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BLUDGERS • • •

• • • CORPORATE WELFARE & THE WORKING POOR



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## BLUDGERS

NEWSPAPER EDITORS profess to publish a balance of viewpoints, but careful readers will notice this is rarely the case. A new strain of ideologue has invaded the opinion pages and more recently the news, business and media sections. A glorified public relations hack, this ad-agency 'intellectual' sermonises under the authoritative front of 'Research Fellow' for a 'disinterested' institution—the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), for example, or the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA).

As recent essays in *Overland* reveal, these 'independent' think-tanks are simply sub-stations for government and industry campaigns—a more laundered approach to PR than the simple 'cash for comment' deals we've learned to recognise. Their messages, like viruses, thrive by invading the cells of a higher organism and exploiting its generative machinery, and the mainstream media has been a compliant host body. Of late it has surrendered a disproportionate amount of ink and airwave to think-tank railings against the sins of the 'compassion industry' (see Philip Mendes's essay in this issue) and the evils of government intervention in business. With symbiotic connections to business itself, it has shirked serious inquiry into a major type of market intervention: that which involves large cash handouts to big industry. Lauren van Dyke's essay in this issue demonstrates how corporate welfare rarely offers fiscal benefit to anyone other than those already flying business class. Unlike welfare for those

who are sick or jobless, corporate welfare is not being slashed in federal budgets, it involves no requirement of 'mutual obligation', it is not policed, scrutinised and stigmatised by government and the media. Unlike the HECS scheme in which students must repay the cost of their education, corporations are not required to return their handouts.

Meanwhile, the 'trickle-down' effect remains elusive; wages remain unworkable for many individuals and families. Poverty was once a problem for the jobless; now, as Frank Stilwell and Tony Eardley note in this issue, a mounting body of studies confirms a rising phenomenon of the 'working poor' in Australia. Thanks to funds from the Myer Foundation, *Overland 170* features essays that chart the systemic ways this 'working poor' sector is perpetuated. These funds have also enabled us to commission stories from the 'working poor' themselves; hardly a homogeneous sector, but individuals who deserve attention from a media obsessed with wealth and celebrity, or at best with 'battlers' who 'made it' (offering a prudent lesson to those who didn't). Because of their working status, people featured in this issue don't qualify for legal aid, health care concessions or other assistance; yet their circumstance predisposes them to stress-related illness and poverty traps. Their lot is not the stuff of media sensation: they are simply overworked and impoverished. If only they stopped drinking and gambling, says Tony Abbott (*Four Corners*, 9 July 2001), while his Treasury gambled and lost \$4.8 billion on the international market. Abbott's mate, Packer, who blew \$17 million in one casino sitting, agrees that poverty is indeed a lifestyle choice. On the (alleged) other side of politics, Mark Latham says all the poor need are incentives to save or tips on the sharemarket. He was speaking at a gig hosted by the Centre for Independent Studies (see Judith Bessant, page 116).

From this issue we take over from Ian Syson as editors of *Overland*. Each of us is indebted to Syson for being a teacher, motivator and friend, and we

look forward to his continuing close association with the magazine. It is now almost fifty years since *Overland* first appeared, in a very different Australia. 1954 was the year of the Petrov affair, when Cold War tensions were running high, amid widespread fears that the world would end in nuclear Armageddon. Despite this, and while maintaining a commitment to social justice and a literature of ideas, *Overland's* first editor Stephen Murray-Smith developed the magazine's distinctly optimistic tone. His confidence, character and humour contributed to the creation of a bank of goodwill that continues to surprise and inspire us, and which we in turn hope to add to. That figures like Tom Keneally agree without hesitation to launch an issue of the magazine, as he did at the recent Spring Writers' Festival in Sydney, speaks volumes for the legacy of humane political commitment established by Murray-Smith, Barrett Reid, John McLaren, Syson and their assistants and supporters.

At the time of writing it again seems that a major military conflict is about to take place. In some ways a world without the Soviet Union to balance the power of the United States and its allies hardly seems a safer one. Murray-Smith and those who with him established *Overland* found hope in communism, the traditional secular egalitarianism of the Australian people, and the Enlightenment insight that human beings can know the world and shape it. Each of these beliefs has been seriously questioned in succeeding years. Those 'second' and 'third' world societies who embraced or had the 'communist' label thrust upon them have failed. Australian 'mateship' was by 1970 rightly criticised as having been at least partly based on racism, sexism and homophobia. An often no less exclusive and even more self-satisfied version of this culture remains visible, and is subject to unprecedented manipulation within the 'age of spin' identified by Bob Ellis in *Overland* 169. People are being pressured into increasingly specialised areas of knowledge and segmented forms of labour, as Humphrey McQueen details in this issue, mitigating against the capacity of individuals to understand the pressures they face. The value of generalist knowledge and collective political activity have also been questioned in postmodernist and post-

structuralist thought, warning as these do against various forms of intellectual hubris.

In spite of these changes, which demand a re-think of *Overland's* identity and approach, we do continue to believe, with our predecessors, that free-market capitalism is inherently unjust, inefficient and tends toward the creation of intolerance, conflict and war; that cultural traditions of independence and opposition do still exist within a fragmented and disorganised Australian working class, comprising the only genuine basis of a more just Australia; and that it is still possible to gain a meaningful understanding of the world, in its particularity and its totality, to develop broad critiques and present social alternatives, to find a personal and social unity of work and life: the basis for something like happiness.

*Overland* has always had a special relationship with its readers and subscribers. A 'mission statement' in the first issue stated that the magazine:

will aim high, but has no exclusive or academic standards of any kind. It will make a special point of developing writing talent in people of diverse background. We ask of our readers, however inexperienced, that they write for us; that they share our love of living, our optimism, our belief in the traditional dream of a better Australia. Send us your criticisms and suggestions, and help us to reach the public we want to serve.

Part of the distinctive tone of the magazine has come from its publishing of personal reminiscences and comment, and we hope to strengthen this tradition through initiating 'memoir' and 'letters to the editor' sections. We are also calling for informed opinion pieces, of the kind that might be published in the mainstream press but, due to direct and systemic corporate pressure, rarely are. While we cannot hope to directly match the social impact of a John Laws, a Mike Munro or a Gerard Henderson, we can dissect media hysteria and dishonesty, debunk populist hype, document lesser-known histories, give a voice to those whose stories are otherwise marginalised, misrepresented or ignored, and point public debate in alternative directions.

## CORRESPONDENCE

THE ESSAY BY Jeremy Fisher about Gerry Glaskin's *No End To The Way*, a novel published under the pseudonym Neville Jackson, corresponds with many of the fan letters Glaskin received. Young and middle-aged men from many European countries wrote him letters of gratitude, thanking him for the novel, for its honesty and for its ending. One only, an Englishman self-described as an old aunty living in France and awaiting the French Immigration Department to permit his young Moroccan lover to become a permanent resident, wished for a happier ending. Even he said the novel dealt with problems he had endured.

The publishing history of the novel is interesting. Glaskin presented a huge manuscript to his publisher, Barrie & Rockliff. He believed it marked a departure from his established list and wanted it published under a pseudonym. The publishers argued that he had built up an impressive reputation, his books selling well, so should stick with the name readers knew. They also worried in the early 1960s about the frank sexual basis of the three novellas that made up the one massive manuscript. Eventually, the first two were edited back to a manageable size and published as *O Love*, *O Loneliness* by G.M. Glaskin,

Barrie & Rockliff, 1964. They are about sex with minors and incest. The book later came out in paperback.

After much cajoling, Glaskin severely edited the third. His editor, John Bunting, congratulated him for removing the 'hysterical preaching'. Yet Glaskin equivocated about whether it should be under his name or a pseudonym even when it was in covers and on the sales list. During negotiations to have the book released in paperback in the sixties and seventies, Glaskin found that it was consistently rejected for its ending, the very section of the novel that readers who wrote to him liked.

*No End To The Way*, which I have now read, is a strongly written novel, its best quality perhaps being its pursuit of the truth. While in Australia men of homosexual persuasion may no longer feel pressured to marry women to advance their careers or to 'enjoy' acceptance by the larger heterosexual community, outside the centre of the big cities not a lot has changed. The loneliness of homosexual life may well still be difficult, and the guilty loneliness and confusion experienced while coming out continues to be a problem.

Jeremy Fisher is fortunate in his parents. Sadly, not all are so sane and good-natured.

Carolyn van Langenberg is writing the biography of G.M. Glaskin.

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### Philip Ruddock: Philatelist

Where *is* the young lad? Philip? Philip?  
I think you're a chip off the old block  
son. I was thinking about your stamps.  
The carton was fine but you've outgrown it  
haven't you? All higgledy-piggledy in there.  
So I've bought you a brand new stamp album.  
I didn't ever glue them in. I used hinges.  
Thin & small, but I suppose they left marks  
even when you peeled them off carefully.  
Now you just slide them behind clear strips.  
You need tweezers to move them in & out.  
No, not household tweezers; flat tweezers.  
Well yes, any magnifying glass will do.  
You might like to borrow mine. Very handy.  
They're not all in English, you know, Philip.  
They're not even all in our ABC alphabet.  
There are all sorts of wiggles & squiggles  
all sorts of odds & sods & opposites. So  
you won't know the names of all the countries  
probably won't & there are always new ones  
usually small ones, not very important ones.  
They're the ones that change their names  
backwards & forwards. I lose track of them.  
When you discover stamps without a country  
you always know the country. Great Britain.  
Invented them & everything else worth having  
& just think about where they can take you  
these little bits of paper—diplomacy, politics.  
You know, Philip, you could become a Minister.  
Minister for External Affairs or Immigration.  
Think of all the different creeds & colours.  
Stamps are an education in themselves.

GRAHAM ROWLANDS

### The Living Room

It was where they sat at night  
beside the fire  
or with the windows open  
for the evening breeze.  
The radio and conversation  
the click of knitting needles  
the tap tap of his pipe  
as the ash was cleared.  
In the morning  
something lay there  
extended by the night  
my dress smocked like the sea  
a jumper, cardigan or coat  
beside the ashes from his pipe.  
Their talk joined  
all that other married talk  
a man and a woman  
speaking of a life in love.  
And every Saturday I entered  
closed the door  
and spent three hours  
at work.  
Switched on the radio  
and ran the carpet sweeper  
back and forth.  
Then with a broken comb  
tidied up the carpet's fringe.  
I was in another world  
and took the ornaments  
from every shelf  
gently dusting them.  
A handmaiden of the marriage,  
sanctity and happiness  
were mine  
as the kero duster moved  
across the table.  
Sometimes I danced  
enchanted  
in that dark and gloomy room,  
the exulted palace  
of a marriage.  
At noon I emerged  
restored, purified,  
almost holy.

KATE LLEWELLYN



## WAR WITH IRAQ

The case against

WHAT MATTERS could have been raised in federal parliament if Howard's promised parliamentary debate on Australia's participation in a war on Iraq had been allowed to take place? A starting point in the debate should be that the US and Britain have already commenced a war against Iraq. US and British bombing of Iraq has never completely ceased since 1991. Many bombs have fallen on populated areas, where civilian deaths are unavoidable. According to British Defence Minister Geoff Hoon, between August 1992 and December 1998 UK aircraft released 2.5 tonnes of 'ordnance' over the no-fly zone. Between December 1998 and May 2000 UK aircraft released 78 tonnes, about 20 per cent of the total released. In other words, during this period the US and UK combined released some 400 tonnes of bombs and missiles on Iraq. The increase in bombing during this period was justified on the basis that Iraq had not complied with UN sanctions.<sup>1</sup> But there was no Security Council resolution justifying the action. The bombing has escalated again over recent months. The pretext for the bombing has been the policing of 'no-fly' zones declared by the US and Britain after the Gulf War. The US and Britain claim that the bombing has been aimed at Iraqi air defences. But Iraq has virtually no air force and no modern air defences. The US and Britain have been dropping bombs or firing missiles at infrastructure already laid to waste by the previous war or the twelve-year-old embargo. These nations claim that the creation of the no-fly zones is supported by UN Security Council Resolution 688. But there is no reference to 'no-fly' zones in the resolution. The Australian-born English-based



journalist John Pilger asked Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General of the United Nations in 1992 when Resolution 688 was passed, about the no-fly zones and resolution 688. He told Pilger:

The issue of no-fly zones was not raised and therefore not debated: not a word. They offer no legitimacy to countries sending their aircraft to attack Iraq... They are illegal.<sup>2</sup>

### THE EXTENT OF THE THREAT

Not even the Bush administration claims that Saddam Hussein is more heavily armed now than he was during the Gulf War of 1991. During that war Saddam did not use weapons of mass destruc-

tion. He dispatched Scud missiles against Israel. They contained conventional warheads, not chemical, biological or nuclear warheads. Yet prior to the Gulf War Saddam had used chemical weapons in his war with Iran and against the Kurds. Why then didn't he use them in the Gulf War? The answer is simple. Saddam has only ever used chemical weapons when he has known that their use would not incur the wrath of the USA. Saddam knew that any attempt to use weapons of mass destruction during the Gulf War would lead to a retaliatory response by the US and its allies and determination to press the war beyond Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait to the removal of his regime. Nothing significant has changed in relation to this balance of terror since the first Gulf War. All that has changed is that Iraq has been weakened economically and militarily, and that a bunch of murderous religious fanatics, completely unrelated to Saddam, have attacked the US. The attackers did not use weapons of mass destruction.

Saddam's regime is and always has been secular. As such it is the subject of scorn from Islamic extremists. This is why Simon Crean is correct when he states that a war against Iraq is not part of any war against terrorism. Not only is there is no proof of Iraqi support for al-Qaeda. There is no reason to assume such support. Iraq's Baathist regime is secular. Its previous support from the US was because Iraq was viewed as a bulwark against Iran's revolutionary Islamic fundamentalism in the region. Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal, his country's former intelligence chief, has noted how Bin Laden views Saddam Hussein as "an apostate, an infidel or someone who is not worthy of being a fellow Muslim". Much of the money trail for al-Qaeda comes from US ally Saudi Arabia; none has been traced to Iraq. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi; none was Iraqi.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Qaeda appears to possess a well-resourced network of Islamic extremists prepared to give up their lives in a holy jihad against the USA, whom it claims is engaged in a "war against Muslims". If it were trenchantly opposed to US intervention in Iraq, it could create a potential political crisis for the Bush administration by kidnapping and holding hostage half a dozen or so US citizens, perhaps children, and threatening to kill them if the US invades Iraq. No such action is likely as a US invasion is itself likely to serve the political ends of al-Qaeda. This 'war' will assist al-Qaeda to reinforce its propaganda, portraying the US, with its supporters and potential sup-

porters, as an agent of Satan. It also has the potential to rid Iraq of the heretic Saddam while creating the tensions, crises and political spaces for the growth of Islamic extremism.

#### A JUST CAUSE?

On 7 October 2002, George Bush delivered a speech in which he made his case against Iraq:

Eleven years ago, as a condition for ending the Persian Gulf War, the Iraqi regime was required to destroy its weapons of mass destruction, to cease all development of such weapons and to stop all support for terrorist groups.

The Iraqi regime has violated all of those obligations. It possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons.

It is seeking nuclear weapons.

It has given shelter and support to terrorism and practices terror against its own people. Some ask why Iraq is different from other countries or regimes that also have terrible weapons. While there are many dangers in the world, the threat from Iraq stands alone—because it gathers the most serious dangers of our age in one place.

Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are controlled by a murderous tyrant, who has already used chemical weapons to kill thousands of people. This same tyrant has tried to dominate the Middle East, has invaded and brutally occupied a small neighbour, has struck other nations without warning, and holds an unrelenting hostility towards the United States.

Let us analyse President Bush's propositions. His first statement, regarding the requirement that Iraq cease construction of all weapons of mass destruction, is true. It is also selective. Resolution 687, made following the Gulf War, also refers to establishing a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. If Iraq still possesses weapons of mass destruction (WMD) then it is not alone. Israel possesses nuclear weapons and the US has also presumably created nuclear capability in the region. Syria and Egypt possess chemical weapons.

Scott Ritter, for five years a senior UNSCOM weapons inspector, has stated:

By 1998, the chemical weapons infrastructure (of Iraq) had been completely dismantled or de-

stroyed by UNSCOM or by Iraq in compliance with our mandate. The biological weapons program was gone, all the major facilities eliminated. The nuclear weapons program was completely eliminated. The long-range ballistic missiles program was completely eliminated. If I had to quantify Iraq's threat, I would say (it is) zero.<sup>4</sup>

If Iraq were to produce or deploy nuclear or chemical weapons, these would almost certainly be detected by satellite and air reconnaissance and destroyed in air strikes. According to Ritter, following the job done by UNSCOM after the Gulf War, in order to produce weapons of mass destruction, Iraq would have to procure the complicated tools and technology required through front companies, which would likely be detected. The manufacture of chemical and biological weapons emits vented gases that would have been detected by now if they existed. The manufacture of nuclear weapons emits gamma rays that would also have been detected by now if they existed. The US has been watching, via satellite and other means, and has seen none of this. "If Iraq was producing weapons today, we would have definitive proof," Ritter has said.<sup>5</sup> In relation to biological weapons, both Stephen Zunes in his article 'Fallacies of US Plans to Invade Iraq'<sup>6</sup> and Ritter, reported in the *Weekend Australian*, have emphasised the problem of delivery systems. Zunes cites Israeli military analyst Meir Stieglitz, writing in the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, as having stated:

there is no such thing as a long-range Iraqi missile with an effective biological warhead. No one has found an Iraqi biological warhead. The chances of Iraq having succeeded in developing operative warheads without tests are zero.

According to Ritter:

Iraq never perfected the means to aerosolise anthrax. What they produced was crude. The only way an Iraqi biological agent would kill you is if it landed on your head.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein is a murderous tyrant, as murderous and tyrannical as they come. He is up there with US allies Pinochet, Somoza, Marcos and Suharto. And like all of those Saddam was assisted by the USA and sustained in

power by them. In the case of Saddam this even occurred at the time when he was using chemical weapons against Iran and Iraq's own Kurdish population. The harsh fact is that, to date, Saddam has only ever used chemical weapons in situations where he knew that the West would tolerate it. Saddam's Baath Party came to power in the midst of the Cold War. The most significant social force in the country at the time was the Iraqi Communist Party. The US-backed gangster wing of the Baath Party decimated first the communists and then the oil workers' trade unions. From this time, Saddam Hussein was rewarded by the West with arms and trade contracts until he invaded Kuwait in 1990.<sup>8</sup>

A comprehensive discussion of US support to Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war is contained in 'Oil, politics and the military in the US "war on terror"' by Irene Gendzier (<[www.zmag.org/meastwatch/gendzieroil.htm](http://www.zmag.org/meastwatch/gendzieroil.htm)>). She states:

The Iran-Iraq war coincided with a period, 1980-1988, that the US Department of State (DOS) identified as one in which the Iraqi regime committed 'Crimes Against Humanity'.

In this period, according to the DOS, the Iraqi dictator "ordered the use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, and against Iraq's Kurdish population in 1988." The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war left 150,000 to 340,000 Iraqi and 450,000 to 730,000 Iranians dead. In the same terrible years, both Iran and Iraq received arms from foreign sources, including the United States, the Soviet Union and France, with North Korea and Israel providing arms to Iran. Assessments of this arms traffic demonstrate, however, that between 1981 and 1988 Iraq received 77 per cent of the arms delivered to the two belligerents (in dollar terms) while Iran received only 23 per cent.

Between 1985 and 1992, according to Henry Gonzalez, Republican former Chairman of the House Banking Committee, the US Commerce Department "approved at least 220 export licenses for the Iraqi armed forces, major weapons complexes, and enterprises identified by the Central Intelligence Agency as diverting technology to weapons programs."

Former Deputy Defence Undersecretary Stephen Bryen reported on the same occasion that the US administration encouraged: "US com-

panies to go to Iraq and do business there, and a lot of that that was sold was going right into the military programs. . . . The [Bush] administration's policy was to support Saddam Hussein, and not to look backwards, not to look sideways, look straight ahead and give him what he wanted. We coddled him, we supported him, he was 'our guy.' And just because he was building missiles, or just because he had a nuclear potential—the CIA warned about that, we know that now for sure—didn't matter. They simply didn't care.

Details of the "US Chemical and Biological Warfare-Related Dual Use Exports to Iraq and their Possible Impact on the Health Consequences of the Gulf War", were issued in a report known as the Riegle Report on May 25, 1994, 103rd Congress, 2nd Session. According to the Riegle Report: "records available from the supplier for the period from 1985 until the present show that during this time, pathogenic (meaning 'disease-producing'), toxigenic (meaning 'poisonous'), and other biological research materials were exported to Iraq pursuant to application and licensing by the US Department of Commerce."

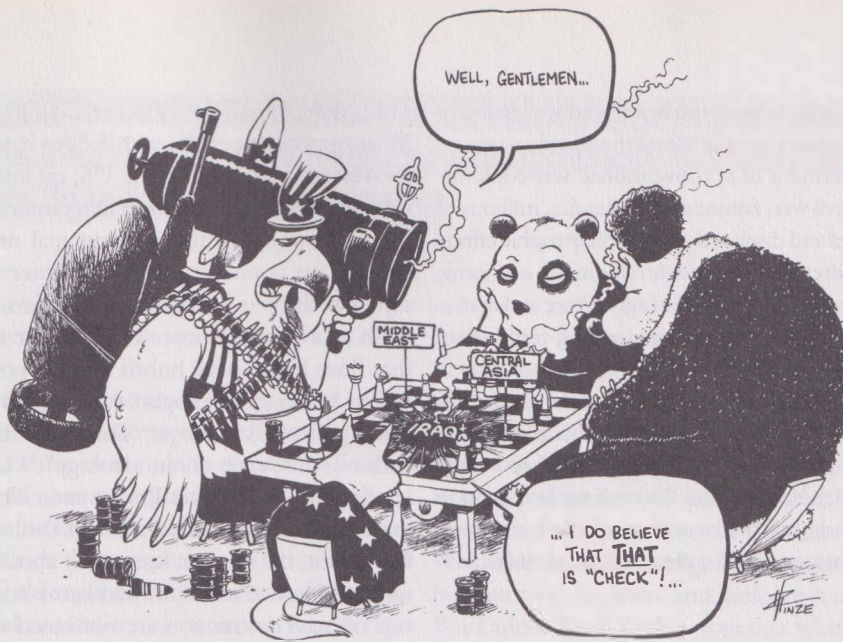
More recently, in August, 2002, *The New York Times* reported on previously undisclosed aspects of the covert US program carried out under the Reagan administration. *The Times* report indicated that the program "provided Iraq with critical battle planning assistance at a time when American intelligence agencies knew that Iraqi commanders would employ chemical weapons in waging the decisive battles of the Iran-Iraq war, according to senior military officers with direct knowledge of the program." These sources further revealed: "Though senior officials of the Reagan administration publicly condemned Iraq's employment of mustard gas, sarin, VX and other poisonous agents, the American military officers said President Reagan, Vice President George Bush and senior national security aides never withdrew their support for the highly classified program in which more than 60 officers of the Defence Intelligence Agency were secretly providing detailed information on Iranian deployments, tactical planning for battles, plans for air strikes and bomb-damage assessments for Iraq."

Criticism of Saddam's treatment of the Kurds by the Bush administration represents the ultimate in

hypocrisy. After being presented with evidence that Iraq had used chemical weapons to attack the Kurds in 1987-88, the Reagan administration blocked a Senate resolution imposing sanctions on Iraq, and continued to pursue good relations with the regime. Moreover, the Kurdish rebellion is directed not only against Baghdad but also against one of Washington's principal allies in the region—Turkey. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has sought to justify the no-fly zones as a protective measure for the Kurds against incursion from Saddam's forces. But the no-fly zones have seen repeated incursions by Turkish forces into Northern Iraq with attacks on the Kurdish population. In December 2000 Turkish forces attacked Kurdish villages in Northern Iraq. Britain and Washington said and did nothing apart from suspending their flights into the area.<sup>9</sup>

Why did Saddam invade Kuwait? Is he likely to again? Kuwait was ruled from Baghdad for two thousand years prior to 1922 and every Iraqi government since has laid territorial claim to it. An oil dispute arose between Baghdad and Kuwait but Saddam did not move against Kuwait until after he had met with US ambassador April Glaspie. To this day the Iraqi regime claims that Glaspie was informed of Iraq's plans, and made no effort to dissuade the regime from executing them. So Baghdad considered that it had been given the 'green light' from Washington.<sup>10</sup> The scenario depicted by the Iraqi regime is essentially that of Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. A regional military power invades a small neighbour believing that there will be no opposition from the superpower. In the case of Indonesia, the Suharto regime was correct. There was no opposition to its invasion of East Timor. In the case of Iraq it seems that the Iraqis were either misinformed by the US or they misread the signs from Washington. It is of course also possible that Saddam simply did not care about the military reprisals that the US indicated it would take in response to the invasion of Kuwait or is lying about having consulted Glaspie. But that Saddam would have invaded Kuwait knowing that this would lead to war with the US and its allies seems unlikely.

Far from Iraq's occupation being brutal, as was Indonesia's invasion of East Timor, Kuwait fell without a struggle. Kuwait's feudal monarchs left immediately. Of course none of this justifies the invasion. But in terms of the ongoing threat posed by Iraq to regional security, the real issues are whether Saddam



would have invaded if he understood the repercussions that would follow and whether his now weakened regime poses a threat, either to his neighbours or the US. It is certainly not the case that Iraq's neighbours are militating for a war to remove Saddam. On the contrary, apart from Israel, most are reluctant players in a war whose primary movers are the US and Britain. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have all urged the US not to go to war.

Neither is Iraq likely to attack its neighbours, given the huge and ongoing military presence of the US throughout the Gulf, a military presence that is unlikely to be removed even if the US achieves its goal of regime change in Iraq. The Institute for National Strategic Studies, a right-leaning US think-tank, has indicated that US military presence in the Gulf will be ongoing even if Saddam is removed.

#### THE HUMAN COSTS

Two aspects ignored by President Bush in his speech are the human and economic costs of military intervention in Iraq. The most significant attempt to analyse the human cost of a war in Iraq has been conducted by the global health organisation Medact, the UK affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War—winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. It released a report entitled 'Collateral Damage: the health and environmental costs of war on Iraq' in London on 12 November 2002 ('the IPPNW report'). It was released on the same day in the US by IPPNW and its US affiliate

Physicians for Social Responsibility, as well by other affiliates in various countries including Australia. The report is available at: <[www.ippnw.org/CollateralDamage.html](http://www.ippnw.org/CollateralDamage.html)>. It bases its estimates on data from the earlier Gulf War, from comparable conflicts and crises elsewhere, and from the most reliable recent information on the health status of Iraq. It hypothesises a credible war scenario from current US military strategy. This envisages four different elements:

- (a) sustained and devastating air attacks on government and military facilities and infrastructure in Baghdad and other major urban centres;
- (b) landing of ground forces to seize oil-producing regions in the south east;
- (c) gaining control of north Iraq; and
- (d) rapid deployment forces backed by air attacks to take Baghdad.

The report concluded:

- Credible estimates of the total possible deaths on all sides during the conflict and the following three months range from 48,000 to over 260,000. Civil war within Iraq could add another 20,000 deaths. Additional later deaths from post-war adverse health effects could reach 200,000. If nuclear weapons were used the death toll could reach 3,900,000. In all scenarios the majority of casualties will be civilians.
- It could also damage the global economy and

thus indirectly harm the health and well being of millions more people across the world.

- The aftermath of a ‘conventional’ war could include civil war, famine and epidemics, millions of refugees and displaced people, catastrophic effects on children’s health and development, economic collapse including failure of agriculture and manufacturing, and a requirement for long-term peace-keeping.
- Destabilisation and possible regime change in countries neighbouring Iraq is also possible, as well as more terrorist attacks. Global economic crisis may be triggered through trade reduction and soaring oil prices, with particularly devastating consequences for developing countries.

### THE ECONOMIC COSTS

The IPPNW report stated that the US is likely to spend \$50–\$200 billion on the war and \$5–\$20 billion annually on the occupation. The report points out that \$100 billion would fund about four years of expenditure to address the health needs of the world’s poorest people. The US Congress itself has attempted to estimate the economic costs of the war. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) provided an estimate of the economic costs of military intervention in Iraq to Congress on 30 September 2002. It stated that the cost of the war depended on a number of variables not currently known.

However it also stated:

CBO estimated that the incremental costs of deploying a force to the Persian Gulf (the costs that would be incurred above those budgeted for routine operations) would be between \$9 billion and \$13 billion. Prosecuting a war would cost between \$6 billion and \$9 billion a month—although CBO cannot estimate how long such a war is likely to last. After hostilities end, the costs to return US forces to their home bases would range between \$5 billion and \$7 billion. Further, the incremental cost of an occupation following combat operations could vary from about \$1 billion to \$4 billion a month.

The finding in the IPPNW report that the US is likely to spend \$50–\$200 billion on military intervention and subsequent occupation does not seem unreasonable.

### THE REAL MOTIVATING FACTOR

Most opponents of the war believe it to be related to Western, and particularly US, oil interests. Conversely, most who support military intervention state that oil is at least not the principal motive. Scott Ritter is an opponent of military intervention who says that the war is not about oil. Having voted for Bush as a compassionate conservative he now says that Bush has allowed hubris into US policy and that he has “far right ideologists running US national security policy”. Ritter says: “This war is nothing to do with oil, this war is about ideology”.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas Friedman argues that despite President Bush not wanting to admit it, the war is at least partly about oil.<sup>12</sup> Friedman says concerns about Saddam obtaining weapons of mass destruction are not based on fears that he might attack the US but on fears that he might acquire “excessive influence over the Persian Gulf”, the “natural resource that powers the world’s industrial base”. He states that North Korea already has nuclear weapons, the missiles to deliver them and a record of selling dangerous weapons to anyone who will buy them, and that North Korea is even more cruel to its own people than Saddam. He says the reasons Bush is going for Saddam first are because it’s easier and because of oil.

Friedman claims that a moral argument can be made out for a war fought to protect Gulf oil. This is provided that the US also adopts policies to limit its own excessive domestic oil consumption and that it helps Iraqis build the first democratic and progressive Arab regime, rather than merely installing a pro-US autocrat.

The politics of oil in the Middle East are extremely complex and cannot be covered in any detail here. Gendzier’s essay contains a comprehensive analysis. A few remarks, however, can be made. Iraq is a significant oil producer with the world’s greatest untapped oil reserves. The USA has an insatiable appetite for oil. Gendzier cites the 2001 report of the US National Energy Policy Development Group (NEPD), ‘Reliable, Affordable, and Environmentally Sound Energy for America’s Future’ which indicates that the US consumes “over 25 per cent of the oil produced worldwide, slightly more than half of which it imports”. Without a shift in policy “the share of US oil demand met by net imports is projected to increase from 52 percent in 2000 to 64 percent in 2020”. Two thirds of the

## A US-led ouster of Saddam could open a bonanza for American oil companies long banished from Iraq, scuttling oil deals between Baghdad and Russia, France and other countries.

world's proven oil reserves are located in the Middle East.

Transport alone accounts for 66 per cent of US oil consumption. US car producers have the technology to produce automobiles that get 45 miles per gallon and vans that get 35 miles per gallon, but there are no signs of a change in US oil-consumption policies. Clinton promised that cars would be getting 40 miles per gallon at the end of his Presidency. He did not deliver his promise. The average miles per gallon for vehicles went down during his presidency from 26 miles to 24.7 miles per gallon.<sup>13</sup> Dependency on oil imports has even led the Bush administration to push for drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Preserve.<sup>14</sup> There is really nothing to suggest that one of Friedman's conditions for a 'moral war for oil', namely policies to lessen US oil consumption, will be forthcoming from the pro-oil Bush administration. In any event, Pulitzer Prize or not, the notion that one country's adoption of policies to reduce domestic oil consumption can somehow bolster a moral argument in support of military intervention in another country seems extraordinary.

Saudi Arabia is by far the world's largest oil exporter. Gendzier's essay states that in November 2001 it exported an estimated 7.8 million barrels per day (mbd), followed by Venezuela at 2.7 mbd, Iran at 2.6 mbd, United Arab Emirates at 2.2 mbd, and Iraq at 2.1 mbd. The strategic importance of Saudi Arabia to Western oil interests is paramount. The Saudis export a little under three times the amount of their nearest rivals.

The Saud family, from whom the country derives its name, governs Saudi Arabia. It is a monarchical system of government without a constitution, run by the King who is the undisputed chief of state and head of government and who administers 'justice' in accordance with Islamic law. The state religion of Saudi Arabia is Wahhabism, a puritanical sect of Islam that supports punishment beatings, the stoning to death of adulterers, the amputation of thieves' limbs, public executions and administration of corporal punishment. Adherence to other religions is

forbidden. Religious Courts preside and base all decisions on Islamic law with no regard to precedent. The system has been harshly criticised by Amnesty International.<sup>15</sup> Women do own property in Saudi Arabia but they cannot leave the country without written permission of a male relative. They cannot drive a car or appear unveiled within the country. Wahhabism is also the religion of the Saudi royals, its bureaucracy, its army and airforce and of Osama Bin Laden. Saudi Arabia, together with Turkey and Israel has long been the US's most reliable ally in the region. Saudi Arabia helped bankroll the religious schools in Pakistan, where the Taliban was created, as well as Iraq's war against Iran.<sup>16</sup>

However, tensions now exist in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the USA. Gendzier states:

There is little question that US-Saudi relations entered a difficult phase in the aftermath of 9/11. The Saudi identity of the majority of the hijackers, along with that of Osama bin Laden, increased Washington's pressure on Riyadh. Washington demanded the arrest of supporters of al-Qaeda and the backers of bin Laden, but matters did not stop there. The Saudi Kingdom was subjected to an unprecedented level of public criticism in the US, its protected status increasingly open to question. Riyadh responded with evident frustration, mounting publicity campaigns and taking more pointed actions, such as the alleged withdrawal by Saudi private investors of some \$200 billion from US markets. Within a year of the September attacks, the Saudi regime moved to close off its natural gas fields to US and Western companies, a step that "appeared to all but end a yearlong plan by the companies to invest \$25 billion in Saudi Arabia, in what was billed as a historic reopening of the kingdom's petroleum sector".

In the view of some observers it is difficulty in the US-Saudi relationship and the need to diversify the sources of oil imports that account for rekindled US interest in Iraq. Although Iraq exports far less oil than Saudi Arabia it possesses two of the largest

untapped oil and natural gas reserves in the world. Iraq has stated that it could nearly double its oil production in the next three years. It certainly has the greatest capacity to extend oil production in the Middle East.

These factors led John Pilger to the view that the US desire for war in Iraq is principally about oil. He has stated in an article posted on ZNET:

At present, America depends on Iraq's neighbour Saudi Arabia, not just for oil but for keeping the price of oil down . . . The grievance against the Americans for their imperial interventions in the Middle East is said to be deepest in the country that was invented by British imperialism and has since been maintained by the US as an oil colony.

If America installs a colonial regime in Baghdad, certainly its dependence on Saudi Arabia will be dramatically eased, and its grip on the world's greatest oil market will be tightened.

This is the hidden agenda of the 'war on terrorism'—a term that is no more than a euphemism for the Bush administration's exploitation of the September 11 attacks and America's accelerating imperial ambitions. In the past 14 months, on the pretext of 'fighting terror', US military bases have been established at the gateways to the greatest oil and gas fields on earth, especially in Central Asia, which is also coveted as a 'great prize'.

Gendzier analyses the work of mostly right-wing think-tanks in documenting links between oil and the war on terror. She cites the report of the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), issued in 2002, unambiguous about the role of oil, the US military in the Gulf, and the high risks of reform to US interests. The report concluded that the US military build-up in the Gulf would have to be maintained even if Saddam's regime was removed: "removing Saddam Hussein is no panacea. There is no escaping the US role as a guarantor of Gulf stability".

Gendzier also examines Iraqi overtures made to French and Russian companies to exploit its two untapped oil and natural gas fields—something that has not transpired due to US sanctions and pressure. She refers further to a *Washington Post* article of 15 September 2002. The article cited oil industry officials and leaders of the Iraqi opposition suggesting that: a US-led ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could open a bonanza for Ameri-

can oil companies long banished from Iraq, scuttling oil deals between Baghdad and Russia, France and other countries, and reshuffling world petroleum markets, according to industry officials and leaders of the Iraqi opposition.

#### PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY

Friedman's other pre-condition for a 'moral oil war' is that the US not merely install a pro-US autocrat "to run the Iraqi gas station". He says moral intervention requires that "the Bush team and the American people, prove willing to stay in Iraq and pay the full price, in money and manpower, needed to help Iraqis build a more progressive, democratising Arab state". But how likely is this? Friedman himself acknowledges that in past interventions the US has installed autocrats. Moreover, he does not consider the likely human costs of a war. Even if the US genuinely wished to stay and help build democracy, how possible is this? If calculations in the IPPNW report are even nearly correct, will the Iraqi people, three million of whom belong to the ruling Baath Party, welcome US efforts to impose democracy from the ruins of a war that it has wreaked upon them?

