the possibility of a new literary form ... A text in performance is the writing which is required by that work – its form is defined by the needs and processes of a given work, not by literary convention or tradition." Whether this aim is realized depends on conceptual breakthroughs being explored in parallel with new technology, and a process of social change providing new platforms and contexts for performance. But of the texts presented here, Jenny Kemp's wonderfully erotic, fluid and dreamlike collage, *Call Of The Wild* – about "four women in one" who are "not characters as such, but represent states of being" – as well as Margaret Cameron's lyrical and elusive *Things Calypso Wanted To Say* and the conceptually and politically agile *The Geography of Haunted Places* by Josephine Wilson and Erin Hefferon, seem to hold fair promise.

Unfortunately, this book is marred by bad design. It is burdened by a welter of typefaces and too much reverse-out (and over-printed) text on grey images – there's even black-on-black in a few places! The designer has subjected some pages to a barrage of decorative flak that not all pieces are strong enough to withstand. The aim was probably to suggest an exciting simultaneity of imagery and text – a design as unfixed and cutting-edge as the pieces themselves. Unfortunately, clarity has been too readily traded for bells and whistles.

Cavils aside, this book is very welcome. For the first time, Australian innovative performance of the past two decades has been well documented. In combination with my own *Arias: Recent Australian Music Theatre* (co-written with Rainer Linz and reviewed in *overland* 150), this book provides an overview for the general reader. And practitioners and scholars who want to dig deeper can consult the complete archive for *Performing The Unnameable* at Sydney's Mitchell Library; plus the archive for my book at the Australian Special Collection at ADFA.

Of course, with such an evolving and fluid medium, there can never be a definitive viewpoint, but we can at least now look back at some important steps along the way.

John Jenkins is a Melbourne poet and journalist and the author of two books on Australian contemporary music/performance.

Beginning to Bear Fruit

Michelle Arrow

Susan Pfisterer and Carolyn Pickett: *Playing with Ideas: Australian Women Playwrights from the Suffragettes to the Sixties* (Currency Press, \$24.95).

Susan Pfisterer (ed.): *Tremendous Worlds: Australian Women's Drama 1890–1960* (Currency Press, \$24.95).

SUSAN PFISTERER AND CAROLYN PICKETT'S *Playing With Ideas* is to be praised for its ambitious scope. It is an engaging, generous account of a still-neglected group in Australian cultural history: namely, the large group of women playwrights who wrote entertaining and provocative drama from the 1890s to the 1960s. The study analyses plays by more than twenty writers, including Inez Bensusan, Catherine Shepherd, Oriel Gray, Marjorie McCleod, Eunice Hanger, Mona Brand, and Dorothy Hewett. Most are unknown today, and one of the stated purposes of this book is to explain why they have faded into obscurity, and in turn to resurrect them to their rightful place in Australian history. That this task is perhaps beyond just one 250-page book is certainly not an indication of failure on the authors' part. Rather, Pfisterer and Pickett have successfully and elegantly defined and explored a large research area that is only now beginning to bear fruit in publication.

Pfisterer and Pickett write that their intention is not only to recover forgotten work by women, but to "make a significant contribution to the the feminist contestation of Australian history". They have chosen to do this by focusing almost solely on the content of plays by these writers, examining them closely to tease out the ideologies which underpin the writing, the *ideas* of the book's title. The plays are explored in seven thematic chapters, covering a diverse range of issues including war, love, history, economic agency, and political activism of various hues. One of the most fascinating aspects of this book is that it reveals the vast breadth of subjects mined by these

playwrights. They created drama out of relationships, gambling, war, espionage, social injustice, and political activism. The authors argue that these writers constituted a "dynamic female dramatic tradition", and the plays they examine reveal a number of distinctive female dramatic voices.

The book begins particularly well, with a chapter on suffrage theatre by Australian playwrights. This is perhaps the best-handled material in the book, shedding new light on several famous Australian literary figures, including Miles Franklin and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Pfisterer and Pickett show how Prichard, in particular, used the stage as a vehicle for political protest long before her socialist drama of the 1930s. This chapter is successful because it analyses the dramatic output that emerged from a relatively contained historical and cultural phenomenon, i.e. the suffrage movement, compared to some of the more sprawling thematic chapters. The authors rightly point out that suffrage drama has not been considered by feminist historians in their 'contestations' of the 1890s, and one of the most satisfying aspects of this study is Pfisterer and Pickett's insistence on the contribution theatre and drama history can make to other histories.