There are at least three other important facts that need to be considered in relation to democracy and Iraq. Saddam is a Sunni Muslim who has from time to time repressed Shiite Muslims within Iraq. A majority of Iraqis are Shiite. Iraq's neighbour Iran has a fundamentalist Shiite regime in power. Tariq Ali postulates that, despite rhetoric to the contrary at the time, democracy in Iraq was never a priority of the US or its authoritarian ally Saudi Arabia after the 1990–91 Gulf War. On the contrary, Washington did not press on to remove Saddam because, although it wanted to teach him a lesson and reverse the 'Vietnam War syndrome' by having a win, an iron-fisted regime was still required in Iraq. Ali says that the US reasoned that without such a power Iraq may become another Lebanon, torn apart by ethnic and sectarian rivalries; and if the Shiite majority were to prevail Iran would be provided with a sister Shiite republic. In the wake of the Gulf War, says Ali, the US and its allies averted their eyes as Saddam crushed popular uprisings. Instead, they punished the people of Iraq through sanctions hoping that this punishment would encourage them to overthrow Saddam.<sup>17</sup>

According to Ali and to Scott Ritter the sanctions have had the opposite effect. Ritter says of Saddam:



## Can democracy be imposed by the 'hidden fist'?

He is more popular than at any time since the Gulf War. Hussein cynically manipulated the economic sanctions . . . transferring blame from himself to the US. The Iraqis don't like him but they have rallied around him and his regime because they hate us more.<sup>18</sup>

And of the war, Ritter says:

If Hussein fortifies his cities with Republican Guard troops, especially in his Sunni heartland the fight will resemble Grozny. The Russians had no choice but to level that city. That's the kind of fight we are talking about . . . We could win but we will kill tens of thousands of Iraqis—not just military but civilians.<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to contrast Friedman's call for democracy as a pre-condition of a moral oil war with his previous statements about the role of the US as a world superpower. In his *New York Times* column of 28 March 1999 he wrote:

For globalisation to work, America can't be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that it is. The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist.<sup>20</sup>

Can democracy be imposed via the 'hidden fist'? While there may well be attempts to portray a post-Saddam regime as a democracy, there are a number of factors that militate against the notion that the US can or will foster a genuine democracy in Iraq in the aftermath of military intervention. Some of these factors include: ethnic and sectarian rivalries; divisions within the Iraqi opposition; the problem of neighbouring Iran and Iraq's Shiite majority; the problem of autocracy in Saudi Arabia; the devastation that will have been wreaked during the war; opposition by Iraqis to their country's oil reserves (controlled largely by the French and British colonies prior to 1958) again being ransacked by foreign powers; and anti-US feeling within Iraq that will only be aggravated by war.

In summary, then, the looming 'war' represents

a radical escalation of a US and UK preoccupation with Saddam's Iraq, which dates from the Gulf War and is at least partly connected to strategic and economic interests. Despite the defensive rhetoric of Bush, Blair and Howard, there is no evidence that Iraq presently possesses the capability of effective offensive action against other nations. There is no direct link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, except the historical one of US support. Any war with Iraq would have massive human, economic and, in all probability, political costs. It is at least possible that the US and UK are presently motivated by a desire to gain control of Iraqi oil, and this, along with other factors, will undermine, perhaps terminally, the putative 'democratic' benefits of military action.

1. Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, Verso, London, 2002, p.144.
2. John Pilger, *The New Rulers of the World*, Verso, London, 2002, p.76.
3. Stephen Zunes, 'Fallacies of US Plans to Invade Iraq', *Foreign Policy In Focus* (FPIF Policy Report, June 2002), Ocean Press, 2002.
4. Quoted in Pilger, *New Rulers of the World*, p.56.
5. Scott Ritter, 'Iraqi threat: take it with a pinch of salt', *Weekend Australian*, 14–15 September 2002, p.21.
6. Zunes, 'Fallacies of US Plans to Invade Iraq'.
7. Ritter, 'Iraqi threat'.
8. Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, p.275.
9. Pilger, *New Rulers of the World*, pp.77–78.
10. Ali, pp.142–143.
11. Ritter, 'Iraqi threat'.
12. 'Oil is a valid reason for war?', *The Age*, 7 January 2002, p.11
13. Michael Moore, *Stupid White Men*, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p.125.
14. Moore.
15. Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, pp.297–298; Dynise Balcavage, *Saudi Arabia*, Times Media Private Ltd, 2001, p.17.
16. Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, p.297.
17. Ali, pp.143–144.
18. Ritter, 'Iraqi threat'.
19. Ritter.
20. Ali, pp.260–261.

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## A Jackson Pollock Day

Graham Rowlands sensed it was there  
the reflection of someone else  
falling across the coffee machine  
at least he thought he saw  
it but didn't think it worthy  
of the ink  
or was it something else

& all this while John Forbes did—  
wish we could be nicer  
like the Americans—  
& i'm left stunned  
wondering if Frank O'Hara  
wore a crewcut  
or did i see him way out west  
sporting a mullet—  
but maybe this was just a dream  
& i don't want to  
inflate things

then people i never imagine  
like Pam Brown pulls on a  
turtleneck & Ken says  
like hey that's cool  
that's huge  
but brief as anything  
like Miles Davis  
like Alex Katz  
which is exactly what i want  
to hear  
Tranter digs it too  
but he'll stay with the jacket  
dazed as he is in the powder  
room wondering if he should  
look for the men's  
or simply stay with the pink  
or is this just a case of  
the blues . . .  
& if so  
could it  
would it  
should it  
be a Jackson Pollock day

& i sense then i could pick up—  
if only i could get a broody hen  
set on the boys to group up  
wearing corduroy & cardigans  
arguing over whether their  
mother-of-pearl buttons were more  
hip than the tortoiseshell  
or the brown leather plaited ones  
& what did Berrigan wear  
or Ashbery  
when all of a sudden a wild  
tea towel fight erupts  
ZAP  
BAM  
BOOM

& one of them has dipped a corner  
of a towel in cough syrup  
to get that extra sting  
(if this is how the hard men act  
i'm staying in the playground)

& all this time little Laurie Duggan  
in his meek & mild outrageous style  
has had an argument with himself  
over whether he should have  
one spoon of sugar or two  
in his cup of tea  
(i personally thought that  
rather sweet)  
& i liked his nationalism & his  
choice of toast with vegemite—  
(now that's a big boys breakfast)  
but maybe i'm just too kind  
& by far too parochial

& Alan Wearne nothing but thunder  
he states  
but he'll never thump  
hard enough for me  
if his hair recedes  
the teeth cave in  
he slumps  
so what  
sorry wrong guy i'm not mistaken

& Ken still writing as well  
as Tony Towle does  
unable to read even  
most poetry except a certain kind  
without hate  
& even when you're expecting it  
it hurts  
& i hope i trust  
he's found a painting that he likes  
& i mean really LIKES  
one that is  
COOL  
one that Frank O'Hara would dig  
LIKE WOW  
so cool true hugity  
one that he & John could get together  
over  
& talk about

& write a dual review of  
to publish with a friend in a cool mag  
or on line  
then kick back & listen to Luther Allison  
sing his slowest version of  
'Red Rooster'  
over & over  
while both wondering what Nigel is doing  
and if it  
was it  
could it be  
a Jackson Pollock day.

GEOFF GOODFELLOW

essay / **EDDIE DAVERS**

## OUR AUSTRALIAN?

Murdoch's flagship and shifting US attitudes to Iraq

IT IS A TRIBUTE to the efforts of activists—most of whom work in relative obscurity and without financial compensation—that the peace movement is strong and growing stronger every day. There are large peace marches even before an invasion of Iraq is launched—a remarkable state of affairs. Public opinion is resolutely against unilateral US action—arguably another victory for activists. Peace activities on university campuses are picking up momentum even though university students today do not fear the draft. Whatever happens, activists have ensured that the cost of state action has been raised.

The public's reluctance to support an invasion of Iraq is partly attributable to its growing awareness of the West's support for Saddam Hussein during the period of the latter's worst atrocities. When Saddam used chemical weapons "against his own people", he was supported by the same officials who are today planning an invasion and the installation of a puppet regime. All this is being brought to the public's attention. What is not widely remembered, however, is how the press covered Saddam's activities at the time.

In Australia, one newspaper now stands out for its hawkish tone. *The Australian* is the loudest and most persistent in calling for an invasion of Iraq. It never tires of reminding its readers that Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons (sing along) "against his own people".

It is worth reviewing how *The Australian* covered the atrocities when they actually occurred. Quantitative aspects of the coverage are revealing; today's profusion is in marked contrast to the paucity of cov-

erage during the 1980s. However, this article focuses on the qualitative aspects: how reports were packaged, what was stressed and what was de-emphasised, and the nature of visual coverage.

### KEY ITEMS

1. In March and April 1984, when chemical weapons were known to have been used against Iran,<sup>1</sup> *The Australian* published a story that suggested the gas attacks may have been "fakes".

It identified the villain not as Iraq, but as Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran: "Iranians said to have been victims of mustard gas attacks in the Gulf war may have only been victims of a factory blast".<sup>2</sup>

These imposters were "allegedly dressed in soldiers' uniforms and sent to the West by Ayatollah Khomeini in order to whip up anti-Iraqi sentiment and, possibly, provide justification for a chemical attack by Iran".

*The Australian* quoted an unnamed "Iranian refugee, living in Paris", who "saw as many as 50 burned workers, still wearing overalls from the national petrol company, arriving at a military hospital in Teheran".

*The Australian's* prize source, the unnamed "Iranian refugee, living in Paris", claimed that "the Ayatollah ordered that the men be dressed in army uniforms and sent abroad for treatment".

2. *The Australian* published material broadly positive toward Saddam's regime.

Among other things, it claimed that Saddam Hussein was "a brilliant orator—one diplomat in Baghdad says he speaks Arabic the way de Gaulle

spoke French. He also has the politician's touch: Iraqi television endlessly depicts him cuddling babies and making jokes".<sup>3</sup> Readers were told of Saddam's "conspicuous concern for the Shiite community by ordering the renovation of shrines in the holy Shi'ite cities of Karbala and Najaf, at a cost of more than \$200 million". In a long commentary on the Baath Party, *The Australian* noted that it:

courted popularity since it came to power in 1968 by enforcing land-reform laws and using Iraq's huge oil wealth (before the war it was the second biggest Arab oil producer) to improve living standards. Villages have been electrified, schools built, an adult literacy campaign launched and a free health service established. Unemployment has been abolished by official decree and by creating unproductive jobs. There is little visible poverty. Iraqi women are better treated than in many other Arab countries. In the towns, women wander around freely in revealing Western clothes. More women are going to university and getting responsible jobs. As in Europe and the United States during World War II, the departure of men for the battlefield has opened up jobs for women. For the first two years of the war, the Government continued to pour money into development projects and subsidies on consumer goods.

*The Australian* also pointed out that:

consumer goods remains a priority: the Government does not want an uncomfortable, discontented population. It imports large amounts of luxury foods—frozen chickens from Brazil, for instance. The United States has provided \$400 million worth of grain which is not yet paid for. Food distribution within Iraq is being liberalised: peasants are now allowed to sell their produce privately, rather than through the state distribution system. Last year cucumbers were the only vegetable regularly available in Baghdad. This year, almost all locally grown foods are available. The Government makes sure the army is kept happy. Soldiers are getting fat on generous rations. They are well paid, and their families get cheap housing. Military heroes get material rewards like free cars and houses. War widows are given handsome pensions.

3. When it discussed chemical weapons, it did not always mention Iraq.

In one story, it reported that Egypt reportedly "used a Soviet-supplied nerve agent in Yemen between 1963 and 1967. There are continuing reports, which the Soviets have denied and some Western scientists questioned, that the Soviets are using mycotoxins in South-East and South-West Asia".<sup>4</sup> That report did not mention Iraq's use of chemical weapons—nor did it mention the word 'Iraq' in the story.

4. It editorialised in the most general terms about the need for an international approach to the problem of chemical weapons.

Expressing the pious hope that there would be an "investigatory body consisting of scientists from the more genuinely non-aligned and neutral nations", *The Australian* wrote of the "possibility of confirming or refuting any allegations concerning the use of poisonous gas and other obnoxious methods of warfare". Such a hypothetical body might "act as some restraint against a proliferation of chemical warfare".<sup>5</sup>

Nowadays, of course, *The Australian* wants nothing to do with "scientists from the more genuinely non-aligned and neutral nations".

5. When Saddam Hussein did in fact use chemical weapons "against his own people", *The Australian's* coverage was remarkable for its portrayal of the Iraqi dictator in a positive light.

The best known of Saddam's chemical attacks against the Kurds was at the city of Halabja over the period 16–17 March 1988. Mustard gas and nerve gas were used. Five days later, *The Australian* carried a brief report on page 6, quoting the Iranian news agency, IRNA.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the issue was placed in context: the regrettable thing about Iraq's use of chemical weapons, according to *The Australian*, was that it had "given Teheran a propaganda coup and may have destroyed Western hopes of achieving an embargo through quiet diplomacy".<sup>7</sup> Iran was the real beneficiary, readers were informed, because it "had capitalised on the propaganda war against Iraq".

Further attempts were made to defend Saddam's use of chemical weapons "against his own people". Quoting "senior military analysts in Israel", Iraq was acknowledged as having "used nerve gas and chemical weapons in the past" (in the past? Less

Saddam Hussein was obedient during the period of his worst atrocities, and was therefore an ally.

than three weeks previously!) “but only against targets inside Iraq and only when important strategic positions, such as the city of Basra, were threatened”.<sup>8</sup>

In an editorial, *The Australian* condemned Iran’s “reckless and violent attempts to intimidate the rest of the world”.<sup>9</sup> While Iraq was “led by a brutish regime, which started the war”, it was Iran, led by the Devil himself (Ayatollah Khomeini), that “poses in the long term a threat to world peace probably greater than that coming from any other source”. Khomeini’s “intolerant and theocratic doctrine . . . makes rational negotiations with non-believers all but impossible”.

Betty Mahmoody’s book, *Not Without My Daughter*, was also trotted out. Billing it “the nightmare ordeal of a mother”,<sup>10</sup> *The Weekend Australian Magazine* re-printed excerpts from it, reminding readers that Iran was a place where fundamentalist Islam flourished, women are oppressed and “Americans are despised”. The subtext was clear—never mind Iraq, the real danger comes from Islamic Iran.

#### OBEDIENCE

Yet it is a serious mistake to think that Islam was the real enemy. In the 1980s the US launched major covert wars in Central America—not against Islam but against the Catholic Church. Terrorist atrocities were committed against the Church because, after centuries of serving the rich, it had begun to serve the poor. While these attacks were underway, the US continued to support Saudi Arabia, the most reactionary Islamic state in the world, and was organising and training fundamentalist Muslims against the USSR. The US supported Indonesia, the most populous Islamic state in the world, during the reign of ‘President’ Suharto. It continued to support Suharto during and after the genocide in East Timor, whose largely animist population had sheltered under the protection of the Catholic Church. *The Australian* was notorious as an apologist for Suharto’s crimes.

The problem was not Islam—or the Catholic Church, or religion in general. The problem was

disobedience to imperial dictates. The US defines its allies not by their values but by their obedience. Saddam Hussein was obedient during the period of his worst atrocities, and was therefore an ally. His disobedience attracted the wrath of the US. And disobedience, in the final analysis, is the standard applied by *The Australian*.

#### VISUAL ASPECTS

Compassion towards the powerless is a universally recognised sign of ethical conduct. It is no accident, then, that photos were circulated showing Iraqi soldiers treating Iranian prisoners of war humanely. A case in point is a photo published after the chemical attacks at Halabja—“against his own people”. With the atrocities confirmed, there was a pressing need to improve the Iraqi army’s image. Dutifully, *The Australian* provided this service. The caption read, “Iraqi soldiers give water to Iranians captured during a battle for the Iraq port city of Fao—Reuters picture”.<sup>11</sup>

Lest this be thought atypical, it is worth noting that similar photos were circulated showing Israeli soldiers giving water to captured Palestinians and otherwise treating prisoners humanely. Of course, they also appeared in *The Australian*. One such photo showed a Palestinian prisoner drinking from a water bottle held by an Israeli soldier. Another showed a Palestinian man’s pulse rate being monitored by an Israeli soldier for signs that the former had been running; readers were informed that he had not, and was therefore released immediately.

All this when torture was routinely (and legally) used by Israeli security forces.

The reason for the pro-Iraqi coverage is the same as that for the pro-Israeli (and pro-Indonesian) coverage—obedience. The US was pro-Iraqi because Iraq performed a function. Its utility, not its power, earned it the support of the US, and of corporate media like *The Australian*.

#### CONTROL, NOT ACCESS

It is often said—incorrectly—that the US is interested in access to Middle East oil. In fact, the US

wants control of oil—a very different thing. Access means that the US simply wishes to buy oil like any other country; that it wants oil at a reasonable price. Control, on the other hand, means that the US can use oil to exert influence against Europe and Japan, whose economies are highly dependent on this energy source. Control also means control of profits; oil-rich countries use their revenues to buy advanced weapons systems from the US, ensuring a huge subsidy for high-tech US industry. Oil revenues are also used to buy US Treasury bonds, make deposits in US banks, and otherwise flow back to US corporations. ‘Control’ is a vastly different proposition to ‘access’.

It was Iraq’s geo-political role that earned it US support. It performed a service in ensuring that the US retained control over the energy resources of the region. When it challenged the US plans, it immediately became an enemy. *The Australian’s* coverage simply reflects this feature of international life. The same holds true for Israel. If the US ever comes to see Israel as a liability to its real interest—control over the energy reserves of the Middle East and the flow of petrodollars—then the US’s pro-Israeli position will also change course quickly. *The Australian* will follow suit.

1. As Stephen Pelletiere makes clear, the details concerning Iraq’s use of chemical weapons are open to challenge (‘A War Crime or an Act of War’, *New*

*York Times* 31 January 2003). I regard as reasonably accurate Professor Seyed Abbas Foroutan’s paper in *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* (16:3, 2001), the official medical journal of the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine. However, his position within Shaheed Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Iran, complicates the issue. After years of reading in the general area, it is my understanding that Iraq conducted experiments with chemical weapons from December 1980 to February 1984. It began using mustard gas against Iran from July 1983. In March 1984, it used a nerve gas, Tabun, against Iran for the first time. It moved on to other nerve gases including Sarin. Attacks continued until the end of the war. The Kurds were attacked at the city of Halabja on 16–17 March 1988 with mustard gas and nerve gas.

2. See for example ‘Gas attack victims “fakes”’, 26 March 1984, p.5.
3. ‘The Gulf War’, 31 March 1984, p.8.
4. ‘Bans and revulsion have not stopped use of chemical weapons’, 18 April 1984.
5. ‘World must act on chemical warfare’, 12 March 1984.
6. ‘Iraq accused of gas attack’, 22 March 1988.
7. ‘Chemical horror kills arms embargo’, 24 March 1988, p.6.
8. ‘Iran poised to cut Baghdad power supply’, 8 April, 1988.
9. ‘Unity on retaliation against Iranians’, 20 April 1988.
10. ‘Escape from Teheran’, 30 April–1 May 1988.
11. ‘Iran vows revenge for US bullying’, 21 April 1988.

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## The priorities of the right

Bluey is overweight at 40kg  
cattle dog never been employed  
never missed a meal  
regularly sees his doctor regularly  
taken for an evening walk you  
got to do the right thing

boat people breaking out again?  
trouble makers  
most likely they’d eat blue  
they wouldn’t have a clue  
where they come from about  
doing the right thing

LAURIE BOOKLUCK

## Exercising or

This time of imperatives  
robs the spoken to  
of or  
as a statement of betrayal,  
so too *but*  
disloyal redundant,  
and the spoken to  
paraphrased  
mouth the simple present.

LOUISE MOLLOY

## REASONS TO BE PARANOID

### The campaign to enlarge the powers of ASIO

AFTER THE PLANES smashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon it was a foregone conclusion that governments across the world would re-examine their security laws and the powers of their law enforcement and intelligence organisations.

In the United States, the Bush Administration pushed through Congress the *United States Patriot Act*, which empowered the government to detain an 'enemy combatant' (either an alien or an American citizen) indefinitely, without having to lay charges, hold a committal hearing or provide access to legal counsel. The FBI was thereby authorised to undertake covert investigations without having to furnish reasonable evidence of planned or actual illegality, regaining powers that were taken from it by Congress thirty years ago. New terrorism guidelines issued to the Bureau by Attorney-General John Ashcroft, and based on the *Patriot Act*, state:

the nature of the conduct engaged in by a [terrorist] enterprise [need only] justify an inference that the standard [for opening a criminal justice investigation] is satisfied, even if there are no known statements by participants that advocate or indicate planning for violence or other prohibited acts.<sup>1</sup>

Since the passage of the *Patriot Act*, the FBI has detained over 750 people for alleged immigration violations. Most of the suspects yet to be discharged are being held in Cuba. The Department of Justice has also interned around 130 people charged with committing federal crimes. Disturbingly, the names of those held, either under suspicion of terrorist activity or for violations of federal law, have, almost

without exception, been suppressed.<sup>2</sup> Although a federal judge ordered the Administration to publish the names of most detainees, the Justice Department has refused to disclose those names or even open immigration hearings to families of suspects, citing national security concerns.<sup>3</sup>

There are two further groups that have been targeted by the Bush Administration. These include suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda members captured in Afghanistan (over 500 individuals)<sup>4</sup> who are being held in military custody and are considered prisoners of war not entitled to legal representation. The second targeted group comprises migrant workers, thousands of whom have been summarily deported to their countries of origin.<sup>5</sup> The overall intent of the Administration is clear: it has greatly enlarged executive power so that it can monitor whomever it desires and, if necessary, engineer their arrest and incarceration, or expulsion from the country, free from the scrutiny of the judicial system, and other checks and balances.

Australia has not been untouched by these developments, although it has never needed to rely on external influence to formulate isolationist and arbitrary security procedures. In the wake of the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002, which caused the greatest loss of Australian life in a single event since the Second World War, it would be easy to forget that the Howard Government began striving to endow the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) with similar powers to that conferred on the FBI almost immediately following the events of September 11. It has formulated legislation, in several iterations, that would enable ASIO, for the

first time in its history, to arrest citizens and hold them, incommunicado and deprived of legal assistance for forty-eight hours, without charge for up to seven days and deprived of the right to silence during interrogation. The government even proposed at one point that ASIO should hold this power over Australians as young as 14 years of age. Further, the government is seeking to make it an offence, subject to two years imprisonment, for a lawyer or representative of a detainee to pass on information about questioning and detention to an unauthorised third person.<sup>6</sup>

These proposed powers would give ASIO even greater legal latitude than the FBI. According to George Williams, Professor of Law at the University of New South Wales, the Howard Government, alone in the western world, is seeking to authorise ASIO to detain people not even suspected of links to or having knowledge of illegal activities. In September 2002, Attorney-General Daryl Williams attempted to douse concerns about the draconian nature of the government's proposals by merely commenting, in an unsupported platitude, that 'safeguards' against abuses of power in the legislation were "not present in the legislation in other places".<sup>7</sup>

From the moment the Howard Government began its campaign to enlarge ASIO's powers, it was obvious that the national mood of heightened anxiety could easily result in heavy or ill-handed treatment of Australian citizens or residents, particularly Muslims, by ASIO. Clairvoyance was hardly needed to predict such events, for three compelling reasons. First, Australia has a long and morbid history of suspicion of foreigners and 'aliens'. This suspicion flares regularly and is transferred from object to object, from the 'Yellow Peril' to 'Jewish' Bolsheviks, to a new Yellow Peril (following the Chinese revolution and the Korean and Vietnam Wars) and finally to the Middle Eastern/Muslim peril of today. No federal government since Menzies' during the Cold War has played up to Australia's dread of foreign invasion like the Howard Government has, and it is questionable whether any previous government exploited this fear with the same degree of cynicism. Second, federal security agencies have historically enjoyed a very close relationship with government, closer than any other bureaucracy or state organisation. It is fanciful (and worse) to imagine that they are unaffected by government-fostered panics and priorities. Third, federal security agen-

cies have historically been characterised by ineptitude, political bias and narrow cultural experience, all of which have the potential to greatly impinge on ASIO's potential to make a meaningful contribution to Australian security in the current geo-political environment.

The proximity of security agencies to government has always encouraged ASIO and its predecessors (the Counter Espionage Bureau, the Commonwealth Investigation Branch [CIB] of the Attorney-General's Department) and colleagues to consistently and inappropriately harass individuals and organisations that lawfully opposed, to varying degrees, conservative governments of the day. Intelligence agencies' origins and organisational structures made them incapable of apolitical service. Given exceptional powers during the First World War, they were deployed by a Nationalist federal government to compile lists of aliens (unnaturalised and/or non-English migrants) and left-wingers to assist in their prosecution for generally spurious violations of harsh security laws. To this end they censored suspects' mail, restricted their ability to publish and prevented them from obtaining employment.<sup>8</sup> The ultimate aim of the federal government was the deportation of politically and racially undesirable elements: Bolsheviks and Sinn Feinists, Russians, Italians, Irish, Jews and Catholics.

Federal security agencies habitually attributed industrial incidents and strikes to foreign agitators, so they secured *agents provocateurs* in the One Big Union and the Industrial Workers of the World<sup>9</sup> and liaised with anti-radical groups like the Queensland Loyalty League and the Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League of Australia, who furnished lists of 'dangerous' people to be observed.<sup>10</sup> This was in part because whenever anti-radical sentiment culminated in violence, the federal government portrayed such events as Bolshevik-inspired riots, formulated and led by Russian immigrants. After one such incident in Brisbane, in March 1919, when a procession of labour and political organisations was attacked by a mob of returned soldiers, the CIB, Military Intelligence (MI), the Censor's Office and the Commonwealth Police Force provided lists of 'undesirable' Russian aliens to the Ministry of Defence, conducted raids on "clubrooms used by Russian Associations" and collected evidence of perfidy and lawlessness. Russians' houses were raided, their property confiscated and earmarked individuals



After twelve years of intermittent devotion, the CIB had finally succeeded in deporting . . . Gustav Niedrig, now an institutionalised, mentally ill man.

rounded up and deported.<sup>11</sup> Then, as now, the federal government relied heavily on the weapon of deportation to fight unwanted peoples and doctrines. Shielded from judicial interference, senior federal officials strove to physically expel ‘Bolshevism’ from Australian shores. Intelligence services did their bit by maintaining constant lists of the numbers and precise nationalities of miscreants deported, and by monitoring the entry paths of undesirables and guarding against individuals’ attempts to re-enter the country.<sup>12</sup>

Although the close of the Great War brought about a rationalisation of intelligence services and a hiatus in deportations, the mission of security agencies was in no way liberalised or democratised. The federal government retained its extraordinary wartime authority to deport foreign and native-born individuals, under an amended *Immigration Act* of 1920, that outlawed advocacy of the “overthrow by force or violence [of] any established government of the Commonwealth or any State or any other civilised country or of all forms of law” (presumably, even agitating against the Bolshevik government became a criminal offence). And a powerful clique of administrators and politicians, anxious to preserve intelligence agencies’ powers and institutional qualities, ensured that wartime operational practices continued. Central intelligence offices produced catalogues of radical persons and causes, while MI published a weekly intelligence bulletin, classifying suspects, clarifying the agency’s general duties and noting radical persons and organisations to be observed and prosecuted. Typically, these reports discussed aliens who had changed residence without informing authorities or who had disappeared from official attention, as well as drill shirkers and citizens attending political rallies and meetings. Bulletins were supplemented by fortnightly reports regarding “pacifist and disaffected persons and organisations”, distributed by the Censor’s Office. All these reports were forwarded to the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor.<sup>13</sup>

These reports did not lie idle. They were used in critical government prosecutions of industrial and

political opponents. When conflict on the waterfront prompted the Bruce Government to revive the practise of show-trials, to flush the ‘Bolshevik’ element of Australian labour from cover, the government resolved to take preventive action against specific individuals rather than charge transgressors under specific regulations, if an infringement occurred. Prime Minister S.M. Bruce directed his Attorney-General to indict the President and Secretary of the Seamen’s Union, Tom Walsh (from Ireland) and Jacob Johannsen (from the Netherlands), for inciting workers to strike. Having arrested Walsh and Johannsen, the government introduced into Parliament a proposed amendment to the *Immigration Act* that would empower the Governor-General to order the deportation of any person not born in Australia, whose continued presence was deemed detrimental to peace, order and government. Before the Bill was signed into law, the CIB was frantically, but unsuccessfully, labouring to produce evidence to show Johannsen had fostered strikes and lockouts.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the CIB’s procurement of damaging (albeit perjured) testimony,<sup>15</sup> the government’s plan to resurrect deportation as an effective administrative procedure was defeated when the High Court ruled that the amended *Immigration Act* was unconstitutional.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this pointed rebuke—the High Court knew what political liberties were at stake—security forces remained cheaply persuaded that ethnicity and political belief revealed treachery, even when they possessed reliable information indicating that foreign-language ethnic groups were neither responsible for, nor participating in, industrial or political disturbance.<sup>17</sup> Well into the 1920s, the CIB kept meticulous records of the numbers of aliens in specific districts, and their occupations and addresses. Pejorative terms and classifications indicate that the Branch took a dim view of immigrants’ contribution to Australian life. Russians, for example, numbered a “few merchants (Jews), hawkers, some tradesmen and [a] labourer”, while most “Turks, Armenians etc.”, were merchants and “hawkers”, although “some” were labourers. Syrians lived in

“ones and twos”, failing to assimilate, while Victoria’s solitary Mexican florist and Peruvian labourer also did not escape notice.<sup>18</sup>

Security investigations were too easily influenced by media concerns. Indeed, press reports were often the point at which investigations commenced, as the capacity of agencies to ‘discover’ information unaided was minimal. For example, in March 1925, the Melbourne *Herald* and *Evening Sun* claimed that China and Japan were ferrying Russian revolutionaries to Australia, through immigration channels. Spurred into action, the CIB found that an associate of a Commercial Representative of New South Wales had informed the press that on a voyage from Tokyo to Sydney, in 1924, he witnessed a distressingly high number of Russians board the *Mishima Maru* in Nagasaki and Hong Kong. Although CIB chief Major Harold Jones regarded the press account as “rather extravagant”, this did not dispel fears of revolutionary smuggling rackets and he decided there was “no doubt something” in allegations that Japan was dumping revolutionaries in Australia.<sup>19</sup>

Information supplied by ‘loyal’ and ‘patriotic’ civilian informers—invariably character assassination masquerading as intelligence—was also seldom analysed and, more often than not, without substance. Numerous case files indicate the degree to which the CIB was compromised by its reliance on innuendo. In March 1933, Harold Jones informed the Attorney-General that he had identified two members of a communist cell in the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways. The suspects were James and Alfred Byham, the latter an employee of the Tramways. Although neither man nor the Tramways had previously come under the notice of authorities, Jones advised the Attorney-General that there was “a very militant section in the Metropolitan Tramways” and that one of the Byhams may have been connected with it. Yet Jones’s intelligence had been gleaned from just one private citizen who had informed him of the activities of “a nest of Communist Vipers” in Caulfield, whose members included the Byhams; the informant’s attention had been caught by the unemployed James Byham’s “well dressed and prosperous” appearance, which suggested to him that he was “probably [in] command of foreign [i.e. Bolshevik] money”.<sup>20</sup>

A number of important insights can be drawn from the CIB’s investigation of the *Mishima Maru*

and the Byham brothers. In the case of the *Mishima Maru*, intelligence forces, acting on the prejudiced, unverifiable assertion of business elites and the media, commenced a major investigation (requiring the resources of three state offices) into the arrival of communists in Australia. Although there were no indications that the Russian immigrants were communists, as a racial and cultural enemy their apparent good intent was meaningless. In the case of the Byham brothers, ‘intelligence’ of very dubious quality again became the basis of extended investigations. Further, the prosecutorial mind of Harold Jones leapt into overdrive before any evidence of perfidy was collected or the situation was cursorily examined. Prior to the Branch even verifying the existence of the Byham brothers, and Alfred Byham’s employment with the Tramways, Jones was speculating about the activities of a supposed “very militant section” in the organisation, whetting the appetite of his superiors for future inquiries and repressive action, and demonstrating his Branch’s value.

It is this last imperative of Jones that remains particularly relevant to ASIO and the powers that it should be accorded today. Intelligence organisations are unique government agencies that need to publicise the existence of treachery (in varying degrees and according to circumstance) in order to justify their existence. Agencies habitually took melodramatic action on the flimsiest evidence against enemies of governments of the day, generally those believed to be communists. The Censor’s Office, for example, continued to intercept private mail after the cessation of Great War hostilities, apprising authorities of the activities of ‘radicals’ and ‘undesirables’. One victim of the Censor, Fred Williams, a fifth-year medical student at the University of Melbourne, was denounced as a “pacifist tool” for forming a Social Questions Society. His activities were reported to the University’s Registrar and Professorial Board, which censured Williams and warned other universities to act against related groups.<sup>21</sup>

The CIB’s paranoid incompetence also moved it to devote no less than twelve years (on and off) to tracking down a German-born, alleged Bolshevik named Gustav Niedrig. In September 1925, the CIB learnt that Niedrig had sailed for Melbourne to “make propaganda”. Although Harold Jones had doubts about the authenticity of the tip-off, the combined efforts of the Brisbane, Sydney, Hobart and

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Adelaide offices managed to track Niedrig to Port Melbourne. Two years later, Melbourne's CIB sprang into action, paying a visit to the home of a Mendel Zovel, where another man, Moses Rabinov stated that he had never heard of Niedrig. Following various leads, Jones wrote to Mendel Zovel, by now a resident of Sydney, asking him if he knew of Niedrig's whereabouts and if he could inform Niedrig that Jones had received "a personal enquiry for him . . . from overseas"; Jones thoughtfully attached a stamped and addressed envelope for Niedrig's anticipated reply.<sup>22</sup> The CIB files do not make clear why, after two years, the Branch suddenly acted on its (mis)information about Niedrig's whereabouts. Whether it had just cleaned out its files in a slow period or was justifying its revenue levels, the Branch's ineptitude was striking; the chief of the nation's premier intelligence agency was reduced to writing disingenuous, formal petitions for assistance from Jewish migrants, in the vain hope that they would, unsuspectingly, deliver their friends and relatives into the hands of the authorities. The investigation of Niedrig finally drew to a close in 1937. Having learned, in May 1934, that Niedrig was an inmate of Callan Park Mental Hospital in Sydney, the Customs Department attempted to secure his passport "with a view to [his] deportation". Harold Jones wrote to the Melbourne CIB office to locate that passport the following month. The wheels of bureaucracy and foreign diplomacy turned slowly until January 1937, when the Polish Consul-General informed the Branch that his government would accept Niedrig for repatriation, upon delivery of all his papers for appropriate perusal; after twelve years of intermittent devotion, the CIB had finally succeeded in deporting the dangerous radical Gustav Niedrig, now an institutionalised, mentally ill man.<sup>23</sup>

The psychological atmosphere of the inter-war and Cold War periods, combined with the need to justify one's professional existence, saw intelligence standards mine such depths that agency chiefs mag-

nified threats to the state by recycling and refashioning old documents. Some even claimed that the absence of significant material pointing to security threats was evidence enough of the efficiency of Australia's internally based enemies. For example, in a 1925 report on communism in New South Wales, Harold Jones, seemingly aware that the pitiful condition of the local branch of the Communist Party would not inspire fear in Prime Minister Bruce, took the liberty of supplying Bruce with duplicate police and CIB reports dating back to 1921. These additional materials, he suggested, would enable the Prime Minister to "more readily" appreciate "the subsequent progress of the [communist] movement". Jones then reminded Bruce that "a portion" of the Branch's "most valuable knowledge consisting of first-hand information" was "unsupported by documents" and could "only be utilised as a guide in connection with the consideration of more material forms of evidence". Jones even suggested that the Branch's inability to furnish any information of "real legal value" should not affect evaluation of its role or efficiency, because "the more secret forms of Intelligence . . . inevitably" depended on the collection of "purely informative" facts from clandestine sources who required protection if their work was to continue.<sup>24</sup> Though he would not have known it, Jones's remarks bore an uncanny resemblance to those of the FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, when he received a request, in 1920, for a numerical estimate of radical strength in the United States from the Director of Military Intelligence. Surprised by a solicitation for *empirical* data, Hoover could only regretfully report his inability to meet the request, instead advising his colleague:

We have found in the course of our work here that an estimate of the membership of the radical organisations is not a fair test of the amount of radical activity.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the import of these statements by both Jones and Hoover. They reveal in the starkest terms how empirical data was, for decades, disregarded as a good “test of the amount of radical activity” and, therefore, as a good test of the relevance and lawfulness of intelligence activity. These agency directors trusted only their own, unique perceptions that, more often than not, were ill-informed, erroneous and founded on baseless speculation.