Pfisterer and Pickett present a uniformly respectful account of these plays. They seek to validate the work of these dramatists through restating the relevance of the plays for a twenty-first century audience. For example, we are told that Marjorie McLeod's 1931 drama *A Shillingsworth: An Episode in the Depression*, "would play well on stage today with particular relevance to unemployment and the problems of street kids". But surely these plays don't have to prove their contemporary worth to be of value to historians. These questions of literary or dramatic value will always vex cultural historians – but these plays should be valued on their own terms as culturally and historically specific documents. Further, these justifications don't take issues of performance into account – a play cannot stand on ideas alone, but relies on how those ideas are presented theatrically. Stagecraft is, however, analyzed by Pfisterer and Pickett in a chapter on experiments with dramatic form. While much of this book is occupied with identifying the radical content of plays, the authors are particularly adept at analyzing theatrical experimentation, and this chapter reveals much that has been lost from our remembered theatrical past.

Currency Press' demonstrated commitment to unearthing Australia's women playwrights through publication of *Playing With Ideas* is reinforced by the appearance of the companion volume, *Tremendous Worlds*. It warms my theatre historian's heart to see never-

published scripts such as Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Forward One* finally hit the shelves. First performed by the Perth Workers' Theatre in 1935, the play depicts the walk-out of a group of women employees in a clothing store in protest over their poor working conditions. While I might question the wisdom of republishing some plays (Dymphna Cusack's *Morning Sacrifice*, for example) while other texts still remain out of reach, the volume is an ambitious and noble one, and reveals just a little of the vitality of these extraordinary women dramatists. Pfisterer and Pickett have performed an excellent task in bringing these writers and their plays to broader public notice: the dramatic worlds that they have uncovered provide ample proof that there is more work to be done.

Michelle Arrow's study of Australian women playwrights 1928–1968, Upstaged, will be published in 2000.

“ease/ into dark water” new poetry

Kerry Leves

John Millett, *Iceman*, fip, \$14.95. A recollection of war that makes an indelible anti-war argument. About “the most prolonged and complex battle in the history of naval warfare”, the Battle of the Atlantic, *Iceman* completes Millett's Second World War trilogy. A poet's requiem for the sailors and airmen and civilians, it's impassioned and informative, with haunting visual imagery and quiet but resonant tones. Despite its unusual beauty – searchlit skies, the ever-changing sea, the gleam of polished artillery and the remembered happiness of shore-leave – there is much to horrify, e.g. “old men” after an air raid, “trying to push the dead children/ back into the wombs of the mothers,/ listening and waiting for sorrows hiding/ in the black shining mushrooms of burnt houses/ and the black puddings of burnt men.” *Iceman* affirms the primacy of feeling, against various kinds of numbness including that of “the banks, rock-hard on the earning process,/ scan[ning] photographs of the killings,/ simply to verify how well the machine worked ... far from that ordinary man/ floating face down in the Atlantic,/ where the living slide out of their bodies/ into the shipping lanes.”

Kate Llewellyn, *Sofala and Other Poems*, Hudson, \$19.95. Some people have reservations about Llewellyn's work – the silvery diction, the hints of a greeting-card sensibility, the fancifulness – but this book goes deeper than usual. The scenic views are there, but the poems about people are both tender-minded and undeluded; the reader's enabled to share in various processes of accepting life, with all its changes. That's especially true of the centrepiece, ‘Sofala’, where the solitary reflections on landscape build into a poem of contemplative richness and quiet conviction. The flower poems – commissioned by the ACT's Floriade festival – have a let's-get-on-with-it inventiveness that's quite charming.

Manfred Jurgensen, *Midnight Sun*, fip, \$14.95. Wide range of settings and topics; a journey with remarkable momentum, as in a four-wheel drive across the outback, riding confidently over the bumps. “the riverbed is dry,/ black cockatoos in flight/ spring waters in the sky,/ it's raining second sight.” Eleventh collection by veteran poet, novelist, editor, critic.

Leon Trainor, *Free Song*, Indigo, \$14. “The hills don't rise, they descend/ from the clouds. Their shoulders ease/ into dark water ...” Lovely first sequence – energetic nature poems that place the reader as sensuous and spiritual participant (rather than mere viewer); they're very open, refreshing, with an unobtrusive but vital formal charge. Poet also writes his Christianity with disarming candour. Stories of love and family haven't the same appeal, but Trainor really can write: the trouble taken is appreciated, by this reader at least. “Why ask whose/ poem it is? Before it grows/ old give it to someone else.”