In this context, it is appropriate that the professionalism of ASIO’s recent, spectacular and arguably melodramatic raids on suspected militant Muslims’ homes is closely scrutinised. The nature of the raids suggests that ASIO is revisiting the dubious techniques of the past to harass a (crudely defined) enemy of today. It was, as stated above, predictable that ASIO would lead a series of raids on the domestic premises of Muslims in the wake of the Bali bombing. It was also less than surprising that ASIO would maximise media coverage and massage public anxiety by sending agents in full combat gear to bash down doors that could probably have been opened by a knock.<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that ASIO and the government should not investigate the existence of fascist pseudo-Islamic terrorism in Australia. However, the Howard Government has needlessly exacerbated the difficulties of regional diplomacy and has wounded the wider Australian Islamic community by persistently demonising Muslims in general, through its policies and rhetoric on migration and asylum seekers.<sup>27</sup> It is precisely this government-fostered atmosphere of mistrust and fear that prompted NSW Supreme Court Justice and former State Liberal Attorney-General, John Dowd to inform a Senate committee that judges were concerned that ASIO will unfairly target Muslims. Among the larger points Justice Dowd and others seek to make are that it is not possible to prevent abuses of great power that may be granted to organisations like ASIO, because the standard of proof for instigating investigations is and will be very low, merely requiring an officer to show “reasonable cause” for an arrest warrant.<sup>28</sup> Legislative safeguards against the abuse of ASIO power vested in the Attorney-General are inherently ineffective (as the government’s proposed safeguards are), because they depend on the personal integrity of the Attorney-General (as I pointed out to Laurie Oakes in a letter to the editor published by the *Bulletin* 19 November 2002). Yet it is impersonal forces,

such as ASIO’s need to justify its existence, the dependence of Attorneys-General on the advice of security organisations (not vice versa) and the singular protection from parliamentary and public scrutiny that security services enjoy that determines intelligence and security activity.<sup>29</sup>

Another significant potential cause for the abuse of power by ASIO derives from institutional shortcomings created by the organisational culture and structure of Australian intelligence agencies. Specifically, an apparent lack of cultural awareness, breadth and sophistication has drawn ASIO and its predecessors into grievous errors. Now, as in the past, Australian intelligence seems to suffer from a lack of linguistically trained staff, who could build relationships with regional neighbours for effective surveillance. If recent reports are to be believed, as little as 7 per cent of current ASIO staff come from non-English-speaking backgrounds.<sup>30</sup> In addition, ASIO/CIB activities have appeared to betray a lack of knowledge of the history and governmental structure of Australia, a similar lack of knowledge of the history of various political ideas informing the beliefs of Australian citizens and migrants, and an equally poor appreciation of the life experience of migrants and the effects such experience might have on their political views. Throughout their relatively short histories, Australian intelligence services have either misinterpreted the motives of the minority groups they have observed or subjected them to ham-fisted scrutiny. The Russian migrants aboard the *Mishima Maru* were far more likely to be refugees from a Bolshevik government the Australian government despised, demonised and made war on, than Red sleepers. And the great majority of today’s Middle Eastern asylum seekers arriving on our seashores are refugees from despotic regimes the Australian government has demonised and made war on, not operatives of al-Qaeda.

The political corruption and insensitivity of Australian intelligence services is a direct result of the circumstances in which they were established and run by a tight-knit group of uniformly conservative men from military and legal backgrounds. Initially, an anti-radical clique of Prime Minister W.M. ‘Billy’ Hughes, Solicitor-General Robert Garran and two senior ministers, William A. Watt and George F. Pearce, policed national security. Besides overseeing the prosecution of wartime legislation, Garran facilitated the creation of a political division in Na-

The complete failure of mainstream print, radio and television media to highlight this particular question in the current national debate on security and civil rights has been particularly lamentable.

val Intelligence and appointed as its senior operative, John Latham, a lecturer in law at the University of Melbourne. Throughout the 1920s and thirties, the two worked in concert as Solicitor- and Attorney-General in the governments of S.M. Bruce and Joseph Lyons, hunting 'Reds'. Latham in turn recruited men like Thomas Bavin, a corporate lawyer and sitting conservative NSW MP. The relationship between the conservative government, the bureaucracy and the Censor's Office was equally intimate; the director of the Adelaide branch of the Office was a sitting federal Nationalist MP and, like Hughes, a Labor defector.<sup>31</sup> The Director of MI from 1916 to 1919, Major E.L. Piesse, practiced law in Melbourne. After the war he became a special agent attached to the Prime Minister's Department, charged with monitoring radicalism in the Pacific. The Director of the CIB, Harold Jones, had worked in the Tax Department in Melbourne and held his intelligence post until after the Second World War. Both Piesse and Jones were former members of the Australian Intelligence Corps. So too was the director of the Counter-Espionage Bureau, Major George Steward, who was also Official Secretary to the Governor-General while he occupied his security post.<sup>32</sup>

As the years went by, agency directors enjoying long tenure and protection from scrutiny safeguarded the institutional properties of intelligence services. They had total control over the recruitment of staff and looked for the same qualities in their employees as their masters had. They sought men from 'solid' backgrounds with integrity and sound (i.e. anti-radical) judgement. Employees of the Censor were drawn from commercial and professional ranks. Zealously monitoring the attempts of foreign firms to displace British mercantile interests, they "unquestioningly believed" Australia was best served by remaining "the preserve of British trading firms"; the term 'anti-British' was often used by the Office to describe individual citizens' political heresies. Intelligence operatives in the employ

of MI and the CIB, on the other hand, were usually career army men and when staff cuts were imposed on the industry, they returned to the armed forces.<sup>33</sup> These recruitment practices played a demonstrably crucial role in determining the political prejudices and professional behaviour of intelligence services, perhaps as far into the future as the post-Vietnam era. The question Australia now faces is whether the culture of ASIO has sufficiently changed in the last few decades to suggest that it can be trusted to act in a politically responsible and professionally effective manner. To date, citizens have been given little cause for confidence and still less justification for expanded powers. Disturbingly, neither the Organisation nor the federal government has made a convincing case justifying the need for increased powers, explaining why current powers are insufficient to permit them to do their job.

The complete failure of mainstream print, radio and television media to highlight this particular question in the current national debate on security and civil rights has been particularly lamentable. The historical amnesia and political complacency demonstrated by both the media and the Howard Government with regard to the proposed expanded powers of intelligence services is perhaps symptomatic of a cavalier attitude to civil liberties peculiar to Australia; Australians, after all, inherited so many of their rights from foreign, previous struggles. It is also arguably the result of the cultural war waged by a virulently reactionary Prime Minister and his sympathisers in government, academia and the media, who have consistently over-emphasised the primacy of classlessness, parliamentary compromise and the rule of law as determining forces in Australian history. It bears repeating that the activities of intelligence services prior to and during the Cold War were a stain on good government in Australia, and that Australian citizens' freedom from inappropriate harassment by these services had to be won, through struggle in the streets and the courts, as well as the nation's parliaments. Freedom is no more

inherent in the Australian character than in any other. It is a privilege that today's politicians have no more right to dispense with than a thief does stolen goods.

1. Nat Hentoff, 'General Ashcroft's Detention Camps—Time to Call for His Resignation', *The Village Voice*, 4–10 September 2002.
2. 'US Ordered to Name Detainees', *The Age*, 4 August 2002.
3. The Department reasons that it doesn't want to provide "a blueprint for terrorists", who might be able to interpret the government's "investigative strategy" from such public information". See Chisun Lee, 'Open-And-Shut Cases', *The Village Voice*, 4–10 September 2002.
4. 'US Ordered to Name Detainees', *The Age*, 4 August 2002.
5. Tariq Ali, 'War and Against', *The Bulletin*, 17 September 2002. More than one thousand migrant workers of South Asian origin, then residing on the east coast of the United States, were deported.
6. *The Age*, editorial, 26 November 2002 and *Lateline* television program, ABC, 26 November 2002.
7. *Sunday* television program, GTV 9, interview with Attorney-General Daryl Williams, broadcast 8 September 2002.
8. Regarding the spurious nature of the 'offences' committed by enemies of the state—it was common to rid a region of Industrial Workers of the World, or 'Wobblies', by imprisoning them for offensive public behaviour, obstructing traffic and assault. Wobblies could also be prevented from obtaining employment if their political affiliations were supplied to prospective employers. See Francis M. Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance 1916–1932: Reactions to Radicalism during and after the First World War*, PhD Thesis, Monash University, 1979, p.272 and Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism—The I.W.W. in Australia*, CUP, Melbourne, 1995, pp.210–13.
9. AA (Australian Archives), (File) A9650/1, Folder 1.
10. Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance*, pp.33–40.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.303–7 & 323–25.
12. AA, B741/3, V/44.
13. Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance*, pp.21–2, 50 & 144.
14. AA, A467, Bundle 94/SF42/64 286.
15. A Royal Commission was called into the affair and personal correspondence of the new Attorney-General, ex-NI chief John G. Latham, indicates that he used suspect testimony, including that of a foreign-born seaman named James Bede Andresen, to whom he gave false assurance of government protection. See National Library of Australia (NLA), Manuscripts (MS) 1009, Series 44.
16. C.H.M. Clark, *A History of Australia: Vol. VI—The Old Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green*, 1916–1935, MUP, 1987, p.242. The High Court ruled that the Commonwealth did not possess the power to remove "the liberty of the subject" from the States.
17. AA, A981/4, Item Com 10. For example, when an independent journal decried the "objectionable [foreign] element" among striking cane workers in Innisfail, Queensland, the CIB, which had concluded that strike activity had been confined to "Australians and Britishers," nevertheless reported that "the poisonous preaching of . . . revolutionaries and other Communists" was having "bad effects" among non Anglo-Saxon migrants in the area. This conclusion was endorsed in spite of the fact that the immigrants were "regarded as being generally very much against the IWW and the Communists".
18. AA, B741/3, Item V397.
19. AA, A8911/1, Item 154/Part 1. Class prejudice played its part in determining this outcome, for the NSW Commercial Representative, John Bligh Sutter, was a member of a "well-known, respectable family from Bathurst".
20. AA, A467/1, Item Bundle 93/SF 42/55 32/1766. The informant also opined that "the women" among their followers were "the most unscrupulous".
21. AA, B741/3, Item V/273.
22. AA, B741/3, Item V/5047.
23. *Ibid.*
24. AA, A8911/1, Item 154/1.
25. United States Library of Congress, Washington DC, United States Military Intelligence Reports, Surveillance of Radicals in the United States 1917–1941, Reel 19.
26. The most notable raids occurred in Perth shortly after 5 a.m. on 30 October 2002, when ASIO officers wearing balaclavas, helmets and bulletproof vests smashed their way into a suspect's house. See *PM* radio broadcast, ABC, 30 October 2002.
27. *Ibid.* Jaya Fadli Basri, a 30-year-old Indonesian-born man whose suburban Sydney house was also raided on 30 October 2002, stated that uncertainty about his and his family's welcome in Australia, coupled with the experience of being raided, made him contemplate returning to Jakarta. Although Mr Basri has been living in Australia since 1994, he does not have permanent residency status.
28. This task was described by Justice Dowd, based on his experience in administering the *Listening Devices Act* with the Law Reform Commission and as a judge, as not difficult. See *Lateline* television broadcast, ABC, 26 November 2002.
29. *The Bulletin*, 19 November 2002, p.10. Laurie Oakes' article, 'Minister of Commonsense', praising the apolitical judgement of Attorney-General Daryl Williams was published in the 12 November 2002 issue of the *Bulletin*.
30. 'Based on Strong Intelligence', *The Age*, 14 December 2002.
31. Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance*, pp.69, 86–8, 204 & 248.
32. *Ibid.*, pp.3, 44–5, 81–5. The Governor-General, too, at this time was not a ceremonial figure, but a powerful and partisan official who conducted informal political surveillance and acted as a conduit between the Imperial Government and MI5, protecting British imperial interests first and foremost.
33. Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance*, pp.47–8 & 96.

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## ROSEMARY FOR REMEMBRANCE

In Abbotsford you got used to seeing the people around you change. One day you'd see an old lady with brown socks push a shopping jeep along Park Street, the next day she'd have a red gash across her face. A woman would see her mother off outside a flat, wave, meet your eye and duck inside with a swift swing of her jaw to prevent you from noticing the shiner she was sporting. An old man, frail, with one arm, would get frailer, acquire new injuries, if you stuck around for enough years you'd watch his eye get milky with a disease, his arm hang in a sling, his ears develop a fungal infection.

Abbotsford was a place of change. It was a place seeking itself. It was a place destined to return to its former swampiness. It was unclaimed by both Richmond and Collingwood who flanked it, and not even known of by Kew on the other side of its bordering river.

In the early parts of the century, when shoe factories shot up overnight employing slum-dwellers for a pittance in Collingwood, Abbotsford was the little strip of almost that took you down to the river. Abbotsford was the swampy impossibility that gave mosquitoes a head start in life before they launched themselves on the metropolis. Where the nuns in the convent kept a farm with pigs and chickens and wayward young girls, torn weeping from their rag-tag lovers, torn screaming from their newborn children, torn aching from the life of a girl, and set

straight in a convent with an industrial laundry and a high moral ground sitting tall and lopsided in the waterlogged riverside swampland.

The girls in the convent were sluts from South Melbourne. The girls in the convent were poor girls from the slums. The girls in the convent were one too many mouths to feed in big country families. They were in need of straightening, this much was known. They worked till they sweated the sin out. And many of them became nuns themselves, convinced that the devil had got them and they could work to keep him at bay. Made afraid of the devil, I could see the girls, the smart ones too, becoming gradually convinced that if the nuns could claim such grandeur and authority in a house of a thousand rooms, then perhaps what they told them of the devil, then perhaps what they told them of themselves, was true.

If you worked that hard and were forced to keep that much silence, you would start to listen, you would start to see patterns, you would start to forget what the world had been, see the man you loved at eighteen as the lustful doomed soul that he was, forget that you loved, forget that you were loved, and buy some shares in heaven, because the people around you did, and they seem to be happier than you.

Every year I learned more that you could forget and forget and forget. Every week I learned more you could forget and be forgotten. And every day I

learned how direly people needed to remember, and how direly they needed to be remembered. Not after they were gone, not because they died, but because they were alive, and they need to be remembered, and Abbotsford was a forgotten strip of suburb, with a forgotten convent destined to be converted into overpriced apartments for couples with two cars and image consultants, with a forgotten people limping, ailing visibly, running across the red lights during peak hour, catching the chemist before closing, catching the last five minutes of Monday's methadone, and I had known the forgotten people because I had held them, I had held them in my arms, because the bus was late, because the bus was late, because the bus stop was next to the chemist, because I saw him approach and I ached with empathy, I ached with his pain, his bent leg, the lights changed, would he make it, should I run, can he make it, the man with the bent banana leg and walking stick was walking so very very slowly, and it was peak hour, and the traffic was hard, and the traffic stopped for no-one, sometimes not even for the lights.

And he made it across the road, and he was coming towards me, and I was terrified, because he was going into the chemist, because I was standing next to the chemist door, he had a plastic bag from the milk bar with a can of soup inside, and his arm was stretched out to hold the walking stick, out far like a scarecrow, to balance his bent, in-turned leg and his foot where the outside of his shoe was worn for want of being a sole, where he walked on the outside of his foot, he was coming towards me, and I was terrified, because already I was involved.

I was right next to the chemist door. I waited for the bus, I did not look at him, there was a step into the chemist, his foot dragged so closely to the ground, and he was close to me now, he was near me, he paused to negotiate the step, he paused, he stepped, and he falls

he falls

he falls

and my arms are there ready

to my horror

to my surprise

he falls like a bird shot out of the sky

his arms are outstretched

mine locked under his

holding his torso

and he

weighs

no

more

than

a

cat

Abbotsford was a suburb of converted warehouses, renovated houses, people complaining about parking because it was never built for double income families. Abbotsford was a suburb where the milk bar, then the bank, then the TAB closed down. Abbotsford was a place where landscape gardeners planted gardens full of rosemary, full of rosemary, full of rosemary.

There were indigenous herbs growing along the train tracks in Abbotsford, but nobody remembered their names.

'Rosemary for remembrance' is an extract from a novel-in-progress.



## THIS IS HOW I LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED

AFTER FOURTEEN YEARS of absence, I went back to the Philippines for a short holiday. In the plane I was reading an old *Time* magazine. On the back cover it stated, “A picture says a thousand words.” It was an ad for Kodak.

Since the rest of my family is already in Australia, I did not have a place to stay. So I rented a cheap hotel for the night. The room I got was small. At three by five metres, it was slightly bigger than a prison cell, with only a ceiling fan to adorn it. It was 37 degrees Celsius that night and the fan, positioned directly above my bed, did nothing to assuage my discomfort. Its dull humming almost drove me insane and certainly kept me sleepless. In the morning I set off to San Miguel by bus. San Miguel is a village 150 kilometres north of Manila, where I did my rural studies, a requirement to graduate from high school in the seventies.

The ride to the village was bumpy because of many potholes. A picture of the moon’s surface flashed into my mind. Since it was midsummer, the collective body heat inside the crowded bus made me sweat throughout the journey. The heat, the bumps, the road dust, and the engine fumes quickly stripped me of my clean suburban comfort.

During the rainy season, the road gets muddy and buses get bogged down for hours, sometimes days. Travel would have been shorter and comfortable had the roads not been in this state of disrepair. The old man sitting next to me commented that the road had been like this since the Second World War. I believed him, because he looked like a Second World War relic, and because when I travelled this same road twenty-five years ago, it was just as bad.

I divorced myself from my discomfort by focusing outside the bus window. Water buffaloes and goats grazed on the grassland, standing still as statues and oblivious to the racket created by the passing bus. Mother nature is unkind to the buffaloes and goats because the hot summer and the lack of rain make the grass brown and less nutritious. There are miles of this sunburnt grass, and from afar these feeding creatures appear like ants all over a loaf of bread.

After a long journey through a vista of grassland and rice paddies, I arrived at my destination. The villagers live in thatch huts, made of straws of palm leaves and supported by thick bamboo frames and floors. Each hut can accommodate a family of four.

The huts seemed fewer since the last time I was here. They also looked fragile and rickety. Their appearance gave me the impression that it need only take a mild cyclone for them to collapse like houses of cards. But the enduring presence of these structures belied this impression.

My vivid recollection of the place directed me to the hut where I lived twenty-five years ago. I was so excited to be going to see once again the family who took me in at that time: Mang Patricio, Manang Berta and their teenage son Adriano. As a matter of fact, I brought with me gifts for each of them: three pairs of denims, a pair of Reebok runners and a walkman for Adriano, two Australian-made shirts and two cartons of Marlboro cigarettes for Mang Patricio, and three beautiful dresses, a dozen Dove soaps, three beach towels, and a transistor radio for Manang Berta.

When I arrived, an old woman met me. Although I did not recognise her, I suspected she was Manang

Berta, but I was a little unsure because she had aged so much. She looked to be in her late sixties, grey, frail and with deep eyes.

She did not recognise me but I felt her nostalgic reaction to my voice.

Suddenly, the old lady exclaimed, "Jose, is it really you?" Before I could say yes, the smile on my face made her lunge at me, although with the great difficulty that comes from aging bones. She hugged me and kissed me like a long lost son.

Manang Berta had not lost the friendliness and hospitality that feted me in the past. I gave her the presents that were meant for her, her husband and her son and thanked her for what they did for me. I could see the mirth in her face when she received my gifts. But beneath her jubilant facade, I saw something disturbing.

She tried to put on a brave front but there was a trace of sadness in her eyes, and they soon cascaded with tears when I asked about Mang Patricio and Adriano.

"My husband and son have both passed away," she said, weeping. "They were mistaken for insurgents by government soldiers when they raided this village in pursuit of the rebels.

"They were forcibly taken and executed by those cold, callous bastards," she added with a defiant tone in her voice. "They both died in 1989."

I was overwhelmed by grief as she related the incident because I knew her husband and son well enough. Although I felt the loss, my grief was nothing compared to her sorrow as a mother and a wife.

"Maybe you've noticed that there are fewer people here now than the first time you were here," she said. "Some have died and some have moved to other towns. Only a few of us are left here, mostly old widows and a few old men," she added.

"We the poor will always suffer," she uttered in despair as she wiped her tears with her hands. "My husband, my son, and I never knew comfort and luxury. All we had in life was misery, pain and hardship. We accepted our fate but we trudged on persistently. The only thing that kept Patricio and me alive was hope, hope that someday our son will do better. Now, I am alone.

"People are supposed to play the best hand they are dealt in life, but poor people like us don't even

have a hand to play," she uttered in resignation.

Manang Berta was unable to continue talking but her silence was eloquent. She excused herself to prepare a meal but before she did asked me if I would mind the humble meal she would serve. She was very apologetic but I was more embarrassed, as if my unexpected visit had imposed much on her. I said that I did not mind.

She left me alone on an old wooden two-seater sofa while the cool night breeze from the opened window made me comfortable. With her last words resonating in my mind, my eyes roamed around the house to look for memories of Mang Patricio. I spotted a portrait of the couple hanging precariously on the wall above an old wooden drawer. I held the photo in my hands. It was an old photo, which I presumed was taken after my first visit.

In the photo, Manang Berta and Mang Patricio were in a happy embrace like newlyweds, smiling, full of bliss and hope, genuine, and without a hint of hardship and pain in their faces. I realised that this simple picture captured the happy life that eluded Manang Berta and Mang Patricio.

A few months after I returned to Australia, I received a package from the Philippines. When I opened it I found in my hands the same photo which I held when I was at Manang Berta's home. There they are once again, the quintessential couple, looking at me with smiles in their faces and locked in a blissful embrace. With the photo came a note which read, "Jose, I am sorry to tell you that Manang Berta has passed away. Before she died, she wanted you to have this photo in memory of her and her husband. She asked me to thank you for the money and the dress that you gave her. She saved the money for her decent burial and she wore the dress you gave her. She looked so beautiful."

I cried.

Later, I gazed back at the old photo. Perhaps with all the sorrow, misery, and hardship that plagued her and her family through life, this simple moment captured in frame is how she liked to be remembered.

José Trijo arrived in Australia from the Philippines in 1984. He has been a regular contributor to the Filipino community newspaper, the *Philippine Times*.

## SERPENT

## TIME

FROM 'POSTCARDS FROM THE END OF THE WORLD'

To the hero who lies dying in the seaweed,

My mother and I have just returned from Bali. She paid for my trip to help me get over my divorce from Gary. During one of our days there we were in a remote village and one of the old ladies saw the small tattoo of a snake on my wrist and she grabbed my arm and made me sit down with her. She told me of the Serpent Woman who had terrorised the village for two centuries. She had the body of a gigantic snake and the head of a beautiful woman, with long black hair and green eyes that put you in a trance. Spears or fire could not kill her. She came to the village twice a year to kill and eat one of the young men—women and children did not interest her. The old lady told me that she had three sons and she was worried that one day she would lose them all to the Serpent Woman. Her anguished tears worried her eldest son and one night when the Serpent Woman was due to come to the village he went to the beach to wait for her. A few hours later he saw her form in the waves. He began to sing a song as she got closer and when she was only a few feet away he looked into her deep green eyes and told her that he loved her. He walked up to her and put his hands under her chin and kissed her and he heard her give out a long sigh. He got on her back and began to sing again as she carried her lover to her island far away, never to return. After she had finished telling her story, I walked away from the old woman and left the village and finally I forgot about Gary and a marriage without true love.

From the girl with the blue pick-up truck.

Dear super-model with the buck-toothed lisp,

I am a history professor. The government had invented a time machine, but there was a problem—it could not bring people back to the present: a one-way ticket to the past. The world was on the brink of World War Three and oblivion. The plan was to send me back to the Garden of Eden and to tell Adam and Eve of the horrors of the world so they could warn future generations. A few seconds later I appeared in Eden standing next to Eve. She was beautiful and perfectly formed, but Adam was a few feet away and hadn't fully evolved. He was half ape, half man, and had not yet learned to speak. I took Eve aside and told her of humanity's dark future. I told her of Jesus and the crucifixion, and of the murder and pillage in the centuries to follow. I told her of the reigns of Mussolini and Hitler, and the destruction caused by the atom bomb. She listened carefully and a worried frown appeared on her brow. She looked so beautiful I asked her to be mine. Eve thought long and hard, and every second felt like an eternity. Finally she looked up at me and told me that she could not love me because I was from the future, and mixing our blood and history might cause problems with our children. She put her arm around my shoulder and said that she knew Adam was a bit dumb but she liked dark and silent men anyway. She told me we could still be friends, it wasn't the end of the world. I felt an intense and unbearable longing.

Cordially yours,  
the organ grinder from hell.

## GOING NATIVE

### Disguise, forgery, imagination and the 'European Aboriginal'

IN 1898, a former butler and footman named Louis de Rougemont appeared before the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Bristol, England with an incredible story to tell. Shipwrecked off the Kimberley coast in the 1860s, he had spent two years alone and marooned. Finally, after building himself a house of pearlshell, and riding about on turtle-back to kill the boredom, he was captured by Aborigines. After some debate they decided that he was not, after all, a returned spirit, but a great man. A dusky young maiden was brought before him. He was presented with a murderous-looking club and told by sign language to knock her over the head. Thinking, as guest of honour, he was expected to kill her for a cannibal feast, he refused, but eventually learnt that she was being offered to him in marriage.

For thirty years he lived among the Aborigines. He came to know their ways in intimate detail: their catamarans and bows and arrows, their sumo-style wrestling matches, the native passports, inscribed with cabalistic symbols, they kept in their noses, their habit of bathing in a sink of oil by cutting a swimming-hole into the head of a beached whale. He became a fully initiated, paid-up member of the tribe. In his appearances before the British Association and afterwards he referred to himself as Aboriginal. He spoke from an insider's perspective and authority, spoke of himself as one of 'them'.

At first, the London public lapped it up. His amazing story was serialised in the *Wide World Magazine*, and he published a book detailing his experiences. Wiry, dapper and self-assured, he rode the crest of an extraordinary media wave as surely as he had ridden the turtle's back, all those years ago. Hold on tight to the shell, he told his audiences, and poke your feet in its eyes to steer.<sup>1</sup>

De Rougemont's story began to unravel when a sceptical journalist, employed by the *Daily Chronicle*, a *News of the World* rival, uncovered a surprising fact. In July 1898, de Rougemont had sent a remittance of £30 to a Mrs H.L. Grin of Newtown, Sydney. Mrs Grin subsequently informed reporters that "the wandering Henri had never married any Yamba or daughter of Leichhardt, as far as she knew, or she would have had something to say about that".<sup>2</sup>

Once the inconsistencies started to appear, the murmurs became a storm. In one public forum after another he was catcalled and abused. In Melbourne, where he unwisely went to try to purvey his story further, he was unable even to speak. A journalist invited him to roll up his sleeve, to see whether his bare arm was as tanned as his face. He refused. On another occasion he arranged a demonstration of bare-back turtle-riding in a rubber tank constructed at the London Hippodrome. Standing by the pool in his bathing suit, he turned and informed his audience that he was an old man. Nevertheless a picture of him remains, a somewhat pitiable figure, skinny legs and arms splayed, sitting precariously astride the beast.<sup>3</sup>

Louis de Rougemont's story was not unique. At the end of the nineteenth century he was the latest in a long line of so-called 'white blackfellows', Europeans who had been shipwrecked, or escaped from convict gangs to live for long periods amongst Aboriginal people. Having lived amongst high society de Rougemont was merely the most able to articulate his experiences. William Buckley, the six-foot-five escaped convict who had lived amongst Port Phillip Aboriginal people for thirty-two years, was said to be "as stupid as a bandicoot". Even under the influence of the local rotgut, poured down his throat occasionally by aspiring newshounds, his "eye might glisten a

little, [but] he had no tale to tell".<sup>4</sup> Jemmy Morrill, who lived among north Queensland Aboriginal people for seventeen years after a shipwreck in 1846,<sup>5</sup> was said to be more intelligent but still incapable of telling those ripping yarns of cannibalism, corroboree and dusky maidens audiences wished to hear.

And this, perhaps, was the point. The 'white blackfellow' was a nineteenth-century media phenomenon, audience-driven, its loquacious practitioners required to fit their yarns within a pre-existing body of popular literature on the exotic.<sup>6</sup> Europeans sought tales of cannibal orgy, sexual abandon and outlandish custom, things that would titillate their repressed senses and confirm their sense of civilised difference.

They were fascinated equally by the persona of the European who had 'gone native'. What were the effects on civilised man of prolonged contact with primitives? Was civilisation something innate, a whiteness that would not wash away; or could a European, in a savage environment, revert to a primitive state? De Rougemont's sophisticated façade was probably reassurance that nature, not nurture, would prevail. Pictures of other 'white blackfellows' reveal the persistence of deeper fears. William Buckley, for example, is pictured with a low, beetling brow, a flat nose, and an almost simian expression. Still recognisably European, he is at the same time bestial, like a Jekyll caught in the act of turning into Hyde.<sup>7</sup>

In the past decade the phenomenon of Europeans 'going native' has assumed different forms. He (and occasionally she) enters Aboriginal life voluntarily, not involuntarily. He does so seemingly on a spiritual quest, in search of something more 'real'. His reports back emphasise the nobility of Aboriginal spiritual life. They reflect European fears, not that we may easily revert to the 'savage', but that in the process of becoming civilised we have lost something noble, some essential connectedness with land.

There is something tawdry about all of this. It reflects an unwillingness to grapple seriously with the issues, a gullible self-centredness, a preference for romantic play-acting that lends itself to fraud.

Again and again in the histories of Europeans who have 'gone native', similar character types appear. They are fraudulent, although they also deceive themselves. Romantic and vainglorious, they grow unable to distinguish their own fantasies from the fantasies of others. They are quixotic, tilting into strange lands. Their lives illustrate the fine line between forgery and imagination, between the artistic



ideal of pretending to be something or somewhere else and its nemesis, passing yourself off. They epitomise the neuroses of their age, the nineteenth century with its fantasy of the noble primitive, or the late twentieth's obsession with 'back to the earth' or primitive nobility.

#### SIR EDMUND BACKHOUSE

In the literature on such characters the most clearly-drawn is the so-called 'Hermit of Peking', Sir Edmund Backhouse, donor of some 27,000 volumes of Chinese printed books and manuscripts to the Bodleian Library at Oxford.<sup>8</sup>

Backhouse was born in 1873 into a wealthy Quaker family in Lancashire. He began a Classics degree at Oxford, but after a period of lavish spending he fled in 1899 to Peking. There, he found work as an interpreter for 'Chinese' Morrison, an Australian who had achieved fame amongst the Western colony of the great city for having walked

In the histories of Europeans who have 'gone native', similar character types appear. They are fraudulent, although they also deceived themselves. Romantic and vainglorious, they grew unable to distinguish their own fantasies from the fantasies of others.

through the whole breadth of China from Shanghai to Rangoon. Morrison, who despite this feat was unable to speak Chinese, found Backhouse indispensable as a translator of Chinese newspapers and official documents.<sup>9</sup>

Backhouse's most famous achievement, however, came in 1910. Published in collaboration with the businessman and *Times* correspondent J.O.P. Bland,<sup>10</sup> *China under the Empress Dowager* satisfied the European fascination with the Dowager Empress. Backhouse confirmed the European view of "the old sorceress who . . . had preserved and dominated an archaic, sophisticated and corrupt society and, by her machiavellian arts, postponed for fifty years the inevitable revolution".<sup>11</sup>

One of its most exciting features was the diary of Ching-shan, a Manchu scholar who was Assistant Secretary of the Imperial Household, and tutor to some of the imperial princes who were most closely involved in the Boxer movement, before being murdered after the downfall of the Boxers by his own son. Backhouse had saved the diary "in the nick of time" from being burnt by a party of Sikh soldiers. He had then sat on it for nine years.<sup>12</sup>

The only problem with Ching-shan's diary, according to Backhouse's biographer Hugh Trevor-Roper, is that it was a fake.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless it deceived learned Orientalists such as J.J.L. Duyvendak, who undertook a scholarly examination and translation of the Chinese text in 1924.<sup>14</sup> It was written in a supposedly difficult 'grass-hand' or cursive script which Bland and others claimed was impossible to fake. At first only Morrison, who had not seen and could not have read the text, expressed doubt about its authenticity. He did so primarily on the basis of his personal experience of Backhouse's character,<sup>15</sup> although his views could equally have been ascribed to jealousy.

Backhouse, in fact, led a far less orthodox life than his shy, donnish and humble exterior would have appeared to suggest.<sup>16</sup> In 1915 he engaged in serious and high-level negotiations with the British Government for the secret purchase of large stocks

of Chinese arms.<sup>17</sup> He convinced a senior official of the American Bank Note Company of New York to employ him to negotiate a "hundred-million dollar order" under which the company would be the sole foreign printers of Chinese money for ten years from 1916.<sup>18</sup> In the course of negotiations, Backhouse casually asked the Bank Note Company representative whether he would like to purchase the old Empress Dowager's famously valuable pearl jacket by breaking into the Palace and receiving it from the Palace eunuchs.<sup>19</sup> In none of these transactions did Backhouse ultimately deliver.

Finally, while leading an apparent hermit's existence in the last decade of his life, Backhouse produced an extraordinary memoir. Provided to the Swiss physician Reinhard Hoepli in May 1943, it was a volume of nearly 150,000 words, entitled *Decadence Mandchoue*. It "described, in vivid, personal detail, his own secret history, and his hitherto undivulged relations with the Manchu court, from his arrival in Peking in 1898 until the death of the Empress Dowager ten years later".<sup>20</sup> Hoepli was convinced that this work was an important contribution to literature and history. However he "had to admit they were unpublishable—at least at present. They were grossly, obsessively obscene".<sup>21</sup> According to Trevor-Roper, who received the memoirs in 1973, the first volume "consists largely of an alternation of two themes, tediously and minutely related: homosexual relations with eunuchs, professional catamites and Manchu *jeunesse dore*, and command performances for the Empress Dowager".<sup>22</sup>

From around 1921, according to his own description, Backhouse had 'gone native'. He regularly wore Chinese dress. He was estranged from his family in England and had very few English friends, although two Anglican bishops in China kept an eye on him. J.O.P. Bland wrote that Backhouse epitomised the observation "that the mentality of Europeans who become absorbed in the intensive study of Chinese gradually assumes an oriental complexion and, in the end, becomes estranged from the European outlook

Positive stereotyping may redress the imbalance better than any number of well-researched but timid attempts to tell the complex truth . . . Tom Keneally has said that he would not have written *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in today's political climate.

on life, habits of thought, and standards of conduct".<sup>23</sup>

What of the forgeries? To begin with, it seems, we must dismiss the idea of insanity. Those who knew and were deceived by him were very far from thinking him insane. The better hypothesis seems to be that Backhouse was, at some deeper level, unable to distinguish fantasy from fact. According to his biographer, "[i]f Backhouse was abnormal, it was in the exceptional vividness of his imagination and the exceptional weakness of the constraints upon it. He lived in a world of imagination . . . Even when he was physically forging documents, he may have been unconscious of the fraud involved".<sup>24</sup>

#### LUDWIG LEICHHARDT

The story of Ludwig Leichhardt is rivalled only by Lasseter's Reef as the great unexplained mystery of European–Australian history. For decades after his disappearance some time after April 1848, legends persisted of a 'wild white man', Leichhardt or a member of his expedition, amongst Aboriginal people around the Roper River region in the Northern Territory.<sup>25</sup> Other theories focused upon the discovery, in 1938, of scraps of iron and leather, human bone fragments and two coins of pre-Leichhardt age on the edge of the Simpson Desert.<sup>26</sup> At least nine major expeditions were mounted between 1852 and 1938 in search of clues.<sup>27</sup>

Certain misgivings about Leichhardt's character were expressed from shortly after the success of his First Expedition in 1846. Recent histories, such as those of Glenville Pike and Alan Powell, have alluded (without explanation) to "controversy" surrounding Leichhardt's "many faults". They have, however, still emphasised primarily the "heroic stature" of what he did.<sup>28</sup> In a sense Leichhardt's character, like his fate, remains shrouded in mystery. The mystery, this time, is created by the reticence of historians who do not wish to re-open an ultimately unsolvable debate.

The exception is Alec Chisholm's biography, first published in 1941, of Leichhardt and his compan-

ion, the naturalist John Gilbert. Chisholm's assessment of Leichhardt's character is summed up in a definition "[of] a particular type of humanity":

The constitutional psychopath has a certain quality of inaccessibility, a complete lack of insight or self-understanding, and an enormous sense of self-love or self-evaluation. He is often attractive, smooth, pleasant, plausible and polished. He 'works' his friends for all they are worth. He is incapable of any real loyalty or devotion to either persons or principles . . . He can concentrate if he wants to, is better at abstract reasoning than interpretation, lacks judgment, and has no sense of planning. Leichhardt's whole career squares with that statement.<sup>29</sup>

Chisholm makes a number of more specific accusations. Even as a child in Germany, Leichhardt had a "delicate physique and nervous temperament". He "showed ability at study but could not endure physical hardship". Although he passed his examinations he "became both short-sighted and melancholic", a "studious youth who kept to himself and whose only recreation was solitary walks". He gained a "certain warped satisfaction" from his father's perplexity regarding his future.<sup>30</sup> As a student he managed to ingratiate himself with another troubled youth, William Nicholson, who took Leichhardt under his financial protection, enabling him to leave Germany and pursue his dreams of travel. In the process he abandoned his studies without graduating from medicine, a fact which did not stop him from styling himself 'Doctor' throughout his time in Australia.<sup>31</sup> He evaded military service in Germany, and plagued his ageing parents with exaggerated accounts of largely imaginary illnesses—but failed even to write to his mother when his father died.<sup>32</sup>

Chisholm's broad thesis is that Leichhardt was successful through luck and the shrewd assistance of others. He entered difficult country without preparation, making no later mention of the loss of

horses and materials to which this led. He showed poor leadership skills, and a lack of concern for the safety of the expedition, including a failure to appreciate the danger from hostile Aboriginal people. He quarrelled with the party's Aboriginal guides. When Leichhardt was sick or fatigued himself, the whole expedition slowed down to allow him to recover; when others were sick or injured, on the other hand, he refused to slow down, depriving them instead of food. He lacked physical courage,<sup>33</sup> and broke the bushman's golden rule that all food should be shared equally, instead taking more for himself as leader. He:

rarely washed himself or his clothes, and as some of the clothes had been used on the First Expedition, they were unpleasantly odorous. His habits at meals were slovenly and he would eat almost anything . . . he insisted on his men eating putrid meat when there was no necessity to do so—and he became angry when their health improved after they had refused to eat it!<sup>34</sup>

Just about the only fault of which Chisholm does not accuse Leichhardt is that of sexual impropriety. This is perhaps surprising in view of his close male relationships, particularly with William Nicholson, who, according to Chisholm, supported Leichhardt for years and whose friendship was “transformed into a loving care which affected us mutually.”<sup>35</sup> Chisholm appears to have scrupulously avoided even a hint of sexual scandal.<sup>36</sup> Dino Hodge, however, “has argued that it was Leichhardt's fondness for Aborigines that led to his eventual disappearance, suggesting that Leichhardt's homosexuality brought him into conflict with Aborigines. Hodge also pointed out that Alex Chisholm implied homosexuality in his depiction of Leichhardt intending the reference to be pejorative.”<sup>37</sup>

It is not my purpose to debate the accuracy of Chisholm's judgements of Leichhardt's character, which were made of a German in the midst of the Second World War.<sup>38</sup> Rather, I wish to point out the extraordinary degree of similarity between the character outlined in Chisholm's description of Ludwig Leichhardt, and that in Trevor-Roper's biography of the ‘Hermit of Peking’. Even if Chisholm's account is entirely false, it still draws upon a readily recognisable model with counterparts both in the nineteenth century and today.

#### MARLO MORGAN'S MUTANT MESSAGES

The best-documented recent example of this type of character is Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under*. This book was first self-published as non-fiction during a ‘lecture tour’ Morgan gave as a sales agent for tea-tree oil in 1991.<sup>39</sup> In 1994 it was re-published as fiction by HarperCollins, which allegedly paid Morgan a seven-figure US dollar advance.<sup>40</sup> Despite its label as fiction, which came after controversy over the authenticity of the work in the United States, Morgan still claims on the first page that it is fact:

This was written after the fact and inspired by actual experience. As you will see, there wasn't a notebook handy. It is sold as a novel to protect the small tribe of Aborigines from legal involvement. I have deleted details to honour friends who do not wish to be identified and to secure the secret location of our sacred site.<sup>41</sup>

Morgan claims for herself a kind of spiritual indigeneity, a status as a kind of shaman with a foot in both worlds. She has taken on a new name, Traveling Tongue, “to reflect a new talent”.<sup>42</sup> She claims to possess supernatural powers, including telepathic powers taught to her by the lost tribe whose Dreamtime secrets she has been shown.<sup>43</sup> She was given access to this experience after being “tested and accepted” in a secret ceremony involving a piece of fruit and some rocks.<sup>44</sup>

Even the superficial claims for Morgan's three-month<sup>45</sup> desert trek seem implausible. Bob Weatherall has been quoted as saying that “I doubt whether there would be many Aborigines who could undertake a journey of that length in a Land Cruiser, let alone on foot”.<sup>46</sup> Morgan herself is alleged to have admitted on at least one occasion that the journey was fictional and a hoax.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless she and others continue to market the book aggressively in the United States and Europe. It seems extraordinary that, a century after Louis de Rougemont's alleged exploits amongst Australian Aboriginal people were exposed as fraud, even more incredible stories—such as Morgan's “telepathy with whales and dolphins”<sup>48</sup> are widely circulated and believed.

In Morgan's version of Aboriginal reality, ‘negative’ issues such as the stolen generation or land rights do not appear. Nor does she deal with the ‘fallen’ Aboriginal people living in Redfern or Dar-



win, or anywhere else in Australia for that matter. Her subjects are the 'Real People', a lost tribe who have remained entirely unaffected by colonialism. They have come to 'save' Morgan—and the rest of us. Her book promotes a comfortable view of Aboriginality. It panders to and confirms the most romantic European fantasies of Aboriginal nobility, without ever touching base with real-world Aboriginality at all.

Like de Rougemont, Marlo Morgan is a product of her time. She is an embodiment of the modern preoccupation with Aboriginal 'nobility', and with 'connectedness' to land. She reflects at least one possible reaction to the question of post-colonial guilt. This is a refusal to acknowledge Aboriginal reality, an assertion that what we all really need is not an economic or material base, but spiritual fulfilment. Its political implications are closer to John Howard's 'relaxed and comfortable' view of Australia than many of her avid readers might believe.

Recent accounts of other Europeans who have 'gone native' are harder to find.<sup>49</sup> Lacking a desire to become a new age 'prophet' of the Marlo Morgan kind, such people are rarely likely to wish to write about their lives. Nevertheless anecdotal evidence of their existence and activities is common around Darwin. According to Northern Territory Senator Bob Collins:

Over the years I think Aboriginal people have been the poorer—and I say that regrettably because it's still a feature of life in many Aboriginal communities—by being afflicted with a whole raft of non-Aboriginal people they could easily have done without. A helluva lot of non-Aboriginal people work in Aboriginal communities because they cannot relate to their own society or culture. Fundamentally, they need Aboriginal people a hell of a lot more than Aboriginal people need them.<sup>50</sup>

Consider also this story from Andrew MacMillan's *An Intruder's Guide to East Arnhem Land*:

There's a theory that whitefellas who live in such isolated communities generally fall into one of three classifications: misfits, missionaries and mercenaries. Certainly, remote Aboriginal communities tend to attract more than their fair share of disjointed whitefellas. Some end up doing a great

deal of good for the community and others, well, maybe they wouldn't fit in anywhere. There was a fellow out at Milingimbi by the name of Rainbow Guy or some such thing. He'd come from Adelaide and had a dream of starting a rainbow ashram in the tropics. He ended up on the island of Milingimbi off the central Arnhem coast. He'd been touched in some unmistakable manner. He had long hair and a beard and to the Yolngu he resembled the Jesus they'd seen in bible classes at the old mission. At Easter, people would get him to play the role of Christ. He'd don a robe and shuffle from house to house requesting water or food, only to be rejected on each occasion. As he left each house the people would pour out after him, jeering and hounding him down the dusty road. At some point on the journey he'd be presented with a crucifix and then the people, this mob of jeering black faces, would repent and pray and seek forgiveness. Eventually Rainbow Guy was hounded out of town after chartering planeloads of Kentucky Fried Chicken from Darwin and selling the food straight from the aircraft at substantial profit.<sup>51</sup>

#### IMAGINATION, ABORIGINALITY, FRAUD

In these types of cases, what is the nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator of fraud? Deceiver and deceived appear to exist in a kind of charmed circle, a parallel world limited only by the credulity of the one and the imagination of the other—and that imposes scarcely any limits at all.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, in a certain sense, de Rougemont, Morgan and Backhouse all wanted to be caught.<sup>52</sup> A perfect forgery, like a perfect murder, is uninteresting. What gives life to the chase is the ever more outrageous denials of the ever more outrageous falsehoods, the yarn that hangs by a thread. De Rougemont, Morgan and Backhouse all entered fully and completely into their fantasy worlds—and yet, at the same time, they maintained a constant connection with the reality that was the sceptics amongst their audience. They traded equally in insult and professional detail, became by turns strident and petty and grand, played the outraged innocent, walked away in disgust before returning to the fray. More significantly, at least for a time, their public lapped it up. They followed ever more closely the thicker the allegations flew; gasped as, with professional nonchalance, the tale-spinner

swayed along the gossamer thread of their own performance, for safety-net just a tissue of lies.

It is sobering to walk outside the circus tent and ask whether Aboriginal lives, the lives of the objects of this discourse, have improved over the last hundred years. As Larissa Behrendt asks, are the purveyors of these tales actually “doing Aborigines a back-handed favour”<sup>53</sup> by portraying Aboriginal people as spiritually superior? Arguably even a distorted portrayal “may gather the sympathy and support of non-Aboriginal people, particularly vulnerable and naïve Americans.”<sup>54</sup> In an environment where so much negative stereotyping exists, positive stereotyping in a popular style may redress the imbalance better than any number of well-researched but timid attempts to tell the complex truth.<sup>55</sup>

For over two hundred years non-Aboriginal writers felt morally entirely free to write what they liked about Aboriginal people. In the past few years, however, an atmosphere of defensiveness and some confusion has begun to envelop the issue. In part this has developed because of some well-publicised frauds, such as those of Marlo Morgan, or Leon Carmen, who adopted the nom de plume of Wanda Koolmatric to win an award for emerging Aboriginal writers in 1995.

More important, however, has been the emerging political muscle of Aboriginal writers and public figures. These people have begun to demand greater public exposure for Aboriginal writing, and on occasions also some degree of control. Tom Keneally is reported to have said that he would not have written *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in today’s political climate. Nicholas Rothwell has asserted that “[a] mood of cloying reverence has long mantled the treatment of Aboriginal people in the mainstream world. Established fiction writers are increasingly of the view that indigenous issues should be left to the new breed of indigenous writers.”<sup>56</sup> Phillip Gwynne, whose book *Deadly, unna?* inspired the film *Australian Rules*, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

As a writer of fiction I reject the idea of cultural protocols. The book has not tried to appropriate Aboriginal culture. It’s a white boy’s story and you don’t see Aboriginal culture unless you see them through his eyes.<sup>57</sup>

How justified are calls for control? In part, the response of non-Aboriginal writers to calls for ‘cul-

tural protocols’ has been that “it’s a white boy’s story”: that is, stories about Aboriginal people are European stories, too. Mark Mordue amongst others has also argued that such stories are “part of a tougher, necessary reconciliation with Aboriginal Australia that a white audience can’t live without”.<sup>58</sup> If a ‘politics of identity’ takes hold, and sensitive non-Aboriginal writers are scared away, the field is left open for the insensitive and irresponsible, the Marlo Morgans who reject any kind of rules. A ‘politics of separation’, and not of reconciliation, will become the norm.

There is a sense in which European writers, like Marlo Morgan’s new-age fantasiers, are demanding reconciliation—and on their terms. Forced reconciliation sounds suspiciously like assimilation, especially when Aboriginal voices on this issue are not being heard. Do Aboriginal writers actually want reconciliation on this issue? Are the assertions that non-Aboriginal portrayals, even distorted ones, somehow encourage the reconciliation process merely self-serving and hypocritical homilies, an outstretched right hand while the other hand greedily stuffs the money away?

At bottom, the argument against cultural protocols is based on freedom of expression. This framing of the debate as one between freedom of expression and censorship has some intriguing parallels. Catharine MacKinnon has argued that to regard the ‘pornography debate’ as being about whether the law is justified in restricting the pornographer’s ‘freedom of speech’ is a fundamental misunderstanding of the issue:

While one might well worry about what pornography does to those who use it, this test makes invisible those who are violated in making the materials, as well as those who are injured and subordinated by consumers acting on them. A substantive equality approach would make those harms visible.<sup>59</sup>

Pornography, she argues, is not an expression of freedom, but rather a “continuous expression of social inequalities”.<sup>60</sup> The question for the law, then, is not about how to balance freedom of expression and censorship, but how to balance freedom and equality. Traditionally, she points out:

publishing decisions, no matter how one-sided and cumulative and exclusionary, are regarded as

the way the system of freedom of expression is supposed to work . . . Speech theory does not disclose or even consider how to deal with power vanquishing powerlessness; it tends to transmute this into truth vanquishing falsehood, meaning what power wins becomes considered true. Speech, hence the lines within which much of life can be lived, belongs to those who own it, mainly big corporations.<sup>61</sup>

Is there an analogy between non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal people and pornography? Few people would accept that 'responsible' books or films like *Deadly, unna?*, or *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, are equivalent to pornography. Nevertheless there are too many echoes of the position of Aboriginal voices in MacKinnon's analysis for her words to be easily dismissed.

Ultimately I doubt Paul Goldman's assertion that, if a system of Aboriginal cultural protocols were in place, a film like *Australian Rules* would not have been made.<sup>62</sup> Any such protocols are extremely unlikely to have the force of Australian law. They would exert at most an ethical or moral pressure on non-indigenous writers and others who sought an indigenous 'seal of approval' for their work. Some individuals would regard the refusal of such a seal as excellent publicity. It is unlikely that any would modify their work under duress.

The strength of a system of protocols, therefore, is not its ability to 'censor' non-indigenous creators. Rather it is to raise the level of awareness in the creative community about the extreme historical and cultural sensitivities involved in ignorant or distorted portrayals of Aboriginal life. This might even help to address some of the substantive inequalities which—if Marlo Morgan's success is anything to go by—so clearly currently exist.

1. For references to this story see, Frank Clune, *The Greatest Liar on Earth*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1945; Geoffrey Maslen, *The Most Amazing Story a man ever lived to tell*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney; and Louis de Rougemont, *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont, as told by Himself*, George Newnes, London, 1899.
2. Clune, p.18.
3. Maslen, pp. 177–178.
4. Charles Barrett, *White Blackfellows: the strange adventures of Europeans who lived among savages*, Hallcraft Publishing, Melbourne, 1948, p.29.
5. Barrett, *ibid*, p.42.
6. This fact Louis de Rougemont knew well: he spent three

months in the British Museum before coming out with his story, boning up on Australian and South Sea literature: see Clune, p.12.

7. He is pictured in Barrett, *White Blackfellows*, p.3.
8. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking: the Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse*, Penguin, 1976, p.11.
9. *Ibid*, p.50.
10. For biographical information regarding Bland, see *ibid*, pp.46–7.
11. *Ibid*, p.87.
12. *Ibid*, p.75.
13. Hugh Trevor-Roper appears to have had sharper senses for a forgery in the case of Chingshan's diary than he did in 1983, when he pronounced the 'Hitler Diaries' to be genuine. Trevor-Roper, later Lord Dacre, died recently at the age of 89.
14. Trevor-Roper, pp.228–229.
15. *Ibid*, p.350.
16. On Backhouse's humility, see *ibid* p.51: "This humility, combined as it was with extraordinary abilities, often aroused protective instincts in more robust spirits. But it had its reverse side: it could be sycophantic in itself, and it could be the mask for other, more real and less attractive qualities." On his timidity and scholarly appearance, see pp.65–66.
17. *Ibid*, pp.162–164.
18. *Ibid*, pp.188–192.
19. *Ibid*, p.197.
20. *Ibid*, p.285.
21. *Ibid*, p.288.
22. *Ibid*, p.311.
23. *Ibid*, p.266.
24. *Ibid*, pp.336–337.
25. "By piecing together the reports of other explorers and bushmen, obviously there was a white man living with the wild Aborigines in the country between the MacArthur and the Roper rivers until after the first settlers arrived in the early Eighties—yet he died unknown. Was he a survivor of the last Leichhardt expedition, lost years before?" See Glenville Pike, *Frontier Territory: the colorful story of the exploration and pioneering of Australia's Northern Territory*, Cosmos Printing, Hong Kong, p.9. Note that Leichhardt's fateful final expedition was not the only one whose members became lost from public view. Consider the story of William Phillips, a member of Leichhardt's successful expedition of 1844, a London attorney and stage-coach proprietor who was convicted of forgery and sentenced to imprisonment for life. He volunteered for Leichhardt's expedition, and gained a pardon from it, his most "interesting appearance being perhaps as a 'trader' with various wild blacks" (Alec H. Chisholm, *Strange New World: the adventures of John Gilbert and Ludwig Leichhardt*, 2nd edition, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1955, p.276). However, the "later career of Phillips is not known. Evidence gained recently seems to indicate that as early as 1857 and as late as 1881 he was living as a solitary bushman (a 'hatter') in Victoria. If, therefore, the exploratory Phillips was the ex-London attorney earlier mentioned, it would appear that he lost or parted from his wife and children and settled down to a lonely life in the bush. This is, in fact, a curious matter. Since Phillips had

done his exploratory duties quite well, and had thereby made the acquaintance of 'numerous influential gentlemen', there is no clear reason why he should have become a bush hermit." (Chisholm p.277).

26. Alec Chisholm, above note 25, p.xiii.
27. *Ibid*, p.265.
28. See Glenville Pike, above note 25: "Leichhardt was a private explorer with very little money at his command. Most of his equipment was donated by his friends . . . His men were volunteers without pay. Leichhardt had many faults, but he did not stoop to misrepresent himself to gain his purpose". (pp.2-3) Pike does not mention Leichhardt's claim to be a medical doctor, which is not supported by evidence of graduation, although he did study some medicine in Berlin (see Chisholm, p.60). Alan Powell states that "Leichhardt's trek was a feat of great endurance and it gave him a heroic stature, since marred by controversy over the very unheroic nature of so much that he did . . ." See Alan Powell, *Far Country*, 2nd edition, MUP, 1988, p.64.
29. Chisholm, *ibid*, p.270.
30. *Ibid*, p.58.
31. *Ibid*, pp.60-1.
32. *Ibid*, p.65.
33. Worst of all, perhaps, Chisholm accuses Leichhardt of lack of physical courage. After he goaded an Aboriginal guide known as Charlie, he was struck "two or three heavy blows in the face". Chisholm notes that "[h]is apologists are unable to explain why he did not 'fell Charlie to the ground', as an Englishman would have done, but claim that such a lapse should not be set against his achievements. Well, there is the explanation, given posthumously by Gilbert: Leichhardt did not strike Charlie for the simple reason that he could not catch him. Possibly he did not try very strenuously—possibly he reflected that if he again got within striking range of the hottempered aboriginal, he might fare rather worse than he did at the outset. In any event, it remains a trifle doubtful whether that huge centre of physical activity in Sydney, where pugilists of many nations meet in combat, is aptly named in being termed the 'Leichhardt Stadium'!" (Chisholm, p.146).
34. *Ibid*, p.238. On one occasion this included emu and a young native dog. According to Gilbert, who along with Leichhardt's other companions could not be persuaded to share in the meal, the dog was "not only miserably thin but had a very bad odour", and even Leichhardt was forced to conclude that it was "not very recommendable", p.183.
35. *Ibid*, p.59.
36. "He frequently exercised an attractive personality and a considerable measure of culture. Almost certainly, too, he was physically moral. His 'love affairs', though numerous, were largely imaginary—he told Lynd, for example, that he proposed to take a girl back to Europe, and he told both Russell and Mann that he was going home to join a girl!", see Chisholm, *ibid*, p.270.
37. Mickey Dewar, 'The Leichhardt Enigma', *Journal of Northern Territory History* 47, 1994, p.56, and references cited therein.
38. Although Chisholm did not see fit to revise them during the relative calm of 1955: see Preface to the Second Edition, *ibid*, p.v. See also on racist attitudes towards Leichhardt, Dewar, *ibid*, p.54.
39. Gareth Griffiths, 'Mixed Up Messages Down Under: the Marlo Morgan "Hoax": A Textual Travesty of Aboriginal Culture', in *Connections: Essays on Black Literatures*, Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.), Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1991, p.76 at p.79.
40. *Ibid*, p.80.
41. Marlo Morgan, *Mutant Message Down Under*, HarperCollins, 1994, p.xiii.
42. Morgan, *ibid*, p.xv.
43. Morgan, *ibid*, p.61, discussed in Larissa Behrendt, 'In Your Dreams: Cultural Appropriation, Popular Culture and Colonialism', *Law, Text, Culture*, special edition ('In the Wake of Terra Nullius'), Autumn 1998, 4:1, p.256, at p.262.
44. Morgan, *ibid*, pp.13-15.
45. Actually "three full changes of the moon": see Morgan, *ibid*, p.14.
46. Quoted in Gareth Griffiths, 'Mixed Up Messages Down Under: the Marlo Morgan "Hoax": A Textual Travesty of Aboriginal Culture', in *Connections: Essays on Black Literatures*, Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.), Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1988, p.76 at 79.
47. Griffiths, above note 46, p.82.
48. Quoted in Griffiths, *ibid*, p.82.
49. See Nicholas Jose, *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola*, Hardie Grant, 2002.
50. Bob Collins, 1992, quoted in Andrew McMillan, *An Intruder's Guide to East Arnhem Land*, Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001, p.242.
51. McMillan, *ibid*, p.247.
52. Trevor-Roper makes the following comments about Sir Edmund Backhouse: "A scholar who has once attempted forgery and apparently succeeded, can rarely be prevented from trying it again. There is a subtle temptation which leads a man on, from mere disinterested craftsmanship, through positive delight in his own virtuosity, to the exquisite private satisfaction of deceiving the elect." (Trevor-Roper, above note 13, p.350).
53. Behrendt, above note 43, p.258.
54. *Ibid*, p.258.
55. The novel was *My Own Sweet Time*, which won the 1995 Dobbie Award: see 'Aboriginal book hoax angers publishers', *The Australian*, 13 March 1997.
56. Nicholas Rothwell, 'Black-lit goes gonzo', *The Australian*, 27 October 2001.
57. Quoted in Mark Mordue, 'White Words, Black Spaces', *HQ Magazine*, June 2002.
58. Mordue, *ibid*.
59. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words*, HarperCollins, 1995, p.xii.
60. *Ibid*, p.xiii.
61. *Ibid*, p.56.
62. Paul Goldman, the director of *Australian Rules*, is reported to have made this assertion on the ABC's *7.30 Report*, see Mark Mordue, above note 56.

Stephen Gray's novel *The Artist is a Thief* won the Vogel Award for literature in 2000. He teaches law at Northern Territory University.

## Twilight of knowing: the forgotten Australian debate

FIVE YEARS AGO the Stolen Generations exploded into the light of day with the launch of the *Bringing Them Home Report*. Today, the issue is fading into a dim twilight zone. Even the most controversial issues run their course on the media fast track, and others take their place—asylum seekers or terrorism, for example. However, particular forces have ensured that this issue has been exiled to the twilight zone, unresolved.

The Stolen Generations issue was destined for controversy. It prompted shocked outpourings of anguish and grief—epitomised in the image of then Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, weeping openly in federal Parliament. Such cruelties could not happen in a nation where the family is sacrosanct and children and parents are separated only as a last resort. Most of us claimed to have known nothing about such practices.

John Howard's lacklustre response—condemned by a Senate Inquiry in 2000—not only dashed dreams and hopes. It created a vacuum for divisive public debate. As truths became lost in a fog of bitter rhetoric, public frustration and fatigue mounted. Who was right? How could we know? What could we do about it? Adding to the sense of despair were reports of Indigenous families in crisis, of courts finding against Stolen Generations claimants, and of the federal government's dogged refusal to act.

It may not seem surprising then that the issue was dumped into the 'too hard basket' and left to slide back into the twilight zone. However, I believe we need to look still further for explanations. I say 'back into the twilight zone' because this was not the first time that the issue hit the limelight and then disappeared off the screen. Evidence about Indigenous child removal has circulated publicly from colonial times. Public protestations of 'I just didn't know' are therefore very puzzling. This twilight state of 'knowing and not knowing' requires explanation.

While systematic removal practices were not widely understood until recently, there was sufficient evidence to expect some public awareness. Rural communities with significant Indigenous populations should have known. In the cities, only those who never read a newspaper could seriously

claim to have known nothing. Explaining a similar state of 'knowing and not knowing' among Germans about the treatment of Jews during the Second World War, researchers have argued that there is an easy slippage between a 'mind-set' that distances and dehumanises targeted groups and acceptance of their unequal treatment. This treatment becomes normalised, unremarkable and invisible to the wider society, even as it assumes harsher forms. Citizens tacitly support these processes without acknowledging what they are doing. This state of 'knowing and not knowing' is powerful and obstinate, persisting in the face of observable evidence and personal encounters.

Indigenous child removal became the norm in official policy and practice and in the public domain. In the process it became unremarkable and virtually invisible. While some may have sympathised with the families' grief, most—if they thought of it at all—accepted that separation was in the children's best interests. Indeed, the state's duty of care towards them became synonymous with taking them from their families and subjecting them to 'civilising' regimes in institutions or white homes.

This twilight state of 'knowing and not knowing' is part of our consciousness. We persistently fail to see, register or retain the tragedy of what is happening to Indigenous Australians. Issues like the Stolen Generations surface for a time into the public limelight and then subside back into the twilight zone unresolved, to fester until some event brings them back into our consciousness.

As a nation we need to break out of this twilight zone and keep the Stolen Generations issue alive. We need to become informed, maintain debate, fight for justice, develop sensitivity and awareness and keep our hearts and minds open. As former Prime Minister Paul Keating said in his Redfern Speech in 1994, these issues are not a matter of government only, they are also to do with 'open hearts'.

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## HEAVENS TURNED ABYSS

Paul Celan, Gordon Bennett, and Australia today

PAUL CELAN, the poet from the Bukowina, came into my life—as he did with most of my generation in Germany—in Year Ten in school. His famous poem, *Todesfuge* (*Death Fugue*), was on the curriculum. Its powerful language, its seductive rhythm and complex structure made it ideal as the example for poetry after Auschwitz:

*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie  
abends  
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir  
trinken sie nachts  
wir trinken und trinken  
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt  
man nicht eng.*

*Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening  
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it  
at night  
we drink and we drink  
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie  
too cramped.<sup>1</sup>*

The poem blew me away. I went and bought the first book I didn't select off the shelf, but ordered: *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (*Poppy and Memory*).

It turned out to be utterly incomprehensible for me, but as I had spent a good deal of my pocket money on it, I was not prepared to admit defeat. I read and re-read the collection, drawn to it also by the sounds and rhythms, the images and strange metaphors. Over the years bits and pieces of the poems started to make sense, or rather, they found their contexts.

Celan's poetry draws on a rich and wide fund of language and traditions across time and cultures,

ranging from medieval death dances, the Kabala, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, botany and geology, to Nietzsche and church frescoes in Northern France. I ran into some of these texts and images long after Celan had given me an accompanying whisper directed towards them.

I saw Leonardo da Vinci's painting *Anna Selbdritt*<sup>2</sup> (*The Virgin and Child with St Anne*), recognising the word *selbdritt* from one of Celan's poems (*selbdritt* is a special word for threesome, used only to refer to the threesome of St Anna, her daughter Mary, and Jesus). I could not see the image without seeing dusk, and tasting the bitterness of almonds:

*Dort erst . . .*

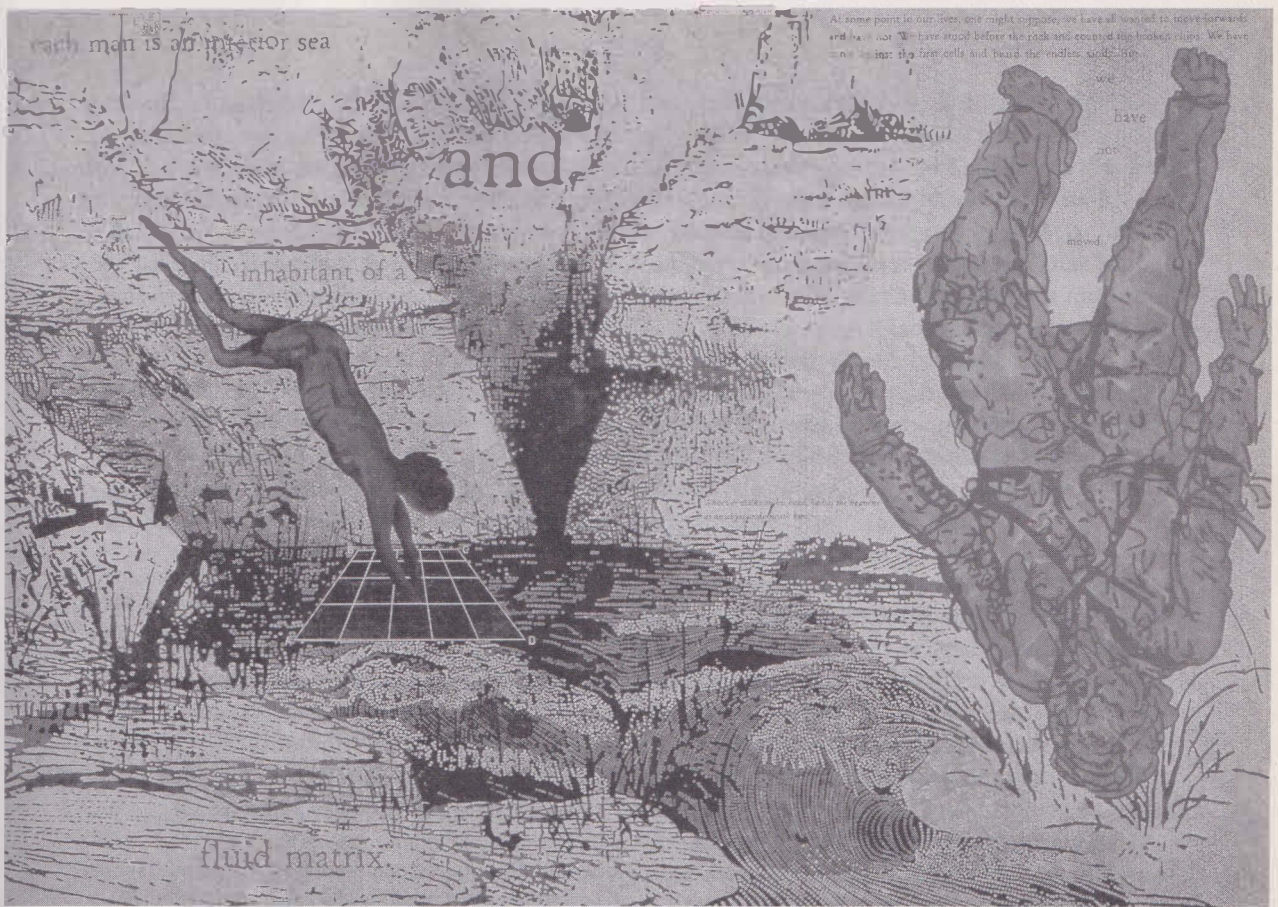
*stieß das Erlauschte zu dir,  
legte das Tote den Arm auch um dich,  
und ihr ginget selbdritt durch den Abend.*

*Mache mich bitter.  
Zähle mich zu den Mandeln.*

*There . . .  
things overheard thrust through to you,  
what's dead put its arm around you, too,  
and the three of you walked through the  
evening.*

*Render me bitter.  
Number me among the almonds.<sup>3</sup>*

Celan's oeuvre comprises mostly poems and translations. He left only a small number of prose texts, among them speeches. His most famous and mov-



Gordon Bennett, 1995, *Im Wald (Divided Unity)*, Acrylic on Canvas, 220 x 312cms, private collection. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

2

ing speech was given when he accepted the most prestigious literary prize in Germany, the *Georg Büchner Preis*.<sup>4</sup> There, in Darmstadt on 22 October 1960, the Jew, who had survived Nazi labour camps, whose parents had been killed by Germans; the man from Czernowitz, whose home in the Bukovina with its rich and multiple cultures and languages—Yiddish, German, Rumanian, Hebrew—had been irretrievably destroyed; there the poet spoke to his German audience about art—and more than art.

He took up the opening scene of Georg Büchner's narration *Lenz*.<sup>5</sup> The poet Lenz, on the brink of madness, walks through a mountain range. He loses all sense of distance and direction, wondering why he cannot cover valleys with one step, and feeling uncomfortable that he cannot walk on his head.

"He who walks on his head," said Celan, "has heaven as an abyss beneath him".<sup>6</sup>

IN 1996 I WALKED into the gallery of the Canberra School of Art to look at Gordon Bennett's exhibition *Mirror Mirror—the Narcissism of Coloniality*.<sup>7</sup> Fairly new to Australia, I walked along the walls, recognising some images and traditions quoted, needing explanations for others. I turned to the wall facing the entrance, where a huge picture, dominated by yellow and orange, hung. And there they were, next to a white man upside down, Celan's words:

whoever walks on his head, he has the heavens  
as an abyss underneath him

On the other side of the canvas was a dark figure, diving into geometrically segmented waters. The two people in this *divided unity* were both upside down, one diving, the other standing, firmly and unmoved.<sup>8</sup>

Celan's words, full of echoes themselves, had become part of the whispers and echoes of Gordon Bennett's exhibition. Through language and rhythm and colour Bennett and Celan, each in their own form of art, presented their incorporated quotations to their audience anew, to accompany our traditions from then on with challenging whispers and uncomfortable connections.

And maybe there are children growing up in Australia today, who will first see Captain Cook in one of Bennett's paintings; who will see Webber's portrait of James Cook with a sea of blood flashing up in their minds.

### 3

RESPONSES TO THE INQUIRY into the Stolen Generations have been passionate to the point of viciousness. Surprisingly they are very similar to reactions to the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> Like Holocaust denial, opposition to 'the stolen generations' does not refute certain basic parts of the historical record:

'Jews were rounded up, sent to camps, and many died.'

'Children were separated from their parents, and treatment in some careless children's homes did harm and damage.'

The battle is fought over the government's intent, over the extent of inflicted damage, and—ultimately—over numbers (it is as if there was, dare I say, safety in numbers). The battle is, I would argue, about a need and desire to retain intellectual and emotional stability and safety.

The disturbing spin-off of the stolen generations—and other events within Australia's history—is that we are confronted not with a choice, but with a fundamental and, I think, inevitable change: What makes me happy and confident has done harm to my fellow countrymen. What makes me proud has caused pain to my sister. Exactly those values and ideals I hold dearest are implicated in destruction. How can I ever feel secure and comfortable again with something which has shown its destructive power? Can I, having walked on my head and seen the heavens turn into an abyss, turn back on my feet and continue as if nothing has happened?

The present debate about the stolen generations, with all its aggression, is ultimately defensive. It is

damage control. An attempt to refute the challenge of losing a relaxed and comfortable Australia.

Those in Germany who ask 'what's wrong with duty and responsibility', and those in Australia who say 'what's wrong with equality and a fair go' stubbornly continue to walk confidently on what they consider to be firm ground, oblivious that the heavens above them are already the abyss below.

1. Paul Celan, 'Todesfuge', in Paul Celan, *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 1980. Translation by John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, Yale University Press, 1995.
2. Painting about 1508–1510, Louvre, Paris. Of earlier studies the only surviving cartoon is in London, British Museum.
3. Paul Celan, 'Zähle die Mandeln', in Paul Celan, *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 1980. Translation by John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, Yale University Press, 1995.
4. The German Academy of Language and Literature (*Die Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung in Darmstadt*) has been awarding this annual prize, named in honour of the German writer Georg Büchner (1813–1837) since 1951. Celan was the ninth prize winner (in 1952 no nomination was made).
5. Büchner's fragmentary novella (1835) focused on the German writer Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1751–1792) and his descent into madness in 1777.
6. Paul Celan, 'Der Meridian. Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Georg-Büchner-Preises', in Paul Celan, *Ausgewählte Gedichte. Zwei Reden*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 1980. Translation by author. The German word *Himmel* is used, which means both sky and heaven: *Wer auf dem Kopf geht . . . der hat den Himmel als Abgrund unter sich*.
7. Gordon Bennett, *Mirror Mirror—The Narcissism of Coloniality*, Canberra School of Art Gallery, curated by Ian McLean. Catalogue ANU Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra 1996.
8. The text between the figure's legs reads "we have not moved".
9. I would like to emphasise that the comparison I want to make here is between the structural similarities of these responses.

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## Budget \*\*\*\* (Censored)

Ladies, Gentlemen and Your Honour Mr Speaker, I table before you the Bill for the Budget of the coming year CENSORED to CENSORED. Let me state that this Budget will bring about a complete revolution in our taxation and financial institutions. From July 1 Australia will begin using the most advanced scientific method of national economic management. That system, my fellow parliamentarians, [Boo, Boo, from the Opposition] is the K9 Plan. We will have seven financial years to one calendar year, and this will put Australia in the forefront of world's best practice. You may ask, why have seven financial years? I will answer that question. The K9 system will be good for small business and will make Australia more competitive in the world market place. We live in an age when everything is speeded up to the point where it affects the way we do business. That [followed by stupid, arrogant smirk] is why we, the Australian people, must implement the K9 System. This revolutionary historic plan is not aimed just at today. The K9 Plan is aimed at achieving its full benefit for all Australians in 2045. If we do not implement the K9 System now, we will be condemning our children and our children's children to a 3<sup>rd</sup> World economic future. Each financial year will run for 52 days and be classified as 1Bark, 2Bark and so forth, until 7Bark, when the financial calendar year comes to an end. All Australians will have to forward with their tax returns an overall form that will cover all seven of the barks which occur within the calendar year. The form will be called the Dpack Form. Through the implementation of the K9 System we the Government will create over 240,000 new jobs. Let me repeat that [Boos from Opposition], 240,000 new jobs. We the Government are moving Australia forward into the new Millennium. Unlike the Opposition, which would continue to have us trapped in a Stone Age economic system controlled by the Unions which would continue to see more and more Australians unemployed. We the Government are the innovators of Australia's future . . .