Mal Morgan, *Beautiful Veins*, fip, \$18.95, includes CD. Mal Morgan, one of the founding artists of Melbourne's legendary La Mama performance venue (he's also its anthologist), was diagnosed with cancer in March 1998. He wrote this book's foreword on 27 July that year: “It is a good day, one in which love is stronger than death.” It's a substantial collection, incredibly clear-eyed about the processes he's going through, intently playful, and rather fine. If you want evidence that free-form poetry can be both ludic and spiritual, read *Beautiful Veins*. “I want to go down swinging/ like Joe Louis and Cassius Clay./ Imagine ten slender yellow roses/ in this poem. Put seven in a vase/ three in my bloody corner. One/ for luck, one for the dark heart/ and one for the petit-mort/ I have been practising.” [Mal Morgandied on 16 November 1999, aged 64.]

Ted Nielsen, *Search Engine*, fip, \$9. The style may suggest a less flamboyant and less literate Ted Berrigan, grimmed-out for the nerdy nineties or the zero zeroes: "your love life arrives/ via stereo headphones/ & the curving horizon/ is a thigh in moonlit gardens." At worst, the hyper-articulate world-weariness (or world-wariness) may remind some readers of Sean Penn's knowing and stressed-out monologist in the movie *Hurlyburly*— but Nielsen's language has more cogency, some excitement, and made me want to re-read.

Gina Mercer, *The Ocean in the Kitchen*, fip, \$9. Opens with a repudiation of "urban chic/ all cool and monotone" and gets right down into sweet carnality, urgent appetites 'In Katya's room' and the tension of sexual intrigue in 'Unfurling'. Then there's a power-surge: the writing goes deeper into the flesh as a locus of physical and emotional wounds. It's not all dark, but the anxiety formations, the "season-long wrestling with words and swamp demons", set up a force field that may be more than the sunny philosophizing can contain. Life is tough in Gina Mercer Land. But there are ameliorations: "Won't mention love, the word's so weak and worn,/ except to say/ it creaks and ripples along our eight limbs/ articulate as bone/ smooth as sinew/ integral as 'e' & 'r' in mother daughter".

John Carey, *Strip Shopping for the Unemployed*, Woodbine Press, \$14.95. Very civilized, in a discursive but well-crafted vernacular. Game and considerably literate book tackles a huge range of material: music, French modernist writers, family, Australian political issues, landscape and art. The poems are never less than intelligent, often biting, with an agreeable rough humour, and a writerly flair for the poetic. From a poem about Louis Ferdinand Celine: "In prose that sputtered/ like a smutty candle,/ under his pen a mishap/ swelled to a disaster/ and when things couldn't be worse/ they got worse."

Keri Glastonbury, *Hygienic Lily*, fip, \$9. Cool, like the electric fan on its cover. Witty, often uproariously funny constructions of sexual chagrin and unwieldy relationships and what it's like to be physically human in a modular world that's at once voyeuristically nosy and solipsistically indifferent. The poet gives us a good time among her eclectic topoi: "a face like a fractal of deposited sand"; a 'magazine girl' "listening to your star sign" in "an astrological food chain"; a lover who makes her feel like an "orange/ plunged chest first/ on to a stainless steel juicer." The tone of always-incipient farce is maintained through poems set in Japan, coastal Sydney, the Hawkesbury and Koh Samet (where's that?).

Stephen Edgar, *Where the Trees Were*, Indigo, \$16. Endorsed by Alan Gould, and if contemporary Australian poetry really was the sackcloth parade Gould seems to imply, it would indeed shine out. But, polemics aside, I'm not so sure. Formality can be comforting: these poems are little architectures, they keep your head dry, and the thinking in them is often astute. Even so, they're not all of a piece. Their elegance can become desiccated, long-winded, pedantic; and sometimes truly problematic—the speaker of 'The Spelling Lesson' could be a revamped Mary Gilmore, placing the same, old, rather specious regrets in the Anglo-Celtic mailbox. The study of Velasquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, doesn't seem to add much to Foucault's, nor to diverge from the latter excitingly. Edgar's talent seems inclined most strongly to the Gothic: the snaky suggestiveness of 'Correspondent's Report'; the horrifying visions of Chernobyl and nuclear winter in 'Aere Perennius' and 'Final Museum', affecting in their quietness. It may be Poe, rather than the almost-audible-in-these-pages Wallace Stevens, who turns out to be Edgar's poetic father.