R.J. CONLON

## Razor-wire nation

they ran a line of wire  
along the empty beaches  
where only yesterday  
our feet met the shore

while love is an empty box  
we busily tend the cages  
gun-turret saviours  
in a razor-wire nation

TONY BIRCH

## Melbourne Assessment Prison 2002 *for Talgium, the stolen generation*

When you ring the voice on the other end  
tells me I don't have to answer,  
I can hold my peace, go with god,  
let you go. Then I hear you,  
your voice direct, human,  
your nerves a wild graffiti  
at the back of the city.  
You can't sleep, but you're eating well,  
better than you did outside,  
there's a roof over your head.  
You're happy, you say, am I?  
Before I can answer you  
your time is up.

ANDREA SHERWOOD

# What Book is that? Test your knowledge of Aust. Literature!

by Lofo



Anagram: TARP  
His best book  
Author once lived in France



Author wrote copy for advertising. Now NY.



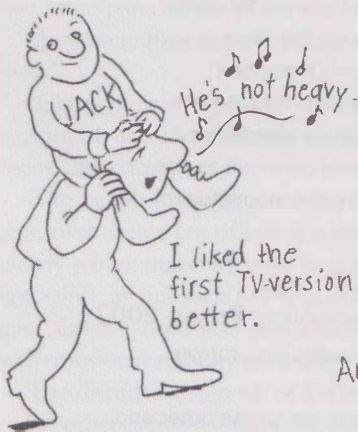
I'm their nephew



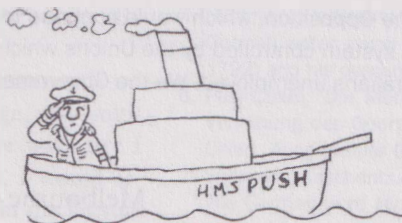
John Olsen liked it!



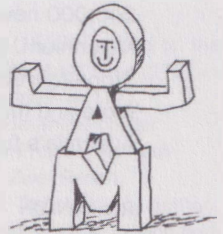
Think Sydney



I liked the first TV-version better.



Anagram: Cithapin of a Tephus



Penguin.  
Author (g) plays guitar and sings.  
Warren Mitchel played him.



This sector is not for you!

Clue: Think Nobel Prize!



Clue: Author writes jingles for sports commercials

TRAP · ILLYTHACKER · AUNTS UP THE CROSS · FIVE BELLS · MY BROTHER JACK · THE CAPTAIN OF THE PUSH · MAN OF LETTERS · THE VISITOR · SCHINDLER'S LIST

## NEW ISSUES, OLD ISSUES

The Australian tradition revisited

RECENTLY, IN A Melbourne pub, I met a bloke who told me and anyone else who would listen that all the bloody Afghan refugees should be thrown into the sea. He was no country redneck or suburban aspirer, but well-educated, suited, professional—a middle-class patriot. Confronted with such a situation, Stephen Murray-Smith would have interrogated him until he either realised the error of his ways or revealed himself as an irredeemable bigot. More cowardly, I walked away, but I did try to think: where is it that we have all gone wrong? Is it because, as Alan Patience has argued, we have an irredeemably hard and masculine culture? Or because, as Jennifer Rutherford suggests, we have unreal expectations whose inevitable failure produces violence?

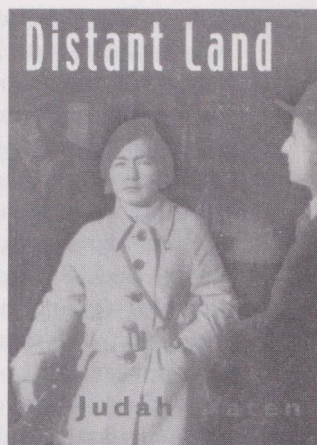
Rutherford sets out her argument in *The Gauche Intruder*, where, like many other postmodernist and postcolonial critics, not to mention the whole of the globalisation push, she argues that the founding idea of the nation is at fault. Whereas the globalisers believe that we should all be subject to the phallic rule of international marketers and multinational companies, Rutherford believes that the fault lies with the primal assault of phallogocentric language on innate innocence. In Australia, the promised fullness of the egalitarian society has failed to materialise. As people see their old ways receding, their desires return as violence. In the opening pages of her book, Rutherford quotes various One Nation supporters who believe their aggression is justified as a defence of an older, coherent, fairer society. The argument of her book, supported by analyses of Henry Handel Richardson, George Johnston, Tim Winton, Patrick

White and David Malouf, is that the radical dream has always been exclusive, and that its necessary failure generates the violence against others that has produced extremist politics.

Miles Franklin in a “Furphy digression on Australian literature” at the start of her admiring portrait of Joseph Furphy, remarks that the fabulous creation of the great Australian novel has been one of our few indigenous intellectual sports. She identifies the partisans of this sport as “the Expatriate-garrison cognoscenti” and the “Kangaroo garrison”. The former, devoted to overseas literary standards, greet “with hosannas any clever or promising novel written in the expatriate spirit.” The latter were:

not only independent but insubordinate. They prized originality and vigour above conformity, consciously repudiated mental vassalage, and demanded an independent state of literature as a factor in national self-respect.

Most, she adds, had lived abroad and brought an international perspective to their work, but they believed that all great literature arose from a specific linguistic and physical environment. Furphy, she believed, had produced such literature from his particular circumstances.



Although the novels reviewed here, now re-issued, all meet Franklin's criterion, and have been central to developing the way Australians and foreigners think about white society in this continent, they do not suggest any single Australian literary tradition. Their titles suggest different ways of looking at the promises that have been made and, just as often, betrayed. Even the apparent Aboriginality implied by the title of Furphy's fictional reminiscences of the liar and the bushman turns out to be an appropriation.

The two series in which the novels appear represent opposed but equally welcome ways of bringing them back into print. The Academic Editions give us painstakingly annotated and accurate texts, with historical and critical essays setting them in their context. The Halstead series give us at times painfully inaccurate texts, but at easily affordable prices, even after the iniquitous GST. Halstead also give us for the first time a meticulously and informatively annotated edition of Furphy's book. The contents of the books separately and together raise issues that continue to plague the settler conscience.

Both Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* and Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* prompted a painful response from contemporaries who objected to what might now be called their black armband view of Australian history and society. Richardson's novel, based on memories of her own education, offended critics who did not believe that schoolgirls would think and behave as her characters did. Others saw it as evidence of the depravity of colonial compared with British children. One reviewer utterly denied that "the thoughts and conversations of the ordinary Australian girl is [sic] such as would disgrace any respectable navy. The book is coarse and sordid . . . and is a libel on girlhood in general, and Australian girlhood in particular."

Clarke's work gave similar offence on its first appearance as a serial and then, in an abbreviated version, as a book. Reviewers agreed on its power, but several felt that its depiction of horror was unnecessary. The "sickening and desolate story" served little purpose now that the convict era had ended. This view was expressed more strongly in a letter from a Tasmanian reader of the magazine version:

There must indeed be a sad paucity of material for the makers of colonial books to work upon, when they needs must rake from the vaults of

the past those things which belong exclusively to it, and which had far better been forgotten. Assuming even that the statements of this writer had about them a shadow of truth, I would ask what good can result from such harrowing details, save that of selfishness in increasing the sale of his books and gratifying a debased appetite for sanguinary sensationalism.

This reader's moral certainty, his sly denigration of the novelist as greedy and untrustworthy, and the refusal to acknowledge any responsibility for the past, have proven an enduring feature of Australian public life. But despite his detractors, Clarke's work, unlike Richardson's, evidently remained popular with the general public, remaining constantly in print and generating the adaptations in comic books, stage productions and films that Elizabeth Webby charts in her contribution to this latest edition. By directing attention to a convict system now abolished, these adaptations, more than the original, distracted readers and audiences from other aspects of the brutality of settlement and from the continuation of authoritarian and exclusivist structures in later Australia.

In the first version of *His Natural Life*, the brutality of the convict system is redeemed by regenerative love. Clarke allowed his hero, Rufus Dawes, to escape to Ballarat, where he raises the daughter of his persecutor and becomes a respected citizen, even though his life continued to be overshadowed by the threat of recognition. In the revised version, which is published here for the first time since 1874, Clarke established a new focus on the System's perverted logic. He excised the daughter from the story, and had Dawes drown in the storm with Sylvia, the girl he once rescued and whose love has sustained him through his sufferings. Her final recognition of her former saviour is their sole reward, for the System allows no escape other than death.

Most commentators on Clarke have read *His Natural Life* either as documentary realism or, as Harry Heseltine puts it, as a Gothic allegory which wrings "from a violent history a symbolic vision of crime and punishment, suffering and redemption." This allegory survives in the revised version in the scenes where North momentarily restores Dawes' self-respect, and of course in the closing scene where Sylvia at last recognises the man who recovered his humanity by sacrificing his freedom to her safety. On the other hand, the plot, driven by a Dickensian

melodrama of mistaken identity and co-incidence, gets in the way of both the allegory and the exposure of the horrors and relentless logic of the System.

In *The Dark Side of the Dream*, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra argue that Clarke got his understanding of history wrong. They claim his opposition to the whole concept of transportation causes him to misrepresent the nature of convictism as a disciplinary tool of the ruling class, or ruling ideology, and to ignore the extent to which the convicts were able to construct their own reality to oppose and subvert the System. They take 'Frank the Poet' as their exemplar, and quite properly contrast his convict's eye view with Clarke's passionate arousal of middle-class compassion towards lower-class victims. Clarke's choice of an innocent and gallant gentleman as his hero undermines the historical verisimilitude of his depiction of the convict environment. It also destroys the moral basis of his argument against the System by confining its injustice to the sufferings of a single innocent, rather than revealing them as its essential characteristic. They suggest that this leads Clarke to portray the System as ultimately illogical: "Its sub-text . . . is the superiority of bourgeois discipline and bourgeois rationality over the irrationalities of the previous system," and that he ignores the extent to which transportation itself was in part a consequence of new ideologies of penal reform.

Jennifer Rutherford, who claims in *The Gauche Intruder* that Australia's whole egalitarian tradition is based on castration anxiety, agrees with Hodge and Mishra that Clarke's novel is about the irrationality of the legal system. It treats, she writes, "a moment in which the law realises its irrationality, when it loses any tenure in justice and becomes an errant, brutal and limitless pleasuring in punishment." But, apart from Frere and Burgess, the ruling-class characters in the novel administer punishment as a necessity of the System rather than as a pleasure to themselves. The law that governs them as much as the convicts is totally logical once you accept its basic premise, repeatedly enunciated by Frere, that the convicts are irredeemably evil. Justice is incompatible but irrelevant.

Historically, transportation is analogous with the forms of slavery that facilitated the rise of capitalism but remain outside its class structures. Michael Roe, in an essay written for this edition of the novel, argues that Clarke wrote in the spirit of the utilitar-

ians who wanted to replace the system, not reform it. Although the documents provide parallels for most of the incidents in the novel, his intention was to awaken disgust rather than to give an historically accurate account of the convict system. But, while Clarke undoubtedly rejoiced that transportation had been abolished when he wrote, the dominant tone of his novel is disgust, not at the inefficiency of the System, but at its remorseless and totalising logic that identifies power with moral right. Its structures are generated by the forms of slavery that arose around the Atlantic at the dawn of modern imperialism, and it shares with capitalism the ideology of efficiency that reduces the human to an instrument. The end of its efficiency is simply, as Orwell understood, power for its own sake.

Like modern capitalism, total surveillance was a necessary part of the System, but its essential part was total control of both mind and body. Capitalism instils self-governance; the System demanded the destruction of the self. Those who held power were beyond question or responsibility; their subjects were denied moral status and excluded from humanity. Clarke may have neglected the fact that assigned convicts often did use the System to their advantage, as well as the extent and effectiveness of resistance within the system, but by focusing on its logical core he identifies the essence of the System that was to underwrite totalitarianism throughout the twentieth century. The successors of Clarke's System are not so much Foucault's institutions of governance and surveillance as the concentration camps and death chambers of Nazi Germany and the gulags of Stalin's Russia. They continue today in the concentration camps in which Australia confines the refugees who come to our shores, and which we justify with the same demonising rhetoric that Frere uses towards Rufus Dawes and his fellow convicts from the time he meets them on the *Hydaspes* until their final incarceration on Norfolk Island. Hodge and Mishra are right to see convictism as part of the dark side of the Australian dream, but they are wrong in suggesting that it is a means to the accomplishment of that dream. Rather, capitalism and the System are two faces of the single logic of modernism, and, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, "comfortably attached to the same body".

Clarke's achievement is to concentrate his power on imagining the total system that produces this condition. Richard Flanagan, in *Gould's Book of Fish*,

imagines it differently. Although the horror is no less, his Macquarie Harbour provides a fantastic realisation of capitalist enterprise as freeing the individual, for a time, from the material conditions of his existence. Clarke's world denies even this kind of escape. It permits no subjectivity. Only in the Crusoe-like interlude when "Good Mr Dawes" tends the castaways is he allowed to realise himself as a human being, an actor capable of taking control of himself and circumstance. This interlude however occurs outside the System, offering to it a contrast that cannot be continued once history resumes and the System brings the moment of humanity to a brutal end. Dawes' temporary recovery of his respect provides the measure of what the System destroys.

Clarke's identification of the System with slavery is reinforced by the convict narratives brought together by Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart in *Chain Letters*. Their contributors have searched among the shards and bones of old documents to resurrect forgotten lives from the convict generations. Sometimes the detective work of the authors reveals remarkable people who constructed their own lives despite the systems of control the state imposed on them. Sometimes they are able to find only intriguing fragments that suggest lives that have slipped through the interstices of state surveillance and leave their full resurrection only to the imagination. In the Prologue, 'A Fictional Quest for Roots', Terri-ann White uses this means to recover her grandfather, Theodore Krakoeur. Born in Poland, educated in Prussia, married first in Britain, 'Runaway Theodore' finished his life in a Fremantle asylum. White's dramatic meditation on the few details of his life that have survived tells us both what we can recover and what is irrevocably lost.

The other contributors apply stricter methods of documentary research and textual analysis to discover lives that still speak from between the words of official records and personal writings. Their accounts allow us to understand the System both as inflexible machine and as an institution its subjects could use for their own purposes. Unlike Clarke's felons, many of these convicts did useful labour that contributed to the original accumulation of physical capital in Australia. Many were able to secure a portion of their contribution for themselves, and so find either emancipation or, through flight, complete freedom. Despite these possibilities, they recognised the System as a form of slavery that began

with ritual humiliations and continued through forced labour and the use of the lash to remove every trace of subjectivity. As the American patriot Linus Miller wrote, "the abominable slavery we endured was . . . a wanton violation of the laws of justice and humanity." His sense of injustice was deepened by his reasonable belief that his incarceration was itself illegal, and by his failure to find any sympathy for his fellow convicts. He shared his attitudes and his class with Rufus Dawes, but this makes no less harrowing his account of the System, recovered by Cassandra Pybus mainly from a memoir he later published and from Canadian National Archives.

The accounts of life in the convict settlements reinforce Clarke's description of an inflexible and inescapable system. Even within these settlements, however, men like the wily Alexander Anderson were able to escape at least into silence. Beyond the settlements, the System allowed many ways of escape. Women found various measures of independence, men and women strove with varying degrees of success to maintain family bonds and security. Ian Duffield and his colleagues show how even in the briefest official narratives of people driven to desperation we can discern their success in making themselves the subject of their own stories. But behind all the variety of individual fates and collective histories lies "a judicial system whose very basis was the discretionary application of mitigation of penal pain". One of the strengths of this book is that it shows the ubiquity both of this state system and of the way individuals evade it. It corrects Clarke's determinist nihilism not by erasing it but by revealing the way people could evade its closures. It enacts its own emancipation of the past by liberating from the official documents the people they were designed to reduce to ciphers.

In *His Natural Life*, Clarke identified the fear of the outsider and the need for control that is a continuing element of Australia's history. This combination produces a grinding logic that is incapable of yielding to circumstance. In *The Getting of Wisdom*, which Graeme Turner puts in the tradition of *His Natural Life*, the System's object of control shifts from the body to the mind. The instrument of oppression is not a closed world beyond the confines of society, but a school—one of the institutions that provides an alternative to physical punishment as a means of social control.

Richardson begins her novel with a picture of an

almost idyllic childhood world in which Laura is able to use her imagination, and the space of a country garden, to escape her mother's domination. But behind her freedom lie the same absolute divisions of right and wrong, power and dependence, that produced Clarke's System. When Laura is removed to boarding school, she finds herself subjected to this logic by the total control exercised by the school over her time and space. In the school, unlike the penal settlement, the staff merely set the bounds, while daily control is exercised by her fellow inmates. This offers the prospect of escape, of joining the powerful, by accepting their rules and so becoming one of them instead of becoming herself. Laura attempts to do this by outward conformity, by using her imagination to construct a narrative that will give her an acceptable place in the school community, only to find that she has violated one of its fundamental rules. While the convict settlement refuses to acknowledge subjectivity, the school requires its destruction. Laura manages to hold on to this core, but only at the cost of remaining alienated from her society. She endures her condition only by finding a real love in one of the other girls to replace the fictitious love she had projected on the curate. The freedom she celebrates at the end of the novel is not emancipation from the school, but a rejoicing in the strength she has discovered to live with others but within herself.

If Clarke and Richardson present Australia as a prison, Vance Palmer and Judah Waten present it as a land offering the promise of freedom. This is literally so in Waten's *Distant Land*, which traces the history of a couple escaping from the ghettos of Poland and the later Holocaust to find safety and a measure of prosperity in their new home. Waten's story, and the flatness of his language, which almost extinguishes their personalities, shows the price they pay as they are forced gradually to shed their strict religious observances, their cultural identity, and even their Yiddish tongue. David Carter has drawn attention to the importance of this novel as a demonstration of Waten's unsentimental acceptance of the necessary loss of the past as he moves towards a future freedom. The characters in the novel remain comfortable in their Jewishness, but not insistent on it. The novel is more critical of those, including two children of the family at its centre, who attach themselves too eagerly to the capitalist ambitions of the new land, and so produce division

where there need be none. Finally, however, the novel shows the promise of the new land justifying the price it exacts.

Home is also the central theme in Vance Palmer's *The Passage*, although his characters, far from being newcomers, belong to families that have lived by the Passage of the title long enough to make it completely their home. The Passage, an inlet offering both passage to the rich fishing grounds of the open ocean and safety from its tempests, provides a metaphor for the events of the novel. At its beginning, we find Lew Calloway sitting in an anchored dinghy, rocking gently on the long swell:

Westerly winds, coming from the land, had flattened the sea down so that not a ripple broke its smooth skin, but there was a rhythmic heaving of its bulk as it still responded to the original movement of the tides . . . When he had come out fishing with his father on such bright, miraculous mornings as a boy, Lew had imagined that he could see the snow-capped peaks of the Andes.

It is not Lew but his young brother Hughie who tries to go beyond the horizons of the village, while Lew's secure world is destroyed by an outer tide of material change and an inner tide of misdirected love. A love triangle and a mistaken marriage provide one strand in the plot; the other comes from the intrusion of the storm of commercial development that carries Hughie away only to break him. Eventually Lew returns to his first love, Hughie returns home, and the continuity of nature reasserts itself. The land offers its promise to those who respect its rhythms. The realism of Palmer's portrayal of the village in conflict with the developers is qualified by a romanticism that eventually contains conflict within a harmony of man and nature. The harmony however remains precarious, and we can see that any threat to it will release the violent forces that Rutherford discusses.

As well as publishing a most welcome annotated edition of *The Buln-Buln and the Broлга*, Halstead Press has reissued the annotated edition of Furphy's major work, *Such Is Life*. Furphy's allusive and expansive style makes the notes invaluable for a full appreciation of both texts, particularly for contemporary students whose own cultural and historical horizons scarcely match the wide sweep of Furphy's imagined and richly peopled Riverina plains. The

notes offer the reader their own encyclopedic pleasures, which in turn lead us back to Furphy's texts and their ambiguous relation to the Australian tradition. He is one of those writers who shows us a country seeming to offer plenitude but finally withholding its promise.

*The Buln-Buln and the Brolga* is an ideal introduction to Furphy's work. Although its yarns encompass the world, they are told during a single day in Echuca and organised around the twin poles of the bush and the world, seemingly unmediated experience and elaborate falsehood. The book, not published in Furphy's lifetime, had its origins in one of the two great slabs Furphy had to excise from *Such Is Life* before its publication. On the surface, it is a report of the conversation between the cosmopolitan liar and the bush chronicler, framed and interspersed with the reflections and recollections of Tom Collins, Furphy's narrator. Despite its vernacular rhythm, it is not instantly accessible. The language is the complex, allusive English of the autodidact—the opposite of Lawson's laconic bush yarn. The reader must relax into its rhythms, follow the allusions and diversions at his own pace if its inner logic is to become apparent.

The key to the novel's logic is not offered by Tom, who as in all three books is the ever unreliable interpreter of the words and actions he reports, nor by Fred Falkland-Pritchard, the preposterous liar, but by Barefoot Bob, the laconic bushman. Fred's tales of his derring-do turn the failures of his mundane life into the forms of the romantic fiction whose pretensions Tom, and Furphy, despised. Tom's reflections on truth, or on the pretensions of the ruling class, the threatening qualities of the Australian woman or the virtues of the common man, keep him from considering his own manipulative role in events. Far from being the detached observer whose role he plays, he actively precipitates conflict among others in order to protect himself from responsibility.

Bob, in his naivety and humility, allows us to see the significance he himself misses in the incidents he describes. His account of his meeting with his boss, M'Gregor, shows how easily the squatter hoodwinks him, putting his skills to use while denying him adequate pay and even the payments legally owed to him. This tells us more about the class system than any number of Tom's reflections, which satisfy Tom's self-regard without bringing Bob to any awareness of his actual value or the way he is exploited. But the

dark side of Bob's easy-going democracy is revealed in his account of his role in an Aboriginal massacre.

Unlike most of the incidents in Furphy's work, the author shows as little awareness as his narrator of the significance of Bob's descriptions of his experiences with Aborigines. Tom reports without comment Bob's casual dehumanisation of Aborigines, as he characterises them as animal-like, as "lubras", "Marys" and "a big buck blackfeller", and explains his own part in "dispersin'" them from a Queensland station. Equally casually, he retails yarns about their cannibalism and his attempt to rescue an Aboriginal woman, which ends in him shooting her to save her from the misery of a slow death brought about by his actions. Bob places these people outside the sceptical tolerance that marks his comments on people generally. He is unseeing rather than uncaring. He acknowledges that all people "naturally inclines to sin, an' wickedness, an' rascality—blackfellers an' whitefellers, jist the same—an' civilizin' makes people worse". But in practice it is only the blackfellers who need to be rendered "tame", to be made "as quiet as sheep, on account of all the rumbumptious fellers gittin' dispersed". As he explains, "I'd jist put it this way; it's wrong to be too hard on the pore beggars; an' it don't do to be too soft with them." Like assimilationists today, he is prepared to be quite tolerant of Aborigines as long as they become exactly like us. In this sense, his recollections, although fictitious, serve the same purpose as settler memoirs. As Amanda Nettlebeck has observed, they manage simultaneously to admit the open violence perpetrated against Aborigines, and to maintain the myth of the fearless pioneer.

Any irony that might modify the reader's attitude to these sentiments seems directed at the genteel sensibility with which Fred's wife receives them at least as much as towards Bob. Tom seems to feel that Bob's account of a prophetic dream where he baited a lagoon and pulled out fish with "blackfellers' heads on 'em", his dramatic recall of the enthusiasm with which he and his mate pursued and shot the remnants of the tribe they had surprised in an attack on a station, or his graphic description of the holes left in black bodies by a bullet from a Martin-Henry, are breaches of manners towards a lady rather than examples of barbarity on the part of the narrator. Tom presents this as of no more importance than his own discomfort at having allowed himself to cast doubt on one of Fred Pritchard's more outrageous lies.



There is perhaps some recognition of Bob's moral insensitivity towards Aborigines when Tom reports his reply to a query about whether there were three in his party: "No, missus; on'y me an' Bat. Paddy was a blackfeller." Francis Devlin Glass rightly compares this to a line of Mark Twain's dialogue in *Huckleberry Finn*, ". . . 'Anybody hurt?' 'No'm. Killed a nigger.'" But this touch of awareness is more than countered by the stock setting Bob gives to his account of the attack on the station. The husband is working around the house, his wife is reading, the children playing, the other men away, when "a whole swag o' blackfellers come into a deep holler . . . but they was supposed to be tame." The scene of idyllic white family life threatened by treacherous blacks leaves little room for Bob's earlier dictum that blackfellows and whitefellows are really just the same. Moreover, the narrative presents Bob's yarns as essentially true by contrast with Fred's vainglorious fantasies. Yet, as the editor points out in her perceptive 'Envoi' to the text, Fred's fantasies of battle and death prompt a considered response to Bob's restrained accounts of actual killings. Bob acknowledges his actions, accepting brutality rather than concealing it in fantasy. Furphy seems uneasy about both.

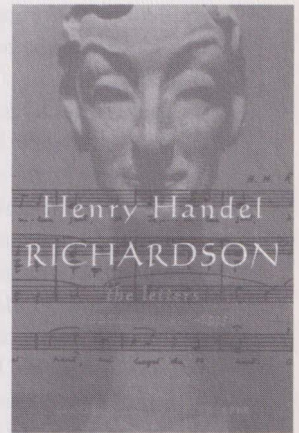
This dark side of the dream does not necessarily falsify its positive elements, nor does it represent an aggression produced by the frustration of the dream's promises. It does of course betray the uncertainty about the legitimacy of white occupation which will continue to underlie all narratives of settlement until we accept responsibility for invasion of the land and the displacement of its people. Until then, our society and its dreams necessarily remain flawed, but not fatally. The fault is not in the dream itself, but in the way we have used it to exclude the people in whose lands we have built it. Barefoot Bob and his listeners, like Furphy's readers, deny their own humanity when they deny the Aborigines, but the humanity remains no less real in its potential. Franklin's portrait, based to a great extent on Kate Baker's memories and Furphy's letters, does not have the scholarly detachment or the ironic involvement of later work by John Barnes and Julian Croft, but it does show how much Furphy was produced by his times. Repeatedly denied material success by the chances of nature and his own disposition, he transformed himself into the fiction of the unworldly Tom Collins, and then proceeded to place Collins's self-delusion back into the everyday world he had tried

to distance himself from in his reflections and his writing. The multiple ironies of his work continue to suggest that the potential of our continent can be realised only by surrendering to it, not by seeking mastery. Then, like Furphy's son Felix, quoted by Franklin, we may find that the unseen Aborigine will touch us on the arm and relieve our loneliness. But this dream, of course, may be merely another furphy.

These books between them demonstrate the liberating as well as the imprisoning qualities of both language and history. The settlement history of Australia starts with the convict system, which generated a rigidly exclusive and authoritarian culture. Reconstructing this structure a generation after the cessation of transportation, Marcus Clarke showed how it imprisoned its victims in a language that denied their humanity. The regenerative close of the novel leaves the System unchanged.

*Chain Letters* provides a source of hope by finding traces of the ways convicts produced individual selves within the official statements they made and the notations they recorded on their bodies, and in the individual spaces of freedom they were able to construct in the interstices of an inflexible system. This system was itself an attempt to impose an alien system of production and control on an alien environment. The failures of settlement produced the large class of landless workers whose history Furphy shared and converted into a sceptically egalitarian philosophy and fiction of survival. His characters weave fantasies of heroism, bush plainness or autodidactic philosophy that imprison them in their own limited consciousness, but the author's aware construction of their speech offers his readers freedom from delusion.

Richardson shows the escape from the bush into the equally imprisoning gentilities of an urban society that takes its models from abroad. The only escape it allows is flight into the imagination or abroad. Waten's characters, on the contrary, flee to Australia, only to find themselves displaced by language as well as place. Like Richardson in real life, they turn their backs on the bush only to be caught in the disintegrating con-



sequences of commerce. The only hope his novel offers of a realised community lies in an implied utopian future.

Palmer tries to establish on the coast the harmony of place and people that had eluded the bush settlers, but the security the novel achieves at its end rests in a past only briefly realised, and remains vulnerable to any outside pressures. The sparse and laconic language of his characters contains its characters by excluding the world. Yet, if none of these fictions realises the hopes of its characters, they contain the seeds of a national hope.

As individuals and as a society we are shaped by our response to the Other, but this response is itself shaped by the pasts we remember and reconstruct. These pasts constitute the present. If we deny them, we destroy the continuity that that peasant settlers brought with them, and that Aboriginal writers can again teach us to cherish. But to attempt live solely in our particular pasts is to mistake the part for the whole, and to allow ourselves to be deformed by resisting a difference we fear without understanding. The pasts expressed in these fictions variously produced values of solidarity, egalitarianism, harmony with the land, but their values remained circumscribed by fear of the powerless and the dispossessed, by the arrogance of the powerful, and by distrust of the outsider. Our future will be secure only as we accept continuity with the past, enter into dialogue with the differences of the present, and accept a common responsibility towards the land that supports us.

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Lucy Frost & Hamish Maxwell-Stewart: *Chain Letters: narrating convict lives* (MUP, \$32.95)

Joseph Furphy: *The Buln-Buln and the Brolga* (Halstead Press, \$18.95)

Vance Palmer: *The Passage*, with Afterword by Neil James (Halstead Press, \$23.95)

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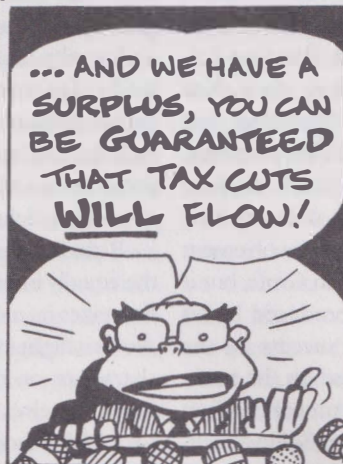
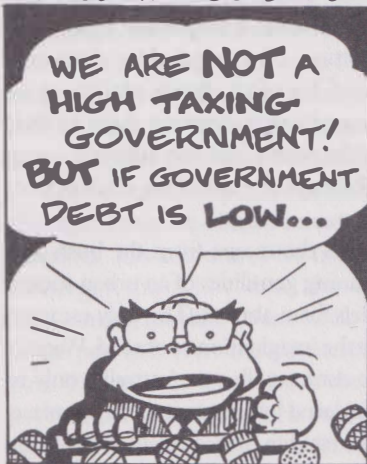
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John McLaren is a consulting editor of *Overland*.

## THESE THINGS I BELIEVE!



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## COP-KILLER HERO

Recent words on Ned Kelly

John Molony: *Ned Kelly* (MUP, \$34.95)

Ned Kelly, Alex McDermott (ed.): *The Jerilderie Letter* (Text Publishing, \$16.95)

Brendon Kelson & John McQuilton: *Kelly Country: A Photographic Journey* (UQP, \$35)

Keith McMenomy: *Ned Kelly: The Authentic Illustrated History* (Hardie Grant, \$89.95, hc)

WHEN NED KELLY'S armoured silhouette first loomed in the dawn at Glenrowan, many police took the apparition for Satan himself, while a certain Senior Constable distinguished himself by yelling, "He's the bunyip, boys!"

Today, Kelly's headgear is to kitsch Australiana and crass jingoism what the Golden Arches are to burgers. It's usually forgotten that it once seemed so entirely alien to white culture that its interpretation required recourse to indigenous legend. Indeed, in a sense, the armour quite probably was foreign—according to one account, Ned's lieutenant Joe Byrne (sufficiently familiar with the Chinese community to develop an opium habit and a passing fluency in Mandarin) fashioned it after an exhibit of ancient Chinese weaponry displayed at Beechworth.

For a story everyone knows, the Kelly legend retains a remarkable ability to surprise, to overturn preconceived conceptions. Perhaps that's why, until comparatively recently, authorities still regarded the gang with suspicion. Even in 1980, the Victorian government—a body that celebrates with ghoulish glee every bloody deed of Empire, from the disaster at Gallipoli to the invasion of 1788—chose to avoid official commemoration of the centenary of Kelly's execution.

That particular refusal inspired historian John Molony's *I am Ned Kelly*, the volume now republished in facsimile edition (albeit somewhat confusingly retitled *Ned Kelly*). Other writers had earlier mounted defences of the gang. J.J. Kenneally, a Benalla schoolteacher, used the transcript from the subsequent Royal Commission and interviews with Kelly sympathisers to produce a stinging indictment of authorities in 1929 (*The Inner History of the Kelly Gang*), while Max Brown had sketched the basis for a social account of the outbreak in his *Australian Son*.

But the significance of Molony's *Kelly* lies not so much in it making a claim for Ned's innocence but in arguing Kelly's importance as a serious subject of historical study. To this end, it presents a strong, almost mythic account, very reminiscent of the style Manning Clark used to put the case for Australian history *per se*.

Here Molony describes the raid in Jerilderie:

Ned sent Joe, Dan and Steve to prepare for their departure while he staged a grand performance before a captive and partly tipsy audience in the bar room of the Royal Mail Hotel. Thirty or so in number, they listened to his sorry tale of persecution in which reality jostled with hatred, love with vengeance, nobility with debasement and awful finality with ineradicable futility. Ned knew that he was crossing the border into a land from which no return was possible, and in desperation he tried to make men understand what drove him there, and remember for posterity at least the things that had curtailed and encompassed his freedom.

The technique—at times, almost novelistic—generates tremendous narrative power. Yet in return for such force it consciously sacrifices ambiguity. As the original introduction puts it:

The fabric in which I have clothed the story of Ned, of his people, of his time and place was woven deliberately for I could not tell of these things in a broken stammer or in the dry jargon of a courtroom.

Today, with much more information about the outbreak available to researchers, the trade-off seems somewhat less desirable. For instance, Molony gives a single account of Constable Fitzpatrick's ill-fated visit to the Kellys (the incident that led to a warrant for Ned on attempted murder charges, thus sparking the Stringybark Creek killings), largely drawn from Kelly sympathisers. By contrast, Ian Jones in his *Short Life* (for my money, the definitive Kelly biography) offers no less than eight versions, and then provides compelling grounds for choosing one of them.

Nonetheless, it would be graceless to criticise an unamended reproduction of a classic text for not incorporating the further research that it itself may have inspired. Indeed, some measure of the strength of Molony's writing can be taken from the evident similarity between the Kelly sketched in *I am Ned Kelly* and the character portrayed in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the success of which is clearly the absent presence behind the current crop of Kelly books.

Now *The True History* stands out from other Kelly novels (say, Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine*) largely because of Carey's inspired invocation of Kelly's own voice, as expressed in the long manifesto that emerged after the Gang's occupation of the small town of Jerilderie. The so-called Jerilderie Letter, now published in full by Text, provides Ned's account of his clashes with police up to and including the shoot-out at Stringybark Creek. "This is a little piece of my life," Kelly says as he hands the manuscript over. "I will give it to you."

In his introduction, 'The Apocalyptic Chant of Edward Kelly', historian Alex McDermott draws attention to the development of authority in Kelly's writing since the earlier 'Cameron' letter, most evident in the extraordinary opening in which Ned offers to acquaint readers with "some of the occur-

rences of the present past and future."

Rather than simply pleading his own cause, the Jerilderie Letter sees Kelly using the gang's situation to mount a broader case against the authorities, framed in sectarian, national and class terms. "It will pay Government to give those people who are suffering innocence, justice and liberty," he warns. "If not I will be compelled to show some colonial stratagem which will open the eyes of not only the Victorian Police and inhabitants but also the whole British army . . ."

McDermott's introduction gives a short but elegant précis of the gang's career, sufficient to make the context of the letter familiar. Yet he frames his discussion in an extended critique of the now orthodox account of Ned Kelly as victim of discrimination and police persecution.

For McDermott, Kelly is best understood as a product of the subculture of rural stock thieves who preyed on the small selectors in the north-east. He gives short shrift to Ned's nationalist pretences:

Kelly's appeal to Ireland's oppression, his rhetoric of rebellion, would also have brought little sympathy. Many of the farmers he stole from, not to mention the policemen he killed at Stringybark Creek, were Irish.

Likewise, he rejects any notion of the gang representing the aspirations of the rural poor, since the majority of selectors in north-eastern Victoria (themselves victims of theft) would have:

examined the niceties of Kelly's justifications (in the Letter) with a jaundiced eye.

What are we to make of this? Doubtless there's a point to emphasising Ned's (self-confessed) involvement in stock theft, since some of his admirers paint the outlaw as half-way to sainthood. Yet it's harder to accept McDermott's dismissal of the social implications of the outbreak. Even leaving aside the issue of whether Kelly (as Ian Jones claims) intended to proclaim a republic of the North East, to make his case McDermott must ignore the police's repeated complaints of the extent of the gang's support. Indeed, even Superintendent Hare—the leader of the Kelly pursuit—acknowledged that "the Kellys commanded an enormous amount of sympathy among the lower orders".

Moreover, despite McDermott's consciousness of the Letter's literary qualities (it, he says, "prefigures the ambition of modernist literature [. . . and] harks back to the warrior's fiery polemic of Homer's *Iliad*"), his view of Kelly as first and foremost a horse thief leads him to a remarkably literal assessment of its contents, in which Ned's extravagant threats ("by the light that shines pegged on an ant-bed with their bellies opened their fat rendered and poured down their throat boiling hot will be cool to what pleasure I will give some of them") become, not rhetorical flourishes familiar within a particular tradition, but evidence of a man yearning for bloodshed and retribution. It's not, to my mind, a convincing reading—but at least the publication of the Letter in an accessible form makes it possible for the general public to make up its own mind.

If *The Jerilderie Letter* gives us Ned's voice, *Kelly Country* gives us his home. Today, the casual visitor to north-eastern Victoria finds it difficult to uncover any genuine link to the gang among a profusion of bushranger tack quite sufficient to drive anyone to outlawry. Veteran Kelly author John McQuilton (*The Kelly Outbreak 1878–1880: The Geographical Dimension of Social Banditry*) and photographer Brendon Kelson manage to sift the wheat of surviving relics out from mounds of tourist chaff to present a visual tour through the landmarks of the Kelly saga.

McQuilton's retelling the story thus grounds it far more closely to the reality of rural life in an isolated area in the nineteenth century. For instance, the importance of the Jerilderie raid in most Kelly histories leads one to think of the town post office stuck up by the gang as a bustling centre of communication and commerce. Kelson's photo renders it instead as an unprepossessing shed.

Likewise, Ellen Kelly's homestead today exists only as some rusting farm equipment and a pair of crumbling chimneys. But sufficient remains to make it clear that the house—the absolute epicentre of the outbreak, both for police and the gang—must have been a pretty tiny structure.

But if the buildings seem smaller than expected, the land itself looms larger. Looking over the stunning black and white reproduction of the caves near the Woolshed Valley, the dense stringybark forests and the highlands of the North East leaves one with a grudging sympathy for a mostly urban police force tracking outlaws through such terrain. Indeed, the

police chasing the Kellys tended to view the landscape as nearly as much an enemy as the gang—a 'wild and trackless region', sprouting criminality as profusely as gum trees, leading the key Kelly supporter Wild Wright to mock: "They stick to the main roads."

In prison, the bushranger Harry Power—a man who took the youthful Ned in tow—declared: "Ay! It's grand to be on the ranges, and to breathe the beautiful pure air . . . There's water all the year round, and it's always cool and pleasant. That's the place for a man to live." After Glenrowan, as the train taking him to certain death in Melbourne passed by the Strathbogie Ranges, the accompanying police heard Ned sigh: "There they are: shall I ever be there again?"

*Kelly Country* gives us a glimpse of what the North-East might have meant to such men.

Keith McMenemy's *Illustrated History* is another reissue, first published in 1984 but reprinted by Hardie Grant in a deluxe version. And what a crack-jack book it is.

In essence, McMenemy displays illustrations of just about anything and anyone who crops up in the story, however briefly. He gives us facsimiles of Joe Byrne's letters written while on the run: "I write these few stolen lines to you to let you know that I am still living I am not the least afraid of being captured", and the breathless police reports of the murders near Mansfield. At Ned's boyhood home, he even uncovers the initials E.K. carved into a door in a childish hand.

One might fear that a book so impressively researched might become tedious, losing the thread of its narrative in a morass of irrelevant detail. Yet in fact the reverse takes place. The stunning and sometimes unexpected graphics breathe fresh life into events with which we are already familiar.

Take, for instance, Ellen Kelly. Ned wrote:

My mother struggled up with a large family, and I feel more keenly than I can express the unjust treatment meted out to her arrested with a baby at her breast and convicted of a crime of which she was innocent.

Here she is in a 1911 portrait, still living on a rough bush selection, with two grand-daughters on her knee, thirty years after losing two sons in horrific circumstances. She's tiny and skeletally thin, but

the photo captures in her face the strength that the matriarch of a clan like the Kellys must surely have possessed.

When the interviewing journalist asks of her time with Ned, she says simply: "It was a lonely life, but we were all together, and we all loved each other so dearly."

Alternatively, there's the larrikins of the Greta Mob. The glamour of the Mob to boys like Dan Kelly and Steve Hart tends to be shrouded by the fact that the preoccupations of nineteenth-century rural troublemakers (mostly centring around horses) seem quaint and old wordily today. The photos change that. The young faces of Kelly sympathisers staring out of the page—some with hat straps under their noses, in a symbol of group identity and defiance akin to the reversed baseball caps of more contemporary urban poses—look definitively *bad*, in all the modern senses of that term.

But let's conclude with the image of the helmet, presented in striking close-up on *The Authentic Illustrated History's* cover.

Kelly's headpiece now serves as a free-floating

logo, equally at home touting the Sydney Olympics and Shane Warne's Pura Cup team as books about outlaws. But the *Authentic Illustrated History* reminds us that it's also an artifact—an aching textured piece of bush craftsmanship, roughly hewn from ploughshares (that most Biblical of materials) on a secret bush forge. And it's much more difficult to believe Disneyfied versions of the Kelly legend when you're looking at the dented faceplate behind which a living man took twenty-eight bullets with a force that, a hundred-plus years later, you can still almost feel.

Ned once argued: "If my lips teach the public that men are made mad by bad treatment, my life will not be entirely thrown away." In these dark days where governments once more want their enemies 'dead or alive', the renewed interest in his story suggests Kelly's life still has something to teach.

Jeff Sparrow is author, along with sister, Jill Sparrow, of *Radical Melbourne: a secret history* (Vulgar Press, 2001).

## The Coat Layer System

Three hundred words scribbled on the side of a factory building. Thirty undercoats on the brickwork: just like rings inside the trunk of a tree. One of the latest lines scrawled is: 'Jesus isn't dead. He just sold out and now he works as John Howard's political adviser on immigration.' Each layer of paint represents five calendar years. One can identify the positive years from the negative years. This scientific process has taken years of gathering data from around the world. Our records now go back as far as 4339BC. Now a positive year will yield on average 27 words to 41 words per wall. Positive periods have been identified as times of great prosperity for society. A negative year will yield anywhere from 150 to an absolute extreme of 567 words per wall: an excellent example of a negative period occurred in AD1452 in Rome. These are times when poverty, war and uncertainty run rampant through society. The 35 rare occasions that the number of words has exceeded 282 have been times of fear, paranoia and unrestrained greed, which resulted in the near collapse of the society, or society was plunged into absolute anarchy. At present we are still in the first quarter of the year and the number of words per wall is on average 178 at this point. It is too early to make a predication whether this year will be a positive year or a negative year. The coat layer system as a barometer of society is 98.3% correct and is the most accurate system in existence in science today. Thank you.

R.J. CONLON

## THE SKULL

A platform for truth

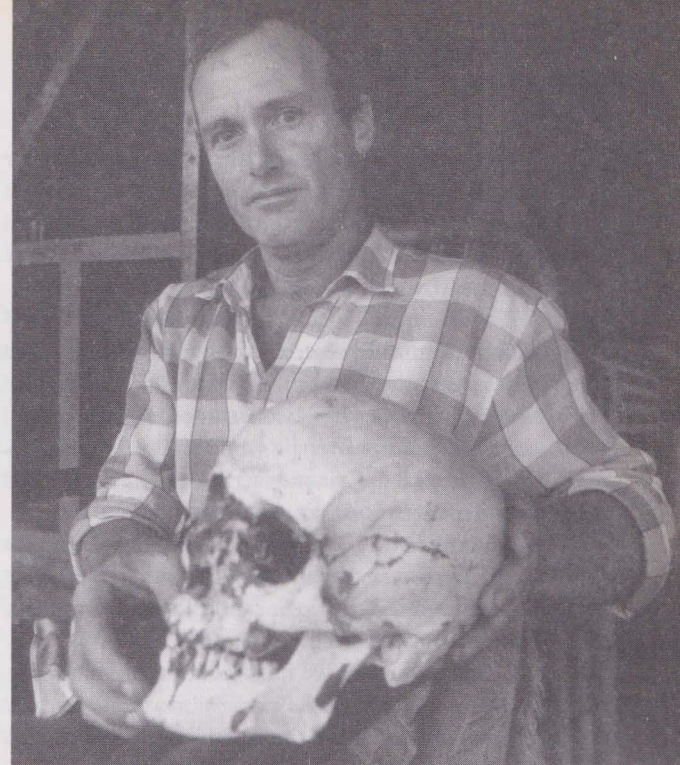
IT BECAME CLEAR to me during a telephone interview for a well-known Australian–Irish publication. The reporter asked me what gave *me* the right to say the things I say, casting aspersions on individuals and institutions involved in the Kelly drama.

I was taken aback. This was a question I had not anticipated, and there was a mild hostility attached to it. After a pause, I was able to point out that possession of a skull that is merely thought to be Ned Kelly's enabled me to say these things. It was not so much my right, but more an opportunity, or even an obligation that often feels like an onerous burden. After all, no-one would want to interview me if I didn't have this skull. I was able to say these things because this particular piece of bone material (genuine or not) allows and demands it.

A friend reminded me of a scene from the novel *Lord of the Flies* in which young boys are stranded on an island and face the prospect of developing rules that would serve the interests of the group. During meetings each boy was not able to speak unless he held the conch shell which was passed between the speakers. The skull in my possession is like the conch shell. People are willing to listen to me and I am able to speak because I am holding it.

What is so important about this skull?

Our skulls house our brains and it is the brain that processes the thoughts, feelings and information that make us who we are. It is here our identity dwells. A skull is the literal protector of this identity. Yet throughout the world it is held to be something more; it is a powerful symbol, well understood in all human cultures. Ned's skull was part of an Australian collection that Victoria's lawmakers kept unburied. Pre-



sumably the criminal distinction placed upon it made this acceptable. The skull became a trophy and was used as such by Ned's enemies. It was a profound revenge the authorities inflicted upon him.

The issues that arise for me point toward the moral codes which people in our age often neglect or only pretend to support. They drift beyond what might be considered historic or philosophical. There is a natural law at work here which has come into conflict with the Victorian legal code. It seems that, in asking for Ned to be given his rightful burial, I am demanding something more than our legal system is willing to accommodate.

The question of the skull's authenticity is, of course, of interest. During the numerous radio interviews I have been involved in, I always make a point of saying that there is a process that needs to be undertaken before we can guarantee the skull's authenticity, although I am confident that it is genuine. I make it very clear that I am guaranteeing that the skull in my possession is the same one that went missing from the Old Melbourne Jail—not that it is Ned's. The issues that I raise remain relevant regardless of the authenticity. If it is found to be another person's skull the questions that arise are: Where is Ned's skull and how did we come to lose it? If the skull is not authentic, why was it displayed (with dozens of other skulls) as if it *were* genuine? In this case The National Trust should be called upon to offer explanation.

Prior to the skull's disappearance, the Trust charged admission to view it on public display throughout the 1970s at the place of Ned's execution. The skulls of other executed people were also on display; they have since been removed.

The National Trust is an organisation we usually associate with the preservation of old buildings. It is curious that the house at Beveridge, believed to be Ned's birthplace, has been allowed to decay beyond the point of repair while the Trust tries to negotiate with me, via public radio, to have the skull returned to its possession. Recently it agreed to relinquish ownership of the skull, but did not contact me to discuss how this would happen. Why? The Trust presumes I stole the skull and its staff will not dirty their hands dealing with a thief.

If it *is* authentic, we must ask ourselves why the Crown is entitled to its possession. How could a remote monarch be the legal owner of a skull thought to be that of Ned Kelly? The answer is both incredible and funny. In the mid 1880s the Victorian police returned the body of an executed male to his wife. She had an oyster shop in Little Collins Street and put her husband's body on ice with flowers in the shop window. Apparently there was nothing illegal about this. The lawmakers of Victoria were less than happy and enacted a law which granted ownership of the remains of executed people into the hands of the Crown. Ned fell into this category. Thus, his bones became the property of the Crown and were not passed on to his family for the burial he had requested.

It would of course be galling to any Irish person for their bones to belong to the Queen of England—as she is at the pinnacle of what most people would understand the 'Crown' to represent. Yet the 'Crown', after all, is nothing more than a legal device, a contrivance that performs a wide variety of functions.

Still, the vast majority of people would voice a sentiment consistent with the proposition that a dignified burial service is a basic human right, or one that any person might reasonably expect, regardless of their background, culture or economic status. Many people would contend that an unburied body is a source of things not being right—particularly when it involves someone of Ned's stature.

Ned has been honoured by Australian people in poetry and song and his life rings on in ours. The Diggers invoked his name and recalled his deeds

during dark hours in the trenches and on the fields of battle. It is here we find the origins of the saying: 'as game as Ned Kelly'. It has been suggested that Ned 'set the height of the bar'; he established the level of courage expected of Australian soldiers. In wartime, the government was prepared to invoke Ned's legend to good purpose; why then, after the war, was he returned to his 'desperate criminal' status?

I believe my role is to appeal to the authorities to acknowledge what I feel the broad public already understands. That is: that Ned Kelly's trial was deeply flawed and that the legal system failed him; that his body was butchered and desecrated; that his head and all his organs were removed for a dubious scientific purpose (his head was presented to a phrenologist apparently to confirm his criminality); that he has yet to receive the spiritual benefits of a dignified burial service.

Our historians tell us, and the skull reminds us, that some of the worst things that could possibly happen to a human happened to Ned. He was persecuted and assaulted by police in his youth. He was imprisoned, a three-year sentence, as an adolescent for a crime he did not commit. He was outlawed, hunted for a huge reward put up by the government and the squatters. He was denied justice—his trial was manipulated for a predetermined outcome. He was denied burial or religious services—his body was desecrated. His remains were passed to the Crown—ultimate punishment—skull used as trophy.

There is a spiritual dimension to beheading one's enemy. Although we might not acknowledge this outwardly, subliminally we understand the effect. A decapitation or mutilation can block what many would understand to be what is essentially a spiritual pathway. We understand with great certainty that beheadings were reserved as a special punishment—far more serious than being executed. To draw and quarter an enemy is a technique known in many cultures. The parts become scattered, guaranteeing that the victim will suffer an extra, perhaps eternal punishment and be caused to linger, possibly forever, in that limbo world that many of us dread and that Ned's unfortunate fate dictated for him.

I feel that we will remain diminished as a people until we bury, with humility, this great Australian whose life has contributed so much to the national psyche. Ned's final wish was to be buried in consecrated ground in keeping with his family's Catholic heritage, and we have yet to honour that. Much of



this remains unacknowledged by many of the institutions that represent us. It seems that they do not know what to say or how to react when confronted with these key points.

Perhaps Ned occupies that part of our emotional lives that senses injustice.

It has been confirmed that medical students attached to Melbourne University worked on Ned's cadaver with an 'unbridled enthusiasm' when they dismantled him organ by organ for purposes that have not been explained. Like the phrenologist they searched inside his body as if to look for his criminality. There is even an incredible suggestion from a prominent Kelly historian that Ned's face still exists—surgically removed and preserved in alcohol. How would the public react if this relic were to surface?

It is only recently that we have come to understand why colonising powers collected body parts of rebels and Indigenous people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They had commercial value and were in high demand; it is probable that people were killed for the financial gain alone. Science used human tissue and bones in an attempt to illustrate distinctions between class and race. British museums in particular were busy fuelling this morbid market, adding to their already large collections.

Ned's relations and now descendants are keenly aware of the purpose of this barbarity. We have been forced to live in the shadow of Ned's execution and they have suffered the opprobrium. State-sanctioned executions can have a dramatic impact upon descendants. The inherent misery caused by this type of grim activity has a tendency to move forward across generations.

There is a patch of ground in the disused Pentridge Prison that was reserved for remains of executed prisoners. It is known that there are twelve male skeletons which were dumped in this patch, that initially existed as a lime pit—it was designed to dissolve whatever human material was placed into it.

The remains of Ned's skeleton were placed into this hole in the late 1920s after being exhumed with other skeletons from the Old Melbourne Jail. It was with disbelief that I came to understand that Ned Kelly, Ronald Ryan and Colin Ross (gun alley murderer) were together in this dreadful place with nine others and that they were destined to share this space with no acknowledgment that, at the very least, they

were wrongly executed. In saying this I don't want to imply that they were innocent of all wrongdoing, only that they were killed for reasons that were political.

So here they were: Ned sandwiched between Colin Ross and Ronald Ryan—two men also widely regarded as being wrongly executed. Ronald Ryan's mother, Cecile, made an impassioned plea for the body of her son to be turned over to her for a burial in consecrated ground and a funeral service, but the authorities denied her this.

If capital punishment is wrong today it was also wrong then, particularly when our institutions produced political executions hidden under the guise of lawful punishment. The Victorian justice system needs to shine a light on this site and not just for those who are well known to the public. All those years ago, the state took on these 'outlaws' as enemies and executed them as an example to the public.

Ned's enemies succeeded in killing only his body. Try as they might, they were unable to remove him from the public memory. His spirit persists and still propels itself forward through the hearts and minds of ordinary people who seem to know the truth and would regard him essentially as a moral being who brushed up against a powerful imperial force. The public has forgiven Ned his perceived criminality, although many people recognised his activities from the outset as being political in nature. Our public institutions are confused as to how they should regard him, and unable to balance his official status as a criminal with the legendary mantle the Australian public afford him. Most recently they chose to present him to the world as being representative of us at the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony.

The issues which fired the Kelly outbreak remain relevant more than 120 years after his death—Republicanism, Land Rights and Social Justice. We seem to be entering a new phase in our understanding of what the myths and legends surrounding Ned's life mean to us. Perhaps we are at the stage where we should explore a posthumous pardon for him.

More than any other person, Ned has helped shape an Australian identity and spirituality. He is the father of an Australian Republic not yet arrived, because profoundly, he taught us so much about being Australian.

Tom Baxter is the conch-holder.

## PERFECT WORLD

AARON WORKS with me. Our offices are next to each other and we know each other like school buddies. One day he says: "I've never been to the beach," and I can't imagine what he must feel like. He says "I've never been, never really that interested. Besides who would I go with?"

"I'll take you," I say, with no intention of actually taking him.

On the fourth floor, our floor, there's a switch on the wall. I don't know what it does. No-one ever touches it. Most people forget it. Each morning I wonder to myself whether it stops time in the office, or turns off all the power, the office goes dark and people who haven't saved their work go into a panic.

The guy in the office on the other side of mine is David. David and his wife look very alike. I don't know if that's a reflection of his ego or what. I see them at the Christmas party and I'm always amazed by the similarities of their features. Sometimes, I've imagined they wear each other's clothes and go to each other's job for the day. Sometimes I'm not sure who I'm saying good morning to.

MY COMPUTER screen is ringing in my ears. Aaron never seems to question what he does, never looking up, never wondering what the switch on the wall is for. I wonder if he thinks about David and David's wife. On days when the sun is shining, I imagine setting my computer free out the window, watching it awkwardly fall to the concrete below. I even see the sun reflecting off the monitor as it turns over and over in air. Then I'd have a plug free for my CD player.

AT LUNCH TIME we have a food court we all go to. All suits and neat haircuts. The storeowners love the lunchtime rush. The employees hate dealing with us. The food court security guard is normally patrolling around the fountains, or 'water feature' I think they call it, or talking to the female cleaner, who always ignores him. He tries to engage her in a talk about her weekend or the football, but she always walks off in the middle of his speech.

"See you later then," he always says, so sincerely.

Sometimes a bird gets in and bounces around looking for food scraps.

An old guy, in a suit of course, sees me across the busy tables and smiles. I've seen him before. Today though, he walks over to my table with his lunch from home, wrapped in three layers of Glad wrap, and sits with me.

"Hi," he smiles.

"Hi."

"Have you ever noticed the girl up there?" The man asks, pointing to a girl who is sitting alone on the level above us. Not at a table, just on the stairs. She stares at the street outside, blowing smoke rings into the window.

"Have you noticed the bird today?" I return to him. His eyes scan quickly to the small bird pecking at the floor.

"Yes, he was here yesterday."

"So was she." We look at our lunches.

"Hey," he reaches into his pocket, "I have this." The man holds out a small figure of Elmo, the Sesame Street character. He squeezes the little red character and it laughs uncontrollably. The man nods his head, admiring it, then laughs with it.

"I can't help laughing with him." He giggles.

"Maybe you should have it." I look at the little red man and poke it as if to check if it's still alive. It laughs. The man is looking satisfied at me. He stands up, his lunch still wrapped and cradled in his arms, and leaves.

I GET IN the elevator, we pack as many people in as we can, until someone puts their hand up in a stop signal and says that's enough. On the wall it says 'ten passenger limit'. We have thirteen. One of the ladies is impatient. She flicks at the 'close doors' button repeatedly every time we stop. As the number three on the indicator above the silver door lights up, the elevator jolts and makes a metal on metal sound, then something that sounds like whale song, echoing through the shaft. We've stopped moving. The impatient lady taps every button, swears, then picks up the emergency phone. Next to me, an old lady makes eye contact.

"Millennium bug, I don't knownothin'," she says.

Sometimes people on the street look up at me. Or at least they look up at the building and stick their fingers up at their own reflection. I wave back to them. David, or David's wife, sees me do this.

"Hey," I say to Aaron, my hand shaking my pocket. He looks at me, so serious. I reach out and quickly flick the switch on the wall. The mystery switch. We both flinch slightly and look around for the damage I've just caused. Nothing seems to happen. Nothing changes. No-one cares. I flick the switch back to normal again.

"I've always wondered about that," Aaron says. My shaking hand in my pocket makes Elmo laugh.

Outside the window, on the fourth floor, the rain is making people run for shelter on the footpath below. The cars switch on their headlights. And as people are finalising everything for the day, starting to save, and file, and clean, I catch the elevator to the roof, without anyone noticing, and stand, watching the drops fall towards me. They catch me on the face and clothes.

The sky is getting dark. The roads are getting busy. The trains are getting full. But Elmo and I haven't left yet. He's laughing.

THE NEXT DAY, at 12:30 exactly, I tell Aaron to come with me. David waves to us. I think he's wearing lipstick. We leave our desks, and our papers,

and our computer screens and get into my car. We have to go quickly to make it back on time. I drive to the beach. It's not a good beach, but it will do.

Aaron and I sit on the sand, our ties loose around our necks, our dress shoes and black socks resting beside us, our black pants rolled up to our knees. We eat our sandwiches. The seagulls make noise above. He has a smile on his face, a look of amazement and wonder and happiness. He stares, completely oblivious to me being there. With that look. And it's beautiful.

The beach is empty, the dark grey clouds overhead threatening rain any moment. I can only see one fisherman out on the dock, and me and Aaron. That's it. You can see where it's already raining on the horizon, where the clouds seem to meet the water. I point this out to Aaron. He says nothing, just stares, taking in deep breaths. And I can't help but smile.

"Hey," I say to him. "Check this out," I say, as I drop my tie onto the sand and run towards the water. Run into the water. And swim out over the small waves. Still in my white shirt and dress pants. Aaron looks amazed, his mouth open wide. But he only hesitates for a second before running out into the water with me. We float with the ocean. We rub the salt water from our eyes. We shake our hair away from our faces. And we laugh. Laugh. Laugh.

It starts to rain. As I float on my back I can feel the drops flicking onto my chest, hitting my thin, wet shirt. The rain gently drumming on the ocean, like a constant, soft drum roll. I can hear it underwater. I can see Aaron underwater, looking up at the clouds above, watching the rain connect with the surface. We come up for air and laugh. Throw our hands in the air. Feel the raindrops on our fingertips. Aaron takes out his mobile phone from his pants pocket. The water has destroyed it. He throws it out to sea.

And I know my watch is beeping on the sand. I know my mobile phone is ringing with the words 'work calling' on the display screen. I know my clothes are ruined.

And it's beautiful.

Andrew Hutchinson has had work published in the *Herald Sun*, *Beat Magazine*, *The Box*, and a collection of young Australian writers called *Anthology*.

## SONG OF EXCESS

Alright then, this is what I want to tell you: I wake each morning, early, it's still dark, and the midwinter cold is out there waiting for me. But in bed I want to find your fingers and squeeze them, hold them within mine, squeeze them, hold them. That's what I want to do. I wonder if you know that. Wherever you are, I wonder if you know what goes through my mind when I wake up. Why your fingers? It's my question, possibly yours too. What is it about fingers? Yours are larger than mine, I've always known that, not that they dwarf mine, but still they are larger, and that's part of the reason why I want to hold them. You'd think, then, that when you'd hold my fingers you'd hold them hard, squeeze tight, crush them. But you didn't hold mine hard, not that your handshake was piss-poor. It was just a soft drop of fingers, resting, so even the word 'squeezing' isn't quite right. Just a soft drop, almost as if they weren't there, but I knew they were—there's nothing comparable to skin on skin. But still the question, why fingers? The accessibility? The sense of ordinariness? The offer of movement? I think it's all of these. Accessible because they were never far from me. When you'd be cooking I'd sit and watch you chop onions, chop garlic, stir up a stir-fry, and I'd want to touch them. If we were watching TV, *Sex in the City* maybe, or *The Bill*, both of us sprawled on the couch like pets, they'd be there, your fingers, on your lap, holding the remote, never far away, and I'd want to touch them. Sometimes when we were in bed, doing what for us only ever happened in bed, you would place your head halfway along my body, and your hands would

be somewhere—I'd want to touch them. Ordinary. Nothing is ordinary when your name's Michael Showell. None-the-least your fingers, large, the ones I want to soft drop onto mine. Movement. Stationary, that's an option. But there will always be others—where could we go? It's the airport of the body. You could take my fingers onto your chest, your nipples, small, tight, upright. I could take yours onto my lips. You could take mine onto your stomach, feel the soft line of hair you have. I could take yours into my armpits, and you could touch me there, almost tickling, almost something very different, taking me back to the time I would wear a white T-shirt beneath my white school shirt so no-one would see that I was becoming a man. You could take mine to a place of yours that still seems dangerous.

I wonder who this is helping. You or me?

Your smell, that's another thing. I can even smell you now. Listen. Listen as I smell you. Sniff, sniffing for you, tracking you down in this room. It's what I still have, will always have, your male musk, not just the smell of your breath, or the places of your sex, something much more. This house, 18 Wannaroo Street, Griffin, holds your smell, it's where it lives, it's where it's home. How strange to think a smell can have a home, but I know it can—a smell can own a house. Because yours does. You won't believe it, I know, I know you wouldn't, because I know you. Thomas, you'd say, smells don't own anything. But how can you tell me that when your smell owns me? And the smell, the smell, the one we're talking about, it's true that it has parts, components, cells of itself. Your mouth plays a part. Is it

bacteria? Is that why your mouth has its own scent? Is it something deeper, something down in the pit of your gut? How can the pit of your gut be something I think about? Well, it can, because what I'm trying to say is this: I might be able to find the parts of your smell, locate them, analyse them, but still it'd be greater than the sum of them, it would never be able to be made in a lab. But it's not just mouth and gut, of course it's not just that stuff. When you would be home from a day, an office day, and you'd be seated at the breakfast table with your coffee, your legs apart like always, that's when I could really smell you. Sometimes you said you too could smell yourself and you'd cross your legs, but I wouldn't want you to do that, I'd want to keep smelling you. Not because I'd be waiting for something else to happen, just because the smell was enough. But it's not just mouth and gut and groin stuff, there's more. There's always more. If I rested my head on your chest, I could smell you. With my head there, I'd wonder if what I could smell was your heart. I'd like to do that to you now. You're lying on your back as if today's been your last. Your eyes are closed, your chest is naked, mostly hairless, not waxed, just mostly hairless, and I want to place my head to it, feel warm skin, listen to your heart beat, wait to smell your heart, the groin stuff, the gut stuff, the mouth stuff. All of it adding up to the smell I've got inside me right now.

Still, I wonder who this is helping. You or me? You need to tell me somehow whether you want me to go on.

You don't say no, so I won't stop.

You were always around. Always somewhere. On the end of the phone, ringing before you took yourself off to work. Ringing when you got to work. Ringing at lunch. There'd always be an afternoon call. Then you'd ring when you got home earlier than me. You didn't have to work full-time, you earned enough without that. But there you would be, on the end of a phone line. Between those calls were the emails, not jokes, sometimes just a line or two, sometimes just one word, sometimes only a symbol. :) There it'd be, on my screen, waiting for me. Even if you were out in the garden, your mas-

sive vegetable garden, the one sometimes I'd laugh at because it seemed like a commercial operation, that maybe you were expecting the need for another income, still you would be around. But soon I wasn't making comments about other incomes, not that the veggie garden came to the rescue. You don't grow vegetables anymore. Even when you were painting in the shed, the tiniest of tiny paintings, I knew you were there, around somewhere, I didn't even have to go looking. Your paintings: they had colours in them three years ago, two years ago, twelve months ago. Then they became compositions of blues and whites, then just blues, and then the blues got darker until you were using just one tube of black oil paint. And it's then that I asked you to tell me the title of your latest, and you said, *The Death of Michael Showell*. Was I too late? Had it settled in you already, got its claws into you, too tight, the grip too much? Excess, that's what management told you, but you didn't feel like excess, you didn't work like excess. But still you were excess. We don't need two senior programmers, they said. Programming is not our core business, they said. But it was your core business, it was your skill, your knowledge. Whatever, the word they used was excess. Excess. That word sounds like a brand of petrol. If that word was a brand of petrol I'd strike a match and put it to flame, wait for it to be a flimsy piece of ash, and then I'd put my mouth to it and softly blow it away, turning it into small pieces, smaller pieces, thin air, gone.

But still I wonder: who is this helping? You or me? You need to tell me somehow whether you want me to go on.

You don't say no, so I won't stop.

I won't ever stop.

Because this is what I want to tell you: I wake each morning, early, it's still dark, and the midwinter cold is out there waiting for me. But in bed I want to find your fingers and squeeze them, hold them within mine, squeeze them, hold them.

Nigel Featherstone is the author of two collections of short stories, *Homelife* and *Joy* (Ginninderra Press, 1999 and 2000 respectively).

## Human Pollution

The apartment blocks reach for the sun  
Bringing the weather upon us all  
Casting shadows on everyone

Below the dark breeds in the murky streets  
WE are a threat to the rats  
And no-one sleeps

Those chemical achievers  
Creators of immunity to diseases  
Now try desperately to feed us all

Waves crash beyond the shore  
Predicaments turn true  
Electricity pulsates no more

The credits slowly start to run  
Displaying the names of everyone  
Born under this fertile sun

DAVID VEENTJER

## Limerick

These words should be writ ten foot high,  
It's the truth and not a word of lie,  
BRYCE COURTENAY CAN'T WRITE  
He's a literary blight  
And his pen should be strapped to his thigh.

BILL PYNE

## Almost-Hearing

As with the near-white baby so rudely removed  
from strong arms and a dark pink nipple  
to be thrust among skins shining like moonlight,  
this near-deaf girl  
was shipped into a classroom of hearing children.

And as with the near-white child,  
a speech therapist rinsed her mouth with English  
until she spoke with such precision  
Australians asked, 'You from England?'

Learning to act—that's all it's about.  
Just as those long, brown fingers pinch  
the china handle of a cup of Earl Grey,  
so she watches lips with a vigilant gaze,  
and laughs so easily that, 'Really!' people say,  
'wouldn't have known if you'd not told me!'

Sometimes she feels like those near-white adults  
who door-knock for mothers  
and wishes for a place—a home—  
where mis-heard phrases aren't laughed at  
and her blank, unhearing stare  
isn't taken for stupidity.  
But she can only wander,  
wearing a false skin in every world.

JESSICA WHITE



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THE MYER  
FOUNDATION

~~When we moved from Wagga to Melbourne~~  
I was very upset + dissatisfied with my employers when we moved from Wagga to Melbourne. In Wagga I had a company ute to do call outs etc. Whenever I asked for a pay rise or did overtime I missed out due to the fact that I had a car. After a while this became okay for me. I was told having a company car equated to about \$700-\$900 per year. When I asked to be transferred back to Melbourne I was told that I would lose my company car + telephone. ~~That~~ The boss asked me what dollar value I was worth to the company. I couldn't answer in fear of saying I was worth too much or not enough. So I said all I want to be is compensated for losing the car + the phone. When I moved to Melbourne I was advised that I would receive an extra \$0.70 per hour pay rise and in a different position of work. This pissed me off immensely as it showed me what they think of me. I am having another meeting with them on Monday about it. If a reasonable outcome doesn't overtake, it's time to start to look for another job!

Damien Maunder

## EDITOR'S NOTE

A SUBSTANTIAL BODY of research indicates an increase in 'working poverty' in Australia since the early 1980s. Yet research remains largely quantitative, and dialogue (other than talkback radio sound-bites) remains outside the public sphere and outside the 'working poor' themselves. There is relatively little published material outside academia on the complex causal factors of this situation, or in the way of a narrative approach.

The following pages seek to go some way towards redressing this. 'Working poor' people from different sectors were sourced to tell us their stories, and we've published edited extracts. Following is what Alicia Sometimes, the writing tutor engaged for the project, said about the stories:

"Sharing stories can happen naturally: at a dinner party, a living room or maybe a bus stop. Not often is the act assessed, written down, explored under headings such as 'responsibilities', 'feelings about money' and then discussed with a group of strangers, ending in publication. I had the unique opportunity to tutor participants of the *Overland* 'Working Poor' project. Workers were

paid to explore and write about their working experiences. The project was always going to make the participants feel valued, supported and heard, even if momentarily. What I didn't realise was how much I would get out of it. Each story was passionate, articulate and deserving of an audience. The participants were from varied backgrounds with many interests and often different goals, but, other than being underpaid, they all cared about the same thing: being *valued* for their work.

Stories were told of what they would do if they had all the money in the world: build homeless shelters or nursing care centres, help families, get into politics, change their career. Many told of unfair work situations, being sacked for dubious reasons, getting harassed, being underpaid and making sacrifices. There were stories of what career they had dreamed of when young, and my favourite—their voices of inner dialogue during a typical working day. Overall their work was surprising and inspiring. Everyone was respectful and considerate of each other's words and feelings. I felt lucky to participate, like a person sitting in on someone else's circle of friends and being thoughtfully included."



## CHRIS ROCKS

TAKE-HOME WAGE		DEPENDANTS	OCCUPATION
\$350 per week		none	Casual factory worker + student
			OTHER

I WORKED IN A SMALL muffin factory. I was employed to pack orders. When I started, the system was very confusing and it was generally accepted that on average there would be three or four wrongly-packed orders a day. It took about six hours to pack all the muffins.

I devised a much simpler system which led to hardly any mistakes—maybe one or two a week. It cut packing time, robbing my time at work by two hours. As I got faster at packing this reduced my time to forty-five minutes, as well as reducing mistakes.

Unappreciated. A threat.  
Punching bag

I felt I should be compensated with a small payrise for all the lost hours and improved accuracy. Instead the boss decided with the new system he could probably manage the packing between himself and the bakers during cooking times. So I lost my job for giving 100 per cent. Better to lurk in the shadows, I think.

I'M SURROUNDED BY fucking morons [in my new job]. Do you think I'm interested in your babble? Do you think I care whatever it is you are trying to prove to me? Just give me the task and I'll do it for that shitty paypack. Don't you think it's enough that I have to sell my soul to you, just so I can survive? What makes you think I want to hear about your weekend mystery flight or the little soapie star you banged? Do you talk beers, steers and queers when you're in that boardroom having a *crucial meeting* about some bollocks that you *won't tell me*

They say money doesn't make you happy, and it probably doesn't. But what it does do is give you the freedom, to realise your dreams. Everything is based on money. The way you see you & work + others. money is the divider.

about, as I probably wouldn't understand? You think me ignorant of the world.

Do you think I don't know the only reason you talk to me, when you see me having a smoke, is so you can convince yourself you have the 'common touch'? Believing I go back to the work floor with a smile, thinking *He ain't bad for a boss.*

Put me on my back for being the little Aussie battler

You arrogant, pretentious cunt. You haven't even ventured out of your parents' world, and you have the nerve to presume to know me. Maybe if you listened or observed you'd know that I savour the five minutes of solitude a cigarette gives me. Maybe you'd know that it's circumstance that led you to your position and me to mine. You would know that I had a little sister to support and raise when I was 16; that I had to sacrifice my education. Even if you did know, would it occur to you what was involved, all the skills needed to survive a situation like that? Would you utilise them? No. At best you would congratulate me on being a little Aussie battler.

I don't begrudge your position or your wealth or education. I begrudge the assumptions you make. I work on your dirty, smelly, noisy factory floor. I sacrifice my health and safety every day. I spend more time in your factory than I do at home. I know your factory. But if I make a suggestion or notice a hazard, you smile patronisingly and feign interest. It's *your* factory, dickhead! If you got your head out of your arse for a minute, you might notice your greatest assets—the workers. At the very least, you might notice your wife giving me the eye.

## تحديات الحياة في المجتمع الجديد

الحياة بطبيعتها مليئة بالتحديات التي تواجه كل فرد . وتزداد هذه التحديات ، وتتعدّد بسبب الحياة حين تطرأ تغيرات جذريّة على مسيرة الفرد . ومن هذه التغيرات الانتقال من بلد إلى آخر ، وما يرتبط بهذا الانتقال من أمور تتطلب تغييراً شاملاً في كل نواحي الحياة المختلفة .

أثبتت إلى استراليا قبل نحو عامين فقط . وهذا يعني أنني انتقلت من مجتمع إلى آخر ، مختلف في تركيبه وقيماته وعبادات وتقاليد وخصايص أفراد . لغة مختلفة ، وعصارة مختلفة ، ودين مختلف ، وكثير من الأشياء تختلف بنسب متفاوتة عن المجتمع الذي نشأت وعرشته فيه .