Graeme Hetherington, *In the Shadow of Van Diemen's Land*, Cornford Press, \$15. Tasmanian, and perhaps Australian history as grand guignol. "The grey-walled house is gash-black edged,/ Its windows dark and looking in/ On shame and hate roofed red as blood..." Sensitive and conservative readers may enjoy the rural landscapes, but the relentlessly brutal evocations of violence could revise your understanding of 'thick-skinned'. "Your breast is overripe and falls/ Beneath the surgeon's red-hot blade..." These intemperately angry ballads are not for the squeamish.

Stephen Oliver, *Unmanned, HeadworX*, \$17.95. The verse technique goes beyond mere skill, becomes an art form unto itself. Oliver's language summons the great public poets of old — Dryden, for instance, and Hopkins — as if to make them bear witness against contemporary depravities. It's almost Byzantine, yet lucid and flexible, does wonders with simple material. Yet much art has been lavished on the bleedin' obvious. In oratorical tones, we're warned against corporatists, eco-tourists, loggers. It's easy demonology: lightweight, at times offensively snobbish, agitprop. Whereas the language, as a wrought surface, is fabulous. It's a folly, but the grand manner is astonishingly well-sustained.

Geoff Page, *The Scarring*, Hale & Iremonger, \$17.95. A verse novel of cruel revenge and even crueller silence, set in the cattle country of NSW's Clarence River. Hal and Sal, prize-winning beef-breeders, seem to have everything

going for them – wealth, looks, prestige, primeland, sexual enthusiasm – and yet . . . The story is mightily sad, but the real tragedy may inhere in the narrowness of the protagonists' imaginations, formed (or set in concrete) by the stiffly normative grazier culture around them. The timespan's from the early 1920s to the approximate present, but the decisive action happens during the Second World War. We've become so used to the offshore fascisms of the 1930s and forties as spectacle, that when a book comes along to remind us fascism is a mindset that wasn't cancelled by the national border, it can be shocking, even traumatic. *The Scarring* begins wonderfully, piping the reader on board with an array of eloquent details and poignant moments, told in dry country vocal tones, but as it proceeds the bluntness could start to feel like a punishment. Yet the crudity's effective: as a reflection of Anglo-Celtic Australian gender bias, and the historic liberty of male anger, *The Scarring* does exactly what its title suggests. If you're feeling nostalgic for the pastoral, read it and count your post-millennial blessings. Country people may find it somewhat abusive: the characters' rigidity of mind could be material for a satire this book chooses not to deliver. Instead it's socially and culturally attentive, and disturbing.

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet.

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Raymond Williams was one of the important figures in late twentieth century radical intellectual culture: a critic whose work redrew the map of English literary studies; a key figure in the New Left intelligentsia from the 1950s to the 1980s; a widely acknowledged 'founding father' of Cultural Studies; a theorist, whose 'cultural materialism' remains influential throughout contemporary literary and cultural studies; a creative writer whose work ranged from the realist novel to science fiction and television drama.

Williams's *The Long Revolution* is widely recognised as one of the key works of English-language socialist scholarship from the 1960s. In the 1980s he reworked this analy-

sis as *Towards 2000*, in the attempt to identify new 'resources of hope' for the journey beyond economic rationalism. Seventeen years later, and twelve after Williams's death, it seems timely to assess the continuing relevance of his intellectual and political legacy.

overland was the first periodical to publish Williams's work in Australia. So it seems particularly appropriate for it to sponsor an appreciation of a body of work whose character could so easily be defined as 'Temper democratic, bias Welsh'. We hope to organise something more than simply another academic conference. Rather, we intend to facilitate as wide-ranging a debate as possible around issues of Left cultural politics in the twenty-first century.

ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Verity Burgmann (Reader in Politics, University of Melbourne); Carole Ferrier (Editor of *Hecate*); Stuart Macintyre (Dean of Arts, University of Melbourne); John McLaren (Humanities, Victoria University); Andrew Milner (Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University); Dan O'Neill (English, University of Queensland); Ian Syson (Editor of *overland*); Iain Wright (Professor of English, ANU).

CALL FOR PAPERS

Papers are invited on issues arising from the above themes. A 200 word proposal should be sent, faxed or emailed by May 1st to:

Nathan Hollier, 'After 2000' Conference,
Overland, PO Box 14146
MCMC, Melbourne
VIC 8001;
Fax: (61) (3) 9688 4883;
email: <overland@vu.edu.au>

REGISTRATION

\$ 30 (employed people)
\$ 15 (unwaged)



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