وكان يجب عليّ إذن كفرد في مجتمع جديد أن أتكيف مع الأجواء الجديدة وأن أقدم الكثير من المجتمع الجديد كي يسهل عليّ الدخول إلى الحياة بطريقة لا أواجه من خلالها مصاعب يمكن أن نلجم من كوني قريب من هذه البلاد ، وكوني أحمل خلفاتي فخرية صعبة من القهر والاضطهاد والتمييز وغيرها من أنواع المعاملة التي عانيت منها فترة طويلة في البلد الذي أتيت منه .

وكوني متزوجاً ولدي ثلاثة أطفال ، كانت التحديّات كبيراً . فمن جهة يجب عليّ أن أقيم موازنة صحيحة معقولة بين القيم التي أحمل وبين التي وجدت هنا ، بين ثقافتنا التي أؤمنها وبين ثقافة المجتمع الجديد ، بين أن يتعلم أطفالي عادات وتقاليد المجتمع الجديد حتى لا يشعروا أنهم غرباء فيه وبين أن يتعلموا ويحافظوا على عادات بلادهم التي

ومن أكبر التحديات التي واجهتها هنا هي العمل . العمل الذي منه خلاصه أو وقت بعيدة مالياتي وأطفالي هنا . ولكن صعوبة هذا التحديّ في أن مسألة الحصول على عمل بالقبول في ليست يسيرة . فوجودي إلا لأن في مستقر . أحمل نوعاً من ضائقة ضاحكة من تأشير الحماية ، والتي تعني محدودية الحقوق والامتيازات المسموح لي بها في هذا البلد . مع ذلك حصلت على عمل . لكن الطبيعة المؤقتة للعمل هنا تؤخر عليّ طبيعة العمل وذلك من وجهتين : الأولى هي الرعيّة القانونية ، حيث لا يمكنني في ظل قانون الحماية المؤقتة الحصول أو الاستفادة من خدمات الحكومة التي تقدمها للدائمين في العمل على عمل . ولوجود الأضرار هي عدم سعة المصير المرتقب ، وهو نتيجة المستقبل ، ولهذا له الأثر النفسي الكبير في تحديّ البرنية والاندماج في العمل أو حتى البحث عن عمل .

يضاف إلى هذا التحديّ مسألة الكلفة الإثنية التي ينتج عنها أحياناً شيء من التمييز العنصري عند التقدم إلى عمل أو حتى في ظروف العمل نفسها . اللغز كذلك لها أثر في تحديّ قبول أو رفض طلب التوظيف . لكن في بعض الحالات قد يكون لها أثر إيجابي ، وهو ما حصل لي شخصياً ، ومنه هنا أنطلق الحديث عن عمل .

MUEEN AL BREIHI		OCCUPATION
		taxi driver, social worker
TAKE-HOME WAGE	DEPENDANTS	OTHER
\$300 per week	wife, 3 children	Temporary Visa Protection

## تحديات الحياة في المجتمع الجديد

I came to Australia [from Iraq] two years ago. I moved from one culture to another. These cultures have different languages and different values. I had to adapt to the new, [because] my background is full of sorrow, discrimination, and other kinds of suffering that we experienced [in Iraq].

The challenge was great because I am married with three children. I had to draw a balance between our values and those of this country; between the education that I know and the education here. I had to allow my children to learn the culture of the new country so they could feel at home, but [it is important that] they keep the culture and traditions of their home country.

One of the biggest challenges was getting work to provide for my family. Finding a job wasn't easy. My residence in this country is not permanent; I hold a Temporary Protection Visa, which limits my legal rights and privileges in this country. This affects my work in two ways: I'm not entitled to many government and employment services; and the uncertainty of my destiny limits the motivation to work. Incorporated into this is racism and the language, [but] I had some advantages; I could speak English well, which enabled me to build relationships. I got a job as a social worker; a big new challenge, because I have an engineering degree and am an experienced teacher—but I couldn't get work here in my field. I just had to find what work I could. I had to build my family's life from scratch.

I also started working as a taxi driver. This didn't conform with my education, qualifications and experience, not even with my physical abilities. But I didn't have a choice. We had nothing when we arrived, other than the clothes we were wearing.

Working as a taxi driver required a lot of waiting: waiting to get the job, waiting for the customer to get in the taxi and to leave, waiting in the taxi queue, waiting for the radio for assistance and help.

Also, a lot of patience is needed with problems with rebellious, drunk, drugged and broke customers. I had to have patience dealing with the owner of the taxi. One day, he'd charge me for the cleanliness of the car, for being late and for not making enough money. On top of that, I had to do my job in the best possible way, obey the law, follow the specific instructions of driving a taxi, and deal with the customers in a way that satisfies them. The long working hours and the subsequent exhaustion doesn't leave me time to spend with my family, to take them out to relax, but it is the only way I can cover our expenses. Night shifts make it difficult—a huge change in lifestyle, sleeping all-day and working all night.

Yet taxi driving wasn't providing what we needed, having to start our lives from scratch. The money I was getting was enough if I worked six days a week provided there weren't any accidents or problems. I tried working like this for two months, but it got to the stage where I didn't have enough energy to continue working. Living in the shadow of a Temporary Protection Visa affected my level of performance and efficiency. Work is not just a way to earn money; it is motivated by future prospects. The Temporary Visa Protection means I don't have a clear view of our future.

My second job provides help to other asylum seekers and the elderly. It requires me to be outside with the public most of the time. As well as working within office hours, I have to attend meetings, seminars, and protests . . . I'm busy all week and over the weekend. The money I get from both jobs isn't enough for [our family] requirements. We suffer from the many things missing in our lives. I'm way below others in regard to my standard of living. I live in poverty compared to others from my country, as well as those in Australian society.

Translated by Abdallah Zakhem.

13. For sometime my electricity and gas accounts were being managed by paying an apportioned fortnightly amount. This continues to be the case for electricity account, but my gas has now been cut off due to my inability to maintain the payments. I now have no gas hot water or gas cooking facilities.
14. At this point I cannot afford to maintain or register my motor vehicle. This presents a real difficulty for me in that I need the car to get to work and I cannot afford a roadworthy certificate that is necessary to change over the registered name. Last week I was picked up by the police for driving an unregistered vehicle and received a \$500 fine.
15. As I am still requiring some treatment after my illness this is a real problem in that I have no sick leave and annual leave credits available to me. These were fully utilised during my time off work due to illness.
16. I have no spare funds for social outings, to pursue any hobbies or to buy replacement clothing, even work clothing.
17. My current financial position is very difficult. My wage level provides me with no scope to make any headway in the payment of my debts or the chance to gather any savings for emergencies.
18. Despite the fact that my current wages are inadequate in meeting my current financial obligations, award safety net adjustments are the only means by which I can achieve a wage increase. My wages are based upon the award minimum. A larger safety net increase would assist me in managing my debt situation.
19. My standard of living provides me with no enjoyment.

Above: Extract from Liz Neville's witness statement for the ACTU's Living Wage Case presented to the Industrial Relations Commission. Reproduced with permission. To view or download witness statements, go to [www.e-airc.gov.au/files/wage2002/actu-witness-statements.pdf](http://www.e-airc.gov.au/files/wage2002/actu-witness-statements.pdf)

LIZ NEVILLE		OCCUPATION
		retail service
TAKE-HOME WAGE	DEPENDANTS	OTHER
\$402 per week	yes	

Oh, great. Becky's not in again today. Now I have to look after the service desk as well as my department. The phone's ringing. Customer wants to know what size Blundstones we have. Hang on, I'll go and check for you. No problem at all. Here comes Jason with ten boxes of stock. Not a problem, Jase, just drop them where you can find a space. Where's my pricing gun? Who used it last?

This is crazy. Tables overflowing, where am I supposed to put these? Bell ringing at service desk. I'll be right there! Take your finger off the bell, I'm coming!

I can't believe I'm doing this job. Never enough hours in the day, put that out, box that up, tidy the tables, order stock, answer phones, serve customers . . . here comes the storeman. Is that all for me? Where will I put it? There it goes, I hope [the boss]

doesn't notice! Bell ringing at counter. Yes, Sir? Phone ringing, can't someone else answer that? [The boss] has arrived, shit, I know he'll find something to pick on. Shit, he's calling me over . . .

I hate this job. But who else is going to hire a 41-year-old, with no education? Take me back, take me back to when I was 16. Give me another chance to do something with my life. Get me out of this place and take me somewhere where I can be appreciated. Where all the hard work I put in means something. How did I get into this? Leaving school, getting married, having kids. Not that I could do without my kids, but maybe I should have waited.

Minimum wage, no prospects for promotion. Can't even afford to have the telephone on. This is bullshit.

I work in a ~~no~~ retail store which is part of a large chain. We are paid minimum wage, ~~do~~ never have enough staff and are expected to do the workload of twice the workers we have. We don't have enough room to move, ~~all our~~ have too much stock to locate, ~~it~~ can never find anything we need, things are always breaking down & never fixed or replaced. Most of the workers are young and never want to work which puts pressure on the ones that do. I hate it ~~how~~ when the bosses come in and make you change things after you've spent most of the day doing it one way. There is never enough hours in the day to do ~~of~~ what you have to and by the next day the pressure has doubled. Sometimes I don't want to be there at all. It's just a vicious circle, which never stops.

# DEAN MITCHELL

## OCCUPATION

Labour, maintenance

## TAKE-HOME WAGE

\$380 per week

## DEPENDENTS

1

## OTHER

Another day, another dollar put on the ear muffs, get my tools. The first 5 hours is like a work-out, that's the best way to look at it. My younger brother's here, he's a good bloke, he got me this job so I'd better be a good worker to keep him in good with the bosses. We've just been called to a meeting, apparently the labour company that hired me has gone arse-up: I'm shocked because we've all been retrenched, no reasons, nothing except "Your pays etc will be in the bank in 2 days time."

Dean applies for and is successful in getting "community job program" work in maintenance.

My first pay-day, god I'm eager to get to the bank to see how much I get payed, sweat is starting to trickle down my face and neck as I finally reach the Bank, that last hill ~~was~~ must have been on a 45 degree angle: What the fuck, only \$380.- for a weeks work. My last job was take home of \$1100.- for a weeks work. now I'm depressed a bit cause I feel like I should get more. Did I really need to get a job that pays so low? Yes, I find myself answering. jobs don't grow on trees so close to home. Re-arranging my whole budget is going to be hard: I'm actually feeling sick in my stomach now that I'm thinking that I'll have to give up and what I'll be able to continue doing: If I give up smoking then I can afford a night out with most of the trappings, but can I give up smoking? I haven't been able to yet!

DAMIEN MAUNDER		OCCUPATION
		Plastics factory worker
TAKE-HOME WAGE	DEPENDANTS	OTHER
\$430 per week	wife, 2 children	another child on way

I can't save any money

with bills + rent it's virtually all gone.

IT'S 4.30AM. The alarm goes off. After the initial startle I get my bearings and I stagger out of bed, trying to be quiet so I don't wake anybody. Then it dawns on me—payday. In the shower I momentarily think, *What will I buy this week? A DVD? Clothes?* Then I realise: *with what?* My pay is already spent. This is the situation week after week.

I get out of the shower, get dressed and drive to work. It's now 5am. Ted, who works on my shift, is already there waiting for me to open the factory. He's all excited about the holiday he's going on. I try to sound pleased for him, but deep down I'm jealous. Jealous that he is single, living at home with his parents, with hardly any financial commitments. Here I am, payday—no money.

We start the oven and the day at work begins. I work on the oven until 8am with Ted, listening to him go on about his holiday. 8am arrives. It's time for me to go and do the paperwork from the previous day. The boss comes in: have you done this, have you done that? I wish I had a gun and could shoot him.

I finish the paperwork about 9am. I take it upstairs to the office girls who put the figures into the computer. On the way down the smoko van arrives. I think, *Geez I'm hungry. A pie would be nice.* I open my wallet. Empty. Back to the vegemite sandwiches in my lunch box. I ring up the real estate agent and pay rent. The car payment comes out. I feel down. [Sometimes] my wife rings. "Can you buy some toilet paper on the way home?" I say to her, "What do you want me to pay with, fairy floss?"

I go back into the factory. I pick up a rattle gun and start to undo a mould. The noise makes me forget about money. The boss comes down and asks me if things are ordered. Yes, I say. I think to myself, *You just ordered \$30,000 worth of powder.* What would I do with \$30,000?

One o'clock arrives and it's time to leave. Back at home, Jen's all ready to go shopping. She asks me how much money we have left [after rent and car repayments]. I say \$160. Okay, she says. We can do \$80 shopping because we have to pay the phone bill.

It's now 4pm. All I want to do is have tea and go to bed. I need to leave this day behind me. I can't, though. I want to spend some time with the kids. I can't take my frustration out on everybody I love.

When will we ever get ahead?

At 5.30pm tea has been cooked. I sit down to eat and ask everybody how their day has been, hoping they won't ask me the same. What would I tell them? "Shocking, I'm sick of being broke by 4pm on payday."

It's now 6.30pm and time for a shower and bed. I say my goodnights at about 7.30pm and crawl into bed. All these thoughts start flowing through my head. *When will we ever get ahead? When will we have money to go on a holiday?* My daughter comes in and says, "Goodnight Daddy, I love you," and off she goes on her merry little way. To be 2 years old again with nothing to worry about. Thank God tomorrow is Friday. Payday is depressing.

I can't stand it

if she tells one more person about how fantastic  
I am and blabs about everything that I  
want to do and am working on and how hard

I'm working and how committed I am to  
becoming a writer and how little money we have.  
and how she struggles to balance the housekeeping  
money and pay all the bills, but we're going  
backwards and its impossible to save

and if I get a job soon that pays well, then  
we'll be able to afford a holiday and perhaps  
buy a house and life will be grand and she can  
buy a new wardrobe of clothes and go to the  
hairdresser more often and then feel better about  
herself. I don't know what I'll do...

And why is all that so bad?

Because, although I say it doesn't matter to  
me about having more money, the pressure of  
responsibility to ~~be~~ provide my family with  
their needs is undeniable and real, and  
my ~~idealism~~ choice of occupation makes my  
previous idealism a bit shaky.

I'm out there on the edge, and my ~~family~~ wife  
and daughters are out there with me,  
~~but~~ some days are harder than others.



## STEVE MERSON

## OCCUPATION

community jobs program

## TAKE-HOME WAGE

\$150 per week

## DEPENDANTS

wife, 2 children

## OTHER

writer

Money no longer feels authentic - plastic  
like the culture of consumerism that  
surrounds us and corrupts our ideas  
of what is worth while

THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DREAM never had huge appeal. House in the suburbs, wife, 2.4 kids and a regular job. So how did I get here?

All I ever wanted was *every thing*.

I was born near the beach to working-class parents. Then Dad shared first prize in Tatts with other clickers in the boot factory and he bought an island in Queensland, where I spent my pre-school years, programming paradise into my personal pattern of preferences.

I went to art school to paint like my father and grandfather. I spent the seventies fishing around Australia, working from season to season, boat to boat, searching for and discovering paradise here and there. There was good money and no money, high life and bone-picking in between . . . Twenty years of hard work [as a ship's captain and business operator] and plenty of time off for reflection had imbued me with a strong sense of capability and worth. I was happy with my life. Born into an atmosphere of love and support, never having gone hungry, and encouraged by my parents to live re-

sponsibly and with vigour, I was well-equipped. I thought I was immortal and blessed.

Marriage, children, mortgages and positions asked much of my resources, and reduced my capacity to create them. In the past decade, a harsh reality presented itself. Having never prepared for the 'full catastrophe', I am behind compared with other Boomers who are more financially secure. Still renting, older car, no guarantee of permanent, well-paid work. My family's idea of luxuries are new shoes, a visit to the hairdresser and a full tank of petrol. We are constantly selling our precious knick-knacks in garage sales and market stalls and we have to create things to make the rent. Our life is simple, austere at times, and we don't know how we will pay for major upsets like a breakdown of the car, computer, washing machine. But we will.

What we do have, as we live hand-to-mouth, from week to week, is the love and intimacy of a close-knit family. The kids will survive, just as I did. My Dad is dead now, but I know he would approve of what I'm doing. I now understand something about mortality.

I am managing my rheumatoid arthritis condition very well, well, well enough to not be in pain *for* all the time — which means,

I am intent on earning my living from a *glated* position.

# DAVID SMITH

## OCCUPATION

Cab driver

## TAKE-HOME WAGE

\$400 for 60-hr week

## DEPENDANTS

## OTHER

*Money is hereditary. There can be no true "free enterprise" system.*

I'M CARRYING TOO MANY people on my back. The [taxi cab] owner, the loan company, Citylink, the parking company at Melbourne airport. The fines to local councils, the service fees for Cabcharge and credit cards. Collecting money on top of fares takes time; time I'm not paid for. I'm not paid by the hour, but I lose money by the hour. The hours I spend waiting, the time I lose because of breakdowns.

I was minding my own business. Merging with the traffic on Williamstown Road. Nobody else in the cab. No-one else on the road behind me. But that didn't stop another driver from hitting me. I think it would've been easier to miss. He was very civil about everything. Very understanding. But there wasn't much he could do about getting me home. I waited about two hours in the cold, waiting for a pick-up truck to arrive and take me back to Moorabbin. Then I had to get back home from there. I get paid for none of this.

I want to get out of this taxi. Not safe. But I am not here. I am not here as myself, but as my uniform. Passengers talk to the uniform and the uniform responds. The cab smells like the previous driver: his cigarettes, stale sweat, scraps of food. Or it smells like disinfectant and vomit. Sounds like the radio, the golden oldies, the footy, the cricket,

the World News Service. Sounds like a dripping tap: the same old [passenger] questions that you use as a creative exercise. I'm depressed by the people I come into contact with.

Refuse [a job] and you're restricted. Joe Blow's been waiting at Location Inaccessible, but you're sent to pick him up. If you refuse the job, your pick-up area is cut. It's illegal, but don't argue. I argue sometimes, threaten them with the *Restrictive Trades Act*. They think the contract you signed allows them to tow the sun out of orbit. There's a bailment agreement, like a master-servant arrangement, that puts the driver in the position of having all the disadvantages of self-employment combined with all the disadvantages of being an employee. The owners can tell you what to do, but have no responsibilities, no superannuation, no sick pay and only a small amount of holiday pay for full-time drivers.

There is no compensation for passengers that aren't there.

I get about \$8 an hour for this happy job I do.

Since the introduction of computerised dispatch systems there are only three operators, Ratty, Irritable and Bossy. Everybody gets annoyed, everybody yells, there's no longer jokes over the radio or drinks after hours.

*I am rising. I will disappear unless I talk to someone. But I am not here. I am not here as myself but as my uniform.*

BRENDA REDMAN		OCCUPATION
		<i>retail service</i>
TAKE-HOME WAGE	DEPENDANTS	OTHER
<i>\$402 per week</i>		

I'VE WORKED WITH A RETAIL COMPANY for approximately fifteen years. I earn the basic wage. During my time with this company I have been involved with the union. I feel at times I have been persecuted for it.

When I started at ~~the store~~ I was promoted to a management position after only three months. I was managing and working with staff in the correct manner but when I was elected union delegate I was demoted. I was told I "mothered" the staff.

From there my working life became a misery. I had to stay with this job as I am poorly educated and my age was against me. I was paying off the house, educating and keeping my son. I couldn't be out of work or I could lose everything I'd worked for. I just had to put up with it.

I was put into a department where the manager made it as hard as he could for me. There were times I would just go into the toilet in tears. Then I was shifted to another department, and after a while I was shifted back, then working for someone who had previously worked for me. She was very good but I found it degrading.

A new store was opening near where I lived so I put in for a transfer and got it. There, I was once again elected union delegate and we had a full union shop. This shop was great, the management and staff worked well together. I loved it.

But then we got a new boss. He wanted to cut hours for part-time staff. I told him, "you can't until you talk to the union". Next thing I am in his office being told I am to be transferred to another store. They told me and the union this was because there were too many senior staff at that store. The

union wanted to fight it, but once again I said no, I need the job and the money. I was sunk again.

The new shop took two buses and one hour and ten minutes to get to. What could I do? Once again I was elected union delegate and health and safety rep. You'd think I would learn. They moved me from one department to another, and one day the store manager called me into his office. This was at a time when I had six months to go until long service leave for ten years with the company. He made me an offer to take up my holiday pay and long-service leave now. I asked if I could think about it. He said I could. I felt if they were that keen to get rid of me I wouldn't go for it: I said thanks but no thanks.

So they put me on registers—this was always seen as punishment for long-service staff. I spent a year and a half doing that, and then a new manager came to my store. We didn't get along but he was reasonable. He gave me an offer to do admin full time and I took it up. He decided I wasn't so bad after all. I started really enjoying my job again. I loved going to work.

But the store closed down. I was offered a position at another ~~store~~ store doing registers. This would mean leaving home at 7.10am and getting back at 7.20pm. I am currently in this store, but now doing admin. There is always the threat that I will be put out of this job, as—have a guess what I am doing again? That's right, union delegate. I sometimes wish I didn't care about people, as my job and life would be much easier, but I do.

I sometimes wish I could get out but I have no choice. I need the job and the money.

I needed to buy a new outfit for the SDA union delegates dinner dance. The most suitable outfit that I owned was five years old and ill fitting. I felt unable to justify the cost of the purchase of a new dress, particularly given other financial commitments that occur at this time. Consequently I did not attend the function.

—extract from Brenda Redman's witness statement in the ACTU's Living Wage Case presented to the Industrial Relations Commission. Full transcripts at [www.e-airc.gov.au/files/wage2002/actu-witness-statements.pdf](http://www.e-airc.gov.au/files/wage2002/actu-witness-statements.pdf)

# OUTWORKER\*

		OCCUPATION
		sewing
TAKE-HOME WAGE	DEPENDANTS	OTHER
\$3-\$5 per hour	yes	

When we were living in Vietnam before the war we were very happy. I am an outworker because when I came to Australia I didn't have any [Australian] qualifications and I didn't know how to speak English. In Vietnam I was a teacher.

I work about fourteen to sixteen hours a day. I wake up at 5am, do exercise and have a shower till 6am. Then I sew till 12pm and then I have lunch. Then I continue sewing until about 5pm. Then I cook and eat dinner until about 6.30pm and I sew until 11pm. I never have any leisure time.

When there is a rush job my husband and my two children stay up all night to do the work. At times my husband and I have stayed up for two nights. We are afraid that if we don't complete the work we will have to pay for the clothes.

When they get home from school, my children do homework, eat dinner, then help my husband and me for two hours each day. On the weekends they help me sew all day. I feel sorry for my children because they can't go out and be with their friends. My daughter helps me to sew when there is a rush job. Sometimes she has school work to do but she doesn't do it because we have to get the work completed.

We eat tinned food so that I don't have to cook or clean the dishes. I am paid \$1.20 for a shirt and that shirt will sell for about \$50 in the stores. I could be doing the same garment as I worked on last year and they have taken 50 cents or \$1 off the price.

My earnings go to pay our bills and there is never any money left. My family can't do simple things such as seeing a movie together.

Most of our friends are outworkers. Their bosses have cheated them all, [they] have so many reasons and excuses. The excuse they use most is that the companies haven't paid them yet.

Sometimes I get back pain and also sore dry eyes and my leg is like dying and my finger feels as if it doesn't belong to me anymore, too painful. I only have breaks when I can't continue sewing anymore because my back is so sore.

There was one incident when my child was sick and there was a rush job . . . it made me feel guilty because I had to sew and couldn't look after my child. There was one time when I sewed my fingers together.

I usually don't know what time or what day it is because I am too busy sewing. I mostly find out the weather through the radio.

If I lost my job I would have to go on the dole. I don't like that way. The people in the social office look at me like prison officers. They ask so many stupid questions.

If I could change my work I would become a journalist.

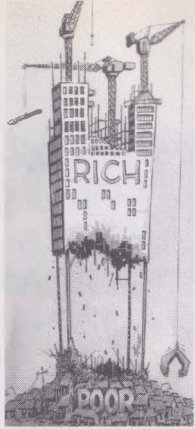
Religion does help . . . I just have to accept that I have been dealt a life of hardship.

Before I came to Australia I knew that life would be hard because I would have to start all over again but I'm doing this for my children's future so I accept it. I have accepted that my own life is dead and with no future. My only hope is for my children to be happy and successful.

I hope that my daughter never becomes an outworker.

\*This is an extract from an interview conducted by Christina Cregan from the Department of Management, University of Melbourne, as part of her research into the working conditions of outworkers. [www.management.unimelb.edu.au/default.cfm](http://www.management.unimelb.edu.au/default.cfm). Most of the outworkers interviewed for this project were very fearful of losing their jobs. To support Fairwear, which campaigns on behalf of outworkers, call 03 9251 5270.

The federal minimum wage is \$431.40 for a standard 38-hour week or \$11.35 per hour. Nearly all states have legislated or fixed a corresponding minimum wage, at the same rate. The ACTU is currently running a series of 'Living Wage' campaigns to increase minimum wages for all Australian workers, regardless of whether or not they are union members. Since the Living Wage campaign commenced in 1996, the ACTU has won an \$82 increase in the minimum wage for Australia's lowest-paid workers.



essay / **FRANK STILWELL**

## POOR SHOW

Economic disparities and the working poor in Australia

THE COMMON DESCRIPTION of Australian society as a ‘wage earners’ welfare state’ has a somewhat egalitarian air.<sup>1</sup> The usual inference is that, because employment is a necessary and sufficient condition for the avoidance of poverty, welfare policies need only focus on those out of the workforce—the elderly and sick, the disabled, the temporarily unemployed, for example. Full employment creates the sound economic base for a society in which welfare policies need have only a residual role.

Current political economic trends challenge this comfortable view. The growth of the ‘working poor’ is symptomatic of the breakdown of the conventional model. Increasing numbers of people are employed in low-paid, often casual or part-time jobs. Disparities between the wages of different occupations have widened. A pool of long-term unemployed has become a seemingly permanent feature of the economic scene. The willingness and capacity of governments to maintain social security expenditures—now comprising 43 per cent of all Australian government spending—is also under strain. More than one in five Australian households receives some form of social security payment.

Governments and potential governments, facing these stresses, have to rethink how best to ensure socially acceptable living standards. The Liberals are currently exploring possibilities for wholesale reform of the welfare system, including the possibility of a system of tax credits that could pave the way for some sort of universal minimum income as well as dealing with the ‘poverty traps’ that inhibit welfare-to-work transitions. The Labor opposition faces the challenge to come up with a better model.

Yet more fundamental is the challenge of coming to grips with the underlying forces generating increased economic disparities.

### INCREASING ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

Australia is still a middle-ranking nation in terms of the extent of economic inequality. According to the latest United Nations data, the ratio of the income of the richest 10 per cent of households to the poorest 10 per cent of households was a little over 12:1 in Australia, about the same as the UK but significantly below the USA’s level of nearly 17:1. By contrast, South Africa comes in at 42:1 and Brazil at 66:1, while the Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Norway and Finland are all about 5:1.

Middle-ranking we may be, but the growth of the ‘working poor’ takes us down the American road. In the United States extraordinary affluence for some people coexists with widespread poverty for others, including many who are in employment. Cobbling together various part-time jobs, even with nominally full-time ones, is common. When Bill Clinton boasted at a rally about the 11 million jobs created during his presidency one worker in the crowd yelled out “yes, and I’ve got three of them”.<sup>2</sup> The growth of the ‘working poor’ in the United States is symptomatic of an increasingly polarised, policed and punished population, or (to push the alliteration further) an increasingly segmented and insecure society.

Australia, like the US, has experienced widening disparities in the distribution of income since the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The rich have got richer, benefiting from the high returns to the ownership of land and capi-

In 1975 the Australian wage share was 62% of company profits but by 2000 this had fallen to 54%. On the other hand, the share of profits, rent and interest payments rose over the same period from 38% to 46%. In effect, about 8% of the national income was shifted from workers to those deriving their income from the ownership of capital.

tal, particularly in the 1990s, and from increased professional fees and the rapidly rising salaries that senior business executives enjoy. At the other extreme, poverty is persistent—variously estimated at between 8 per cent and 17 per cent of the Australian population, according to the level of income for which the ‘poverty line’ is set for different household types.<sup>4</sup> Setting the poverty line at half the average family income, for example, shows that 13 per cent, or one in eight Australians, lived in poverty in the year 2000.<sup>5</sup>

Wealth inequalities are even more striking than inequalities in the distribution of income. While income is a flow over time, wealth is stock held at any one time. A study in 2002 by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling at the University of Canberra, based on a specified set of assets (housing, shares, rental property, superannuation and savings deposits), showed the wealth of the average household in Australia to be about \$280,000. The variation around that average is huge, the wealthiest fifth of households having average assets of more than \$750,000 and the bottom fifth having an average of only \$18,000. The former are more than forty times wealthier than the latter, according to these estimates. These wealth inequalities have increased sharply over the past two decades.<sup>6</sup>

#### CAUSES OF GREATER DISPARITIES

What explains the growing economic inequalities? The changing labour-market conditions figure prominently among the complex underlying causes. There is evidence, for example, of major shifts in the distribution of income between household types. There seems to be a growing polarisation between two-income households and households where all the adults are unemployed.<sup>7</sup> There has also been a relative decline in the number of middle-income jobs based on skilled ‘blue-collar’ and clerical ‘white-collar’ work. Employment growth has been concentrated in professional, executive, managerial and other high-paid positions and, more strongly, at the

other income extreme in the proliferation of casual and part-time work in the secondary labour market (including so-called ‘Mac-jobs’). So wage incomes are becoming more polarised.<sup>8</sup>

Growing economic disparities also reflect changes in the power of employers in this era of corporate globalisation. The increased power of transnational corporations and financial institutions has resulted in strong pressures to reduce labour costs. One measure of the resulting redistribution between labour and capital is the relative shares of wages and profits in the national income. In 1975 the Australian wage share was 61.7 per cent, but this had fallen to 54.1 per cent by the year 2000. On the other hand, the ‘gross operating surplus’, comprising income in the form of profits, interest and rents, rose over the same period from 38.3 per cent to 45.9 per cent.<sup>9</sup> The increase in profits almost wholly accounted for this switch in income shares. In effect 7.6 per cent of the national income was shifted from workers to those deriving their income from the ownership of capital over the twenty-five-year period. This constitutes a major redistribution of income between social classes.

One might have expected the broader spread of share ownership to be an offsetting factor. The proportion of households owning shares in businesses has certainly risen dramatically—up from about 8 per cent to 52 per cent over the same quarter century, according to data from the Australian Stock Exchange.<sup>10</sup> This is largely the consequence of the privatisation of government business enterprises, many workers having taken the opportunity to buy tiny individual parts of what they had previously owned collectively. However, in practice, the pattern of share ownership has remained very lopsided. About 90 per cent of shares are owned by the wealthiest 20 per cent of households.<sup>11</sup> According to the Australian Stock Exchange data, only 5 per cent of shareholders have sufficient shares to generate an income which exceeds 25 per cent of the average adult income.<sup>12</sup> So, contrary to claims about

The adoption of 'enterprise bargaining' and the Howard Government's push for individually 'negotiated' contracts has left some workers without significant market power and bleak prospects, especially where employers offer contracts on a 'take it or leave it' basis. Further widening of wage disparities is a predictable consequence.

'people's capitalism', the growing proportion of households who derive some income from the ownership of capital has not fundamentally affected the control of the bulk of incomes from capital by an affluent elite.

Meanwhile, industrial relations policy has accentuated distributional inequalities, impacting both on the relative shares of capital and labour in the national income and on the degree of income dispersion among those who derive their incomes only from wage-labour. The adoption of 'enterprise bargaining' and the Howard Government's push for individually 'negotiated' contracts (AWAs) has eroded the Industrial Relations Commission's capacity to ameliorate inequalities of economic power in labour markets. Some workers in key industries and with strong bargaining power have been able to achieve significant wage rises under the newer arrangements, but workers without any significant market power face bleaker prospects, especially where employers can offer contracts to individual workers on a 'take it or leave it' basis. Further widening of wage disparities is a predictable consequence.

Women have been a particular casualty of the shift from centralised wage-determination to enterprise bargaining. Their gains in the labour market, resulting from their growing participation and greater gender pay equity over the past three decades, have been eroded because women are concentrated in sectors where they have less bargaining power—industries like textiles, clothing and footwear for example, or other sectors characterised by part-time work or low unionisation. The closing of the wages 'gender gap' which had been evident during the 1970s and 1980s stalled during the 1990s. The ratio of female to male earnings for adult full-time non-managerial employees peaked at 85 per cent in 1991: by 1998 it had slipped back to 83 per cent. In February 2002 the ratio of female to male earnings for full-time employees was 81.3 per cent, back to where it was in the early 1980s.

These factors combine to accentuate the tendency towards growing disparities in economic rewards—between and within classes. One should not be shocked: as US economist Lester Thurow says, "Capitalistic economies are essentially like Alice in Wonderland where one must run very fast to stand still—just stopping inequality from growing requires constant effort".<sup>13</sup> Historically, these 'constant efforts' have come mainly from trade unions and governments of a social democratic inclination. Both are now on the defensive. Trade unions still have a major role to play in fighting for higher wages and defending workers' rights but their coverage of the workforce has fallen: only 25 per cent of Australian workers are now members of unions. Concurrently, the redistributive role that governments—conservative as well as labour—had previously played through progressive taxation and the welfare state has been undermined by the ascendancy of neoliberalism.

#### WHAT POLICIES FOR REDISTRIBUTION?

In the nineteenth century the distinguished liberal political economist John Stuart Mill argued that the pattern of income distribution was essentially a political choice, not determined by any of the economic principles that shaped the production of economic wealth. In the twentieth century, economists like J.M. Keynes, Gunnar Myrdal, Joan Robinson, Armatya Sen and J.K. Galbraith, as well as social theorists and policy analysts such as R.H. Tawney, Richard Titmuss, Peter Townsend, and Ronald Henderson, were proponents of economic policies with egalitarian intentions. Socialists have rubbed shoulders with small 'l' liberals in seeking to develop labour-market institutions, regulatory policies, taxation structures and welfare-state provisions to give practical effect to those intentions.

Notwithstanding the ravages of neoliberalism in recent years, there are still many policy instruments for the redress of economic inequalities, if there is the political will to use them. Taxes could be levied

Women are particularly disadvantaged, because they are concentrated in sectors where they have less bargaining power—industries like textiles, clothing and footwear, or those characterised by part-time work or low unionisation. The ratio of female to male earnings for full-time employees has decreased to 81%, back to where it was in the early 1980s.

directly on wealth, including wealth held in the form of land and housing which generates ever higher unearned incomes as a result of inflationary processes in urban land markets. At present increases in wealth are subject to capital gains tax, but this only applies when assets are sold and thereby converted into income. An annual wealth tax (for example, on asset holdings of more than a million dollars) would more effectively capture some of that private wealth for public purposes. Inheritance taxes could also capture part of the unearned incomes which perpetuate economic inequality inter-generationally. Australia is currently unusual in having no wealth or inheritance taxes.

Extra tax revenues derived from such sources could be used to finance government spending on public education, health, transport infrastructure and other services which would create more equality of opportunity throughout society, as well as contributing to a better quality of life. Incomes policies can also be used to tackle the distribution of incomes at source, seeking to regulate the balance between different levels of wages and salaries, professional fees and other non-wage incomes. A guaranteed minimum income scheme could directly redress the problem of poverty by setting a 'floor' to the income distribution.<sup>14</sup> The sheer complexity of welfare-state provisions and the need to address the problem of 'poverty traps' makes the latter policy attractive even to the likes of Tony Abbott, it seems, although there is no evidence of any corresponding concern with the underlying drivers of economic inequality.

How far to go with policies for greater economic equality is a difficult political judgement. My personal view is that there should be 'ceilings' as well as 'floors' in relation to the distribution of income and wealth, but we could reasonably debate whether the ratio of income ceiling to income floor should be closer to 3:1 or 10:1 for example. In this respect it is pertinent to note that the ratio of salaries of corporate CEOs to average earnings of manufacturing workers in 1997 was 19:1 in Australia,

second only to the United States at 24:1 in this particular 'league table'.<sup>15</sup> So even getting down to a ratio of 10:1, the sort of level prevailing in European nations like Switzerland, Sweden and Germany, would require the existing Australian disparities to be reduced by nearly half.

#### THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE

Some neoliberals claim that large economic inequalities are necessary because they stimulate individuals to try to 'get ahead' by working hard, thereby contributing to improved national economic performance. John Howard used to call this process 'incentivation' (although, thankfully, he seems to have stopped using the term lately). The claim rests on some distinctive behavioural assumptions. As the political economist J.K. Galbraith once wryly observed, it assumes that the rich will work harder if their incomes are increased whereas the poor will work harder if theirs are reduced!<sup>16</sup>

Hard work is not the key determinant of income inequalities anyway. The growth of the 'working poor' illustrates the point. So too, at the other end of the income distribution, does the growth of 'unearned incomes' from land and capital, partly dependent on corporate welfare. How one defines the poor is also debateable: in relative terms, some are always poorer than others. The characteristics of the poor are also relevant from a policy perspective: are people poor because of their inherent disadvantages in a competitive economic environment, because of their inadequate responses to material incentives, because of a self-perpetuating 'culture of poverty', or what?

If poverty is defined in relative rather than absolute terms, it is insoluble in an increasingly unequal society. Consumerism exacerbates the problem by continually 'raising the bar' of what constitutes acceptable material living standards. Looked at from this perspective, poverty is not just a 'residual' problem facing the less fortunate, whether 'working poor' or totally excluded from participation in the main-



Some neoliberals claim that wage inequalities are necessary because they stimulate individuals to try to 'get ahead' by working hard, but hard work is not the key determinant of income. The ratio of salaries of Australian CEOs to average earnings of manufacturing workers in 1997 was 19:1.

stream economy. It is one aspect of the broader problem of an inegalitarian, consumerist society.

Poverty and affluence are two sides of the same coin. The former is not soluble by its transformation into the latter. ●f course, people commonly say that they would like to be wealthier and they often devote much of their personal energies to the pursuit of that ambition. However, there is abundant evidence that the relationship between income and happiness is generally non-linear. Rising out of poverty—whether defined in absolute or relative income terms—reasonably reliably enhances personal happiness. However, in an already affluent society, further increases in people's incomes produce no similarly dependable improvements in their subjective wellbeing.<sup>17</sup> Numerous surveys have shown that, beyond a certain level of material comfort, happiness is much more strongly correlated with personal health, the quality of social relationships, and environmental factors than it is with income, wealth and material possessions.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, economic inequalities intensify the scramble for 'positional goods' (such as houses in the 'best' neighbourhoods) that are sought after precisely because not all people can have them. Large economic inequalities also exacerbate feelings of relative deprivation. If people's perception of their happiness is judged according to what they have relative to what others have, then substantial economic inequality is a recipe for widespread and permanent social discontent. Looked at from this perspective, the inegalitarian tendencies within modern capitalism are fundamentally incompatible with the achievement of a good society. The growth of the 'working poor' in Australia brings this fundamental contradiction into yet sharper focus.

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## BATTLERS OR BLUDGERS?

Who are the poor in Australia?

IT'S A CONFUSING TIME for what right-wing commentators often like to refer to as the 'poverty industry'. First, late last year there was a concerted attempt by conservative think-tank the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) to discredit poverty estimates published by a major social-welfare agency and produced by a respected academic research institute.<sup>1</sup> Then this was followed up by a report from the left-leaning and environmentalist Australia Institute, which similarly implied (albeit from a different perspective) that those 'genuinely struggling' made up a smaller proportion of the population than often suggested and that the real problems were inflated expectations and middle-class whingeing.<sup>2</sup>

So what is going on in the poverty debate? Who is really poor in contemporary Australia? Is all the talk of emerging working poverty just a beat-up by the welfare sector and its fellow travellers in the academy? Or are we being softened up for more US-style reform, to shift the policy emphasis further from public support for the most disadvantaged to personal responsibility by poor people themselves?

### THE WAR ON POVERTY STATISTICS

The CIS critique focused mainly on the decision in the Smith Family report to headline a poverty estimate based on one of a number of alternative poverty lines included in the study by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM). The headline estimate (based on a poverty line of half the mean national income) suggested a poverty rate of around 13 per cent in 2000, up from 11.3 per cent in 1990. The CIS's own preferred measure (the half median—and also de-

rived from the Smith Family's report) puts the poverty rate at 8.2 per cent in 1990 and 8.8 per cent in 2000.

There are a number of valid statistical points made in the CIS paper, as well as several serious misunderstandings about how such estimates are derived and used in poverty research internationally.<sup>3</sup> The debate highlights that there are no straightforward or simple ways to measure poverty and that some judgements, informed by accurate data, are always needed. However, the CIS's main purpose seems to be to suggest both that the extent of poverty in contemporary Australia is wildly exaggerated and that the welfare sector deliberately exaggerates the problem for its own purposes—mainly to argue for extra government spending. The details of the critique are in many ways less important than the underlying ideological nature of the campaign, which is about promoting an American-style reform of welfare based on generating 'self-reliance' amongst the (supposedly small) group of people who 'are genuinely poor'.

To some extent we in the social policy research community have only ourselves to blame for the confusion underlying current views of poverty. The debate has become bogged down in statistical technicalities and uncertainties about survey data that, while clearly important for researchers, often fail to engage with either popular or political discourse. Discussions of 'absolute' versus 'relative' poverty are important both theoretically and practically, but still allow critics like the CIS to pretend that the presentation of a range of possible measures represents little more than "arbitrary assumptions cou-

pled with guesswork” (the CIS’s own guesswork, incidentally, arbitrarily revises the poverty rate down to about 5 per cent). We have also as yet been unable to produce widely accepted measures that clearly link particular income levels with material deprivation.

This is where the Australia Institute’s argument comes in. Their survey suggests that even at the lowest levels of income around one-fifth of people have more than enough for essential expenditures—and thus that feelings of deprivation are conditioned by expectations and attitudes rather than material circumstances. While obviously not intended to do so, this does align curiously with the CIS’s arguments about the exaggeration of the extent of ‘genuine’ poverty.

Clearly over-consumption is a real issue in rich countries like Australia, not least because of the stress it places on a fragile environment. However, the danger of the ‘middle-class whinger’ argument is that it tends to assume that everyone not in the most blatant poverty is equally involved in over-consumption, and that this is a matter of personal choice. In fact there is plenty of other evidence to suggest that many households are not in a position easily to afford consumption of a relatively modest nature that most Australians regard as normal and not luxurious at all, and which has become a common community standard.<sup>4</sup> Not all of these households are in the very lowest income bracket and some have members in paid work.

#### DOES AUSTRALIA HAVE A PROBLEM OF WORKING POVERTY?

This leads on to the question of whether through wage deregulation and industrial change Australia is heading down the road of US-style working poverty. In the postwar ‘wage earners’ welfare state’, to be working but poor used to be a contradiction in terms. In the early 1970s, the Poverty Inquiry found that less than 2 per cent of families with an adult in full-time employment could be described as poor.<sup>5</sup> Poverty was mainly a problem for those who could not get paid work. More recently, however, being in waged work seems less effective as a protection against poverty and since the mid-1990s the ACTU’s Living Wage claims have expressly linked the question of low pay with that of household deprivation.<sup>6</sup>

Like all questions of poverty, this depends on

how you measure it. Just as there is no agreed poverty line, there is no single measure of ‘low pay’. However, a study carried out at the Social Policy Research Centre looked at this question using data from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup> This took pay to be ‘low’ if it was below two-thirds of the median hourly rate and used both the ‘Henderson poverty line’ (HPL), based on that determined by the Poverty Inquiry in the 1970s and updated since then by the Melbourne Institute, and the half-median measure. There are good arguments that the HPL no longer provides a useful measure of poverty because of the way it has grown relative to other measures of income, although at \$410 per week for the reference family of four in 1995–96, it remains a fairly austere standard for contemporary Australia.

On this basis (and excluding the self-employed, whose reported incomes are known to have inaccuracies) we found that the phenomenon of working poverty in Australia was real and growing, but still at a low level. Just over 3 per cent of all adult employees in 1981–82 lived in households with net incomes below the HPL after taxes and benefits, rising to nearly 7 per cent in 1995–96. Using the stricter half-median standard the equivalent figures were 2 and 3 per cent. It was not just a question of low pay. Most low-paid workers did not live in poor families and the biggest increase in family poverty over the period was among employees not in low pay. Yet the proportion of low-paid workers who were also in poor families grew to nearly one in five. Much of this was due to the increasing prevalence of involuntary part-time and casual work, as well as a growing polarisation between dual-earner and no-earner families, but there was also a small but significant rise in poverty amongst those in full-year, full-time work. It seems likely that this situation would at least have continued in the latter half of the 1990s, if not actually increased. Thus, having paid work does seem to be a less effective safeguard against poverty than in the past.

Yet these findings need to be seen in perspective. It is still people without paid work who are much more likely to be living in poverty than even low-paid employees, although with the increase in casual work more people are moving back and forward between these two statuses. In this respect the incentive structure built in to the relationship between low wages and social security remains largely in-

To be working but poor used to be a contradiction in terms. More recently however, being in waged work seems less effective as a protection against poverty. We found that the phenomenon of working poverty in Australia was real and growing.

tact. Similarly, although wage deregulation certainly has brought about much greater gross wage inequality, the combination of continued minimum wage protection and tax and social security structures has so far restrained this inequality in gross earnings from breaking out into full-blown working poverty on a US scale. There is no room for complacency, but we should be cautious about suggesting that Australia is currently rushing down the US path.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What might happen if wages at the lower end of the distribution were allowed to fall further, as has been suggested as a strategy for reducing unemployment? There is an argument that any comprehensive package of measures to combat unemployment would need to include some form of wage restraint. However, there are doubts about how large the impact on unemployment would be, especially if such restraint was concentrated on awards rather than aggregate wages. If the effect is small, then many low-waged workers might be worse off, while relatively few of the unemployed would gain, especially if a large proportion of any new jobs created went to people currently outside the labour market. In effect, the earnings gain from additional employment would largely be shuffled amongst those with already low incomes rather than being redistributed from the better-off.

Such changes might also lead to calls to reduce the level of income support payments for unemployed people, because of concern about work incentives. Unless a large number of unemployed people found work as a result, the effect would be to depress further the living standards of many of the poorest families. Even if a wage freeze would not affect all those in or close to poverty, the problem of working poverty would be aggravated unless adequate compensation is provided through the tax and social security system.

Proponents of a freeze on award wages, such as the 'five economists', have argued for compensa-

tion for low-income households through tax credits.<sup>8</sup> Simply increasing existing family allowances cannot be the whole answer, even though they have helped to reduce poverty amongst the low-paid with children since the early 1980s. For a start, half the low-paid workers living in poor households in poverty do not have children. Extending income-related support to low earners without children, however, whether through social security or through a tax credit, would be expensive. In the context of increasingly individualised wage bargaining it might also stand a risk of being captured over time by employers through even lower pay, unless a strong and enforceable minimum wage platform is in place.

Tax credits can enhance incentives for unemployed people to take lower-paid work, but they can also exacerbate problems of high marginal tax rates and act as a disincentive for women in couples to look for work of their own. The US Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), for example, has been popular politically in the context of withdrawal from welfare provision, but it has had a fairly small impact so far on working poverty. It is arguable that one of its functions has been to legitimise further the low-wage sector of the US economy. Its main impact has been on sole parents, but, as one of the EITC's main architects and proponents has recognised, their increase in participation would have been caused partly by the withdrawal of access to welfare.<sup>9</sup>

There is a danger that if wages in Australia are allowed to fall on the assumption that incomes will be protected through tax credits, these payments may end up failing to meet their income support goals even while spending on them increases. The consequence might either be a cutting back of this compensatory support in the future, or (perhaps more likely) a shift away from other forms of social security expenditure in order to meet the costs of tax credits.

Another round of welfare reform is currently on the agenda and neo-liberals such as the CIS would

have us go down the US road.<sup>10</sup> So far the government has moved cautiously in areas such as compulsory participation in job search or employment by sole parents and other mothers of young children, but this is clearly one possible direction for the future. The US documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, currently on release in Australia, tells how in a small town in Michigan a primary school age girl was shot dead in class by a six-year-old boy who had found a gun in his uncle's house and taken it to school. The boy's mother, a single ex-welfare recipient now doing two minimum wage jobs through the State's much-vaunted welfare-to-work program, had to travel hours each day to work but still could not afford to pay her rent (thus having to move in temporarily with her brother), much less pay for pre- and after-school care. In a telling scene the local Sheriff excoriates the welfare-to-work push that is leaving already disadvantaged children with less parental supervision. Of course, this is just one anecdote, and scientific research on the impact of US welfare reform on children has found mixed results.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, a host of studies have found that work at any price does not necessarily improve the lot of either welfare mothers or their children.

The challenge in Australia is to recognise what has worked well in our own industrial and social security systems and what continues to work, as well as what needs revising and updating to reflect new needs and a changing social and economic context. This does not require a shift toward US solutions. There is little doubt that poverty, both overall and amongst those in paid work, is a continuing problem, but we should not overdo the rhetoric. We need to demonstrate more transparently how low incomes lead to real deprivation and to exclusion from aspects of life the rest of us take for granted. This might lead to better and cleverer ways to address the problems without simply assuming that the only way is to force people into low-paid work. Inequality has also been growing, as Frank Stilwell's article (p. 83), and this exacerbates the feelings of material deprivation that are highlighted by the Australia Institute and which are socially divisive. Perhaps it is time for a new Poverty Inquiry.

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## MAKING CAPITAL TICK



Mary Leung

A CRISIS IN working time erupts every second of every day for some worker somewhere. An alarm doesn't go off. The porridge burns. A car won't start. The bus sails past your stop or the train runs late. Minuscule as each incident appears, any one of them could contribute to dismissal. Although employers should make allowance for the long littlenesses of life, these annoyances are not attributable to the needs of capital. The same cannot be said about the acceleration of life and work across some 250 years.

Longer hours, intensified routines and unpaid overtime are among the problems pressing on working people. The mass media has reported numerous cases of disruption to family and social life. These stories are presented as if the difficulties resulted from misunderstandings between management and the employees. Tony Abbott would be happy to resolve such disagreements by compelling workers to negotiate individual contracts, free from the rigidities imposed by union bosses. Sections of the union movement would prefer to extend last year's ruling by the Industrial Relations Commission that employees may refuse excessive overtime. What Abbott dares not admit and the ACTU cannot absorb is that the conflicts over the organisation of time arise from the needs of capital more than from the aspirations of workers.

To prepare for the future of work, working people need to investigate the future of capital. This lecture offers a contribution to that understanding, conceived in the spirit of inquiry that guided Marx's *Capital* (1867) and Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899). No solutions will be

specified beyond the implication that policies are more likely to succeed when grounded in an appreciation of why capitalists must behave as they do.

### CAPITAL

#### i. enforcing free labour

Current concerns with working hours are only one side of the coin. At the turn of the twentieth century, Joseph Furphy opened his novel set among Riverina drovers, *Such is Life*, with the exaltation: "Unemployed at last!" That predilection remains a greater concern to capital than any difficulties that employees face from overwork. Wherever labour is in short supply, the propertiless will try their luck with a succession of bosses. To make bush workers see out their contracts, Masters and Servants Acts were enforced until late in the nineteenth century.

For employers, the prime problem has always been to get people to go to work for them at all. In his 1697 report to the Board of Trade on *Relief and Unemployment of the Poor*, John Locke recommended that the recalcitrantly idle be whipped and have their ears lopped off. Their offspring, he advised, should be taken away—stolen—at the age of three years to be placed in schools that would inculcate the discipline of work.<sup>1</sup>

A precondition for the capitalists' ability to buy labour-power is that its sellers possess no other means of sustaining themselves. That was not the case in 1829 at Swan River, to which Mr Thomas Peel had conveyed the coin of the realm, the means of production and labourers but neglected to import the power relationships that, in England, would have obliged those farmhands to work for him.

Unhappy Mr Peel was left “without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water”.<sup>2</sup> The labourers, meanwhile, were busy working land they had occupied for free. The Wakefield Scheme of Systematic Colonisation proposed to remedy this defect in nature by making assisted immigrants to South Australia work to repay their fares and then to save to buy land that would only be made available seven years after their arrival.

The evidence for an increase in inequality through globalisation is not to be found in income statistics alone, or through exposing the low wages in the factories that supply Nike. Underpinning those aspects, and of far greater import, is the proletarianisation of the world as billions of people are dispossessed of their land and water, or other resources for self-sufficiency outside the world market.

## ii. intensification

Once labourers have been hired, the manager’s task is to make their labour as productive as possible during the hours for which they are paid. Workers sell their ability to produce (i.e. their labour-power), but what their employers need is its application. At the point of production, the class struggle is joined when the owners of productive property tussle with their labourers to enforce their attention to the tasks that will produce value in excess of the costs of reproducing their labour-power. Therefore, capitalists try to control their wage-labourers for every second that they are at work, a subordination dignified as managerial prerogative. The capitalist has paid for labour-time and is driven to extract the most value from it. For that reason alone, Marx and Engels were right to declare that “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”.

When bosses call for ‘a fair day’s work’, they want to intensify their operatives’ attentiveness. For instance, after the introduction of the forty-hour week in 1947–48, Australian employers called on unions to support “A Full Forty-Hours”.<sup>3</sup> In 1953, the Chair of the Joint War Production Committee, Sir John Storey, deplored that most wage-earners put in no more than thirty-three hours a week “after allowing for public holidays, tea breaks, late starting and early finishing”.<sup>4</sup>

The length of attendance need not be the workers’ main burden. Some Japanese salarymen hung about their offices till 10 pm because there was no

room for them at home. Even during the day, a few had little to do and were known as ‘apple polishers’, that is, clerks who sat at their desks polishing an apple until it was time to eat it. Their twelve-hour shifts did not lead to ‘death from overwork’. That syndrome afflicted a different stratum with similar attendance times but far heftier workloads. Equally, ill-health can result from seven-hour days in a thirty-five-hour week if the strain is relentless. While the physical effort has diminished in many tasks, mental pressures are up across the board. The isolation in the cabin of a mechanised coal-extractor makes twelve-hour shifts at an open-cut as stressful as eight hours underground with a pick. Lack of control over one’s environment is the source of most mental and physical disorders.

Control over labour-time was known as convict discipline long before Fordism and Taylorism and is propelled through globalisation. The development of the methods for ensuring a worker’s attentiveness can be traced, albeit with a broad brush, through the drive that capital has exerted over several hundred years to convert concrete labour times into a universal labour-time. To this end, the capitalists’ concern had to spread from lengthening the working day to intensifying the application with which the work is performed. The crux is the comparative time taken by each operative to perform a task.

When production was for the maker’s own use, a lass might have taken a day to cut out and finish a shirt, her sister six hours and their aunt only four. Indeed, there would have been as many actual production times as there were seamstresses. The time taken was important only in relation to other domestic tasks such as cooking, child-minding and gardening. However, should the shirt be bartered for food, then the participants to the exchange would have guessed at the time involved in its production to know how many eggs to offer.

The setting of relativities of labour-time assumed a different impact when the shirt-maker sold not the shirt itself, but her capacity to make shirts in exchange for wages. Once workers entered that regime, the time taken to finish each garment was not measured against household chores or personal satisfactions. The pace was no longer set by the wage-labourer, but by the purchaser of her labour-power. Depending on the nature of the produce, the capitalist also mimimised unproductive labour-time through piece rates.

From early on, the masters divided the making of each shirt into its several stages—cutting out, sewing, button-holing—and also into the shirt’s parts—sleeves, collars, backs and vests. The capitalists spurred each operative towards the rate of their most efficient employee. The particularisation employed to reduce labour-time also lowered the workers’ attentiveness and hence demanded stricter oversight. Efficiency is a mix of speed and quality. Spoils are a double loss to the employer, of wages and materials. Because their assault on profits is like stealing, operatives were fined for their mistakes.

Having established a factory-wide standard, the next step was to make the production time of each worker approach or exceed the best rate throughout the area in which that firm sold. The shortest labour-time in that market became the standard that all the wage-labourers had henceforth to match, a Universal Labour Time (ULT). The quickest is never a permanent quantum. Innovations follow in reaction to the attainment of each rate. These speed-ups, in turn, drive all firms within that market area towards further cuts in labour-time.

For a long time, the approximate achievement of the ideal labour-time could be recognised only after profits had been reported. That index was rough-and-ready because book-keeping remained rudimentary. Moreover, the realisation of any profit depended on the employer’s success at selling his workers’ output. Fordism and Taylorism were attempts to move beyond this post hoc measure of the success at matching ULT.

After railroads imposed standard time across the USA in 1884, a music-hall routine had a stage Irishman complaining that John D. Rockefeller had monopolised time within his Standard Oil. This joke conveyed an element of truth because the pace of work was being increased as part of the reorganisation of capital into corporations, cartels and trusts. Monopolising competition also compelled firms to move into new markets. Bukharin recognised as early as 1915 that those new structures were combining with the migration of labour, commodities and of money-capital to inscribe a wage-rate for “socially indispensable labour on a world scale”.<sup>5</sup> These institutions brought forth the Multi-Divisional Corporation in the 1920s boom. The longer post-1950 boom, better understood as the “great trough in unemployment”, was built on the conglomerate and the Multi-National Corporation.<sup>6</sup>

Control over labour-time remains at the crux of the current wave of competition between monopolising capitals, so that globalisation continues the universalising of labour-time, but with a new dimension. Throughout the centuries, the geographic boundaries to that accelerating standard have been extended by communication, conquest and transport, or restricted by protective arrangements ranging from import duties to warfare, from oligopolisation to retail price maintenance. Nowadays, globalisation is making labour-time doubly universal by opening certain kinds of production to sites where the workers can exert the least influence over the length of their working day or the pace of the line. These relocations are not always to third-world police states. Before planning a greenfields plant in Ontario, Chrysler was able to secure union agreement to lower wages because 15,000 automotive jobs had been lost in Canada since 1999.<sup>7</sup>

At every stage across the past 250 years, the index of a manager’s ability to impose time controls has been profit. The ultimate test of whether a firm is besting the labour-times prevalent throughout its market area will be its survival. Given a choice between lower wages and greater controls over the labour process, managers will often opt for the latter as the more profitable. Capitalists have much more than the pay-scales to consider in achieving a rate of profit that at least approximates that from any alternative investments.<sup>8</sup> In addition to Chrysler’s pressing down on Canadian wage-rates, it obliged its suppliers to contribute more than half of the construction cost of the plant.

### iii. turnovers

Like greed, speed is not a personal choice for owners or managers but is tied to the expansion of capital. Hence, to ask why labour-time is always being speeded up is to ask why capital must expand. Of course, every capitalist expects to obtain a surplus on his investment out of each cycle of production and consumption. If he and his dependants consume that extra for their own enjoyment, his enterprise can do no more than repeat a circuit equal in scale to the original capital. That steady state puts them in danger of going under to a competing family who invests more of the surplus they have expropriated and realised. Because some of that surplus has been put back into expanding the raw materials, the labour and perhaps even the machinery, the



conditions will exist for the extraction of surplus value on a larger scale. A few capitalists will take this route because they enjoy the busyness of business. All capitalists must engage in an expanded reproduction of their capital if they wish to remain in business.

This expansion is not some mystical essence of capital. A need to expand is imposed on each firm (capital) because it comes under two kinds of pressure. The first is where competitors chase after their customers. To ward off these rivals, each firm produces more than it has been selling. This expansion usually involves more expensive machinery which tends to lower the rate of profit per item. To keep absolute profit levels up, each firm now has to sell larger quantities.

At the same time, all firms have to deal with workers who demand higher wages, shorter hours and safer conditions. If a firm cannot disorganise its workers, it must pay them more, driving up the unit cost of production to the advantage of its rivals. Larger absolute returns are required to meet higher labour costs. The threat of a competitor inhibits the attainment of that revenue through a price increase. The outcome of these intertwined forces is a greater volume of commodities. Profits still depend on their sale. Thus, in a deregulated economy, employers must drive down their unit costs in order to compete. Greater mastery over all aspects of labour-time is inescapable.

Hence, the time pressures on employees derive from the pressures on capital to behave as capital. A factory is not capital. A machine is not capital. A warehouse of Nike shoes is not capital. The labour-power of an employee waiting for her next task is not capital. Gold bars under Malcolm Fraser's bed are not capital. Indeed, capital items become capital only when they engage labour in adding values, that is, setting in motion the circumstances for its expansion.

This fact of life for capital applies at every moment of the production-consumption cycle. The greatest inventions of the industrial revolution were the re-organisations of labour-time. These breakthroughs, which in their time were as significant as supercomputers, are now taken for granted. The continuous flow that Wedgwood introduced to his potteries in the 1770s was as ingenious as Watt's steam engine. This creativity extended to money-capital in consolidating individual hordes. Although a speedier realisation of the surplus became possi-



ble because of the railways. Their construction had required the legal novelty of the joint-stock company. Such conglomerating interactions still serve capital's need to reduce the time taken for its circuit of expansion. The current pressures on working time followed a new round of innovations in the circulation of money. Much of what has happened to employment and labour processes after 1980 required discount brokerage, indexed funds, cash-management accounts, junk bonds and spreadsheets.

The significance of time for commodity capital can be drawn out from the case of a manufacturer who puts all her resources into the production of razor wire. Until Mr Ruddock pays for those rolls, her firm cannot purchase more raw materials, hire labour or declare a dividend. The alternatives to a sale are either to borrow, or to cook the books. Without those expedients, there must be an interruption to the process of adding value in order to expand. This interval, in turn, slows down the progress of suppliers and reduces the consumer-spending of the labourers. The effect is to retard the entire system. If the delay is protracted, the manufacturer or some of her suppliers may be driven from the field.

Too long a passage between making and selling is so hazardous that businesses created measures to shrink it. After the last war, the Benneton family got started on the principle: "First we sell them. Then we make them." From such beginnings, the biggest corporations are extending the just-in-time systems towards a regime of built-to-order so as 'to eliminate incoming and outgoing inventory'. Firms

have slashed the costs of holding supplies and production and management. The next step is to reduce the period between completion and sale. Agriculture has long operated a futures market to avoid these delays to the circuits of capital. Capital is raised prior to sales and even investments. Now we could see a futures market in automobiles.<sup>10</sup> All these devices confirm Marx's insight that capitalists would relish "*Circulation without circulation time*—i.e. the transition of capital from one phase to the next at the speed of thought"—a phrase that Bill Gates used as the title for his book.<sup>11</sup>

The futures market can be illustrated with another homely example. Around the corner from where I live, a new office block remained untenanted for a year. No rent came in. The builder was unable to start a new project. Instead, he faced bankruptcy. Let us suppose that a real estate agent had appeared on the scene when plans for the \$10 million building were being drawn up. She offered to buy it for \$9 million. This price was one million less than the construction company had budgeted. But 'loss' of that million would be offset by removal of most of the selling costs and erasure of interest payments on the bank loan taken out to pay for materials and labour. Moreover, even before the builder had sent workmen to the first site, he could plan for a second project financed by the promised \$9 million. The real estate agent has bought the building's future.

This procedure is often explained as spreading the risk, which is part of what is happening. Even more important is that trading in futures can speed the cycle for the expansion of investment, and thus contribute to the growth of the economy as a whole.

The trade in futures began long ago when it was called Merchant's capital, familiar from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. As Merchant's capital quickened the accumulation of capital, it also increased the space for swindles. Derivatives spun out of the trade in futures. Some of these devices continue the service provided by Merchant's capital, helping capital to expand with fewer and shorter interruptions. Other derivatives are parasitical, shaving fractions of a per cent off each trade. Still others are larceny. The necessity for speed does not make theft necessary. Rather, some of the mechanisms by which the turnover of capital is quickened have multiplied the opportunities for capitalists to rob each other, which is a less expensive undertaking than

making workers go faster. As Marx observed: "All nations with a capitalist mode of production are therefore seized periodically by a feverish attempt to make money without the intervention of the process of production."<sup>12</sup>

## LABOUR

### iv. disorganised labour

The crisis of time management being encountered by Australian workers and their families is but one result of the success that capitalists have had across the world in the contest for control of the labour process. High among the factors that have tipped the balance of strength in favour of employers has been the disruption of labour movements. In Australia, the Accord, industry restructurings, union amalgamations and de-registrations contributed to that weakening. Meanwhile, the employers consolidated behind legislation and administrative interventions. Plans by a few firms to de-unionise their workforces have built into patterned non-bargaining. One constant has been the organising role of the state which in almost all cases attempts to achieve for capital what its managers cannot do through corporations.

The contest for ideological dominance has also run in favour of Capital through taxpayer-funded think-tanks inside universities, Judith Sloan in Labour Studies at Flinders, for instance, as well as outriders such as the H.R. Nicholls Society. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc encouraged employers around the world to feel confident that they could bear down on their workforce without risking the survival of their system. On the other side, workers feared that there was no alternative. The dissolution of Australia's three Communist Parties from the late 1970s has deprived the labour movement of even the strategic economism that had passed for a socialist objective. The pace of globalised speed-ups has been possible only because the labour movement has been so disorganised ideologically.<sup>13</sup>

The question of just how much organised labour can achieve was given a human face in John Morrison's *Stories of the Waterfront*. Morrison introduced his collection by recalling that, when he went on the wharf in the late 1930s, "minimum period of engagement could be for as little as two hours; smoko was limited to particularly strenuous or fast cargoes such as pig-iron and bagged flour". He wrote of a Melbourne gang which had

worked for nineteen days without a break, and till nine o'clock every night, or over 200 hours without a day's leave. The average week for three years had been from sixty to seventy hours. By 1949 militant leadership of a determined membership had settled "these long-standing grievances".<sup>14</sup> Sydney wharfies campaigned under the slogan 'Nights are for love' to put an end to the 11 pm to 6 am shift

#### v. revolution in time

The story of time management in the capitalist era has been told by several authors.<sup>15</sup> A perception of a crisis in the time pressures on paid work is not peculiar to the present. Its longer history can be glimpsed by comparing a pharmaceutical response from the 1870s with a couple of nostrums from a hundred years later.

In the 1870s, the strain of work led to the diagnosis of a medical condition, Neurasthenia. To cope with this malaise, Pope Leo XIII and the Prince of Wales endorsed *Vin Mariani*, alcohol laced with cocaine. Its popularity led to the concocting of Coca-Cola in 1886. Its inventor knew that New Orleans stevedores used cocaine to work seventy-two-hour shifts and that West Africans chewed the kola while carrying the whiteman's burden. Cocaine fell from favour in the 1890s, but the need for a kick-start remained. By the 1970s, 8 per cent of prescriptions in the USA were for amphetamines.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, children with normal energy levels are diagnosed as suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder, although their parents need sleep more than the kids require drugs.

Time pressures persisted across postwar Australia, despite the adoption of a forty-hour week, long-service leave, four weeks annual leave and flexitime. Evidence for the demands placed on workers in the 1950s is less grounded in statistics than it is for the more recent past. Some clues to those earlier decades are embedded in the novels of working life that the authors wrote as participant-observers. Dorothy Hewett's re-creation in *Bobbin Up* of the clothing factory where she had worked, lamented the inadequacies of child-minding:

Jeanie was two minutes late. By the time she got the kids from Fivedock to Erskinville and then caught the bus to Alexandria, it was always the same. Five minutes late and docked a quarter of an hour.<sup>17</sup>



In *The Dyehouse*, Mena Calthorpe made a comparable comment:

John Thompson woke in his bedroom at Granville. The alarm blurred in the dark morning. It is only a little after five, but he had a long trip to the [Macdonaldtown] Dyehouse and there would be trouble if there was no steam up before seven twenty.<sup>18</sup>

Both authors included these incidents as no more than everyday demands which their characters had to cope with to hold down a job. The naturalness of the retelling adds to their claim on actuality.

That long hours were not uncommon is confirmed by a mass of interviews and statistics on overtime and second jobs. The effort demanded of male wage-earners continued into the 1970s even while the national average per week was declining from 39.5 towards 37.4 hours. For example, a steelworker at Whyalla gave this account of his routine:

I can bring home \$150 a week if I work seven days a week plus some extra overtime in the evenings. At the end of each day you are buggered, physically buggered. You're just sort of shattered. And it takes a couple of hours when you get home of sitting down to get over it. There is no hope of being able to play with the children. Quite often I'm so buggered at the end of the shift that the only thing I can do is go to bed. My entire twenty-four hours of each day is basically geared to this eight-hour shift at the steelworks. You go home, wash and have tea and the thing that you most

want to do is just sit and drink beer and watch the television. I go to bed at about nine or ten so that I can get up in time to be back at work by seven in the morning. We are just working machines. They tell you that you are working for BHP for only eight hours a day, but basically you are working for the Company twenty-four hours a day.

You don't feel like sitting down and reading a book or going for a walk with your children. Last night I came home from work at 4.30pm and had a bite to eat and sat down in front of the television and fell asleep, and then I went to bed at seven and didn't wake up till six this morning—just in time to go back to work.<sup>19</sup>

This quotation cannot tell us whether matters are worse today, but at least serves as a reminder that workers' perception of time pressures is not novel.

By contrast, Don Townsend set *Gland Time* (1975) in a Tasmanian abattoir in the 1960s when the workers ran the joint to suit their social, sporting and sexual needs. They had even more success, if with less gusto, than the garbos in Frank Hardy's *The Outcasts of Foolgarah* (1971). Those pictures of sociable working environments now seem as remote as William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1888). David Ireland's *Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (1971) proved more prescient regarding the dehumanisation both of the labour-process and its respites.

One new aspect is that the time squeeze has moved beyond process workers to include more professionals and thus is a 'problem' for policy-makers because those now enduring the time famine have access to the media.

A second change is that the burden of total hours of paid work is becoming more evenly distributed between men and women. The belief "that contemporary women have become overburdened . . . is the issue behind most of the discussion of the balance between work and family".<sup>20</sup> The pressures remain on men, whether or not they are husbands or fathers, though those relationships will add to the strain. In 1974, the number of Australian men working longer than eleven hours a day was one in eighteen. By 1997, that ratio had risen to one in eight.<sup>21</sup> Time pressures have never been confined to one gender. Rather, they have been distributed unevenly between paid and unpaid work. Within each kind, time pressures take a different form for

each gender. In turn, those forms are expressed differently at different periods, locations and for ethnic communities.<sup>22</sup>

The calls for reform aim to increase the unpaid work that men put in at home while reducing that of women, especially mothers, both at paid work and in the domestic sphere. The market's pressures on many men to work harder and longer need to be included in any divvying up of domestic chores. Although a declining percentage of men are in full-time employment, more of those who are so occupied are putting in excessive hours. Meanwhile, more women are either in full-time employment or spending the equivalent hours in cobbling together part-time casual jobs.

Neither the source of these shifts nor their solution is confined to gender relations. Rather, they derive from the conflicting needs that capital has for increased productivity and a growth in effective demand, driven by mass marketing. Capital's recent ability to hold down hourly wage rates has meant that the rise in the socially necessary costs of reproducing labour is being met by additional hours. Capital-induced needs compel workers to seek or accept a longer working week, as well as boosting the number of dual-income families.<sup>23</sup> These needs of capital bear down on both genders, although in different ways.

To comprehend these problems, it is necessary to ask why there is still a problem with excessive hours. In the mid 1950s, the panic was that mass unemployment was just around the corner from automation. In the 1970s, the concern was that there would be a social crisis as people failed to cope with an unaccustomed excess of leisure. An early contributor to the debates sparked by Harry Braverman's 1974 *Labor and Monopoly Capital* proposed that:

society as a whole needs to devote less and less of its time to factory work . . . If everyone did a short stint of factory work each year, it would be possible for everyone to be free from such work for most of the year.<sup>24</sup>

Similar scenarios were sketched by commentators of every political persuasion. Yet the reverse has happened. The reason is that in a free-market context no firm or national economy could survive against its monopolising competitors if it made these

concessions. The future where nobody will need to sell her or his labour-power for more than a few hours a week remains in the realm of science fiction.

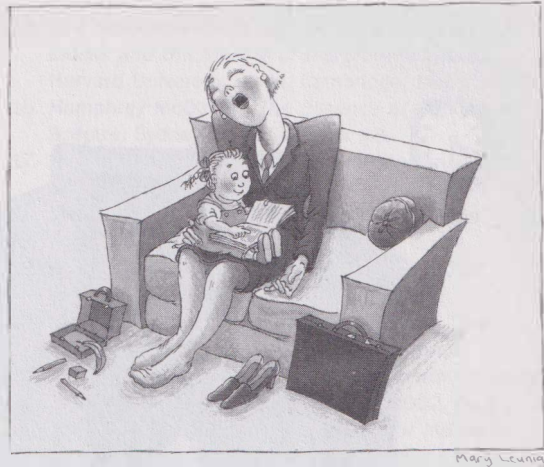
vi. time travel

The impact of this 250-year fast-forward can be glimpsed by commandeering H.G. Wells's time machine to propel a worker of average mental and physical abilities from 1750 into the present.<sup>25</sup> How many hours would elapse before he experienced a total mental and physical collapse? A clue can be gleaned from villagers who came down from the New Guinea highlands in the 1950s to Port Moresby, then a town of only a few thousand. The culture shock was so great that a phrase was added to Pidgin to cover the encounter. The visitor was called a 'head-he-go-round-man'. Sometimes, the speed of life and work in Sydney leaves even those of us raised in modern industrial urban centres a touch dizzy. In the main, we get by.

If the pace has been ratcheted up across 250 years, how have human beings coped? Two hundred and fifty years allow for only twelve generations, too brief a span for human beings to have evolved physiologically. Human nature, however, is an interaction of the physical with the social. Social adaptation is a less protracted affair than molecular change, and can be passed on as learned experience.

Our distant ancestors developed tools in making themselves into *homo sapiens sapiens*. We deploy both tools and machines—to quote Marx again—as prolongations of our bodies.<sup>26</sup> Levers and the wheel reduced the output of physical energy. In 1945, Brambles supplied men with long-handled shovels to fill two fifteen-ton railway trucks per day each with silt from the Hunter River.<sup>27</sup> Nowadays, dredges deposit the load directly onto conveyors.

As well as reducing the wear-and-tear physically, we have improved the means to repair body and brain. The marketing of medical research has provided chemical, prosthetic and dietary means to preserve our capacity to labour. On the pharmaceutical front, cocaine, caffeine and amphetamines have been noted. Office workers do yoga and take fitness classes in their meal breaks. In the 1940s, two of the Brambles brothers collapsed and died in their mid-fifties.<sup>28</sup> Today, their vital organs would be replaced, their hearts operated on. The most extreme instances of prolonging the body are the norm in the working lives of professional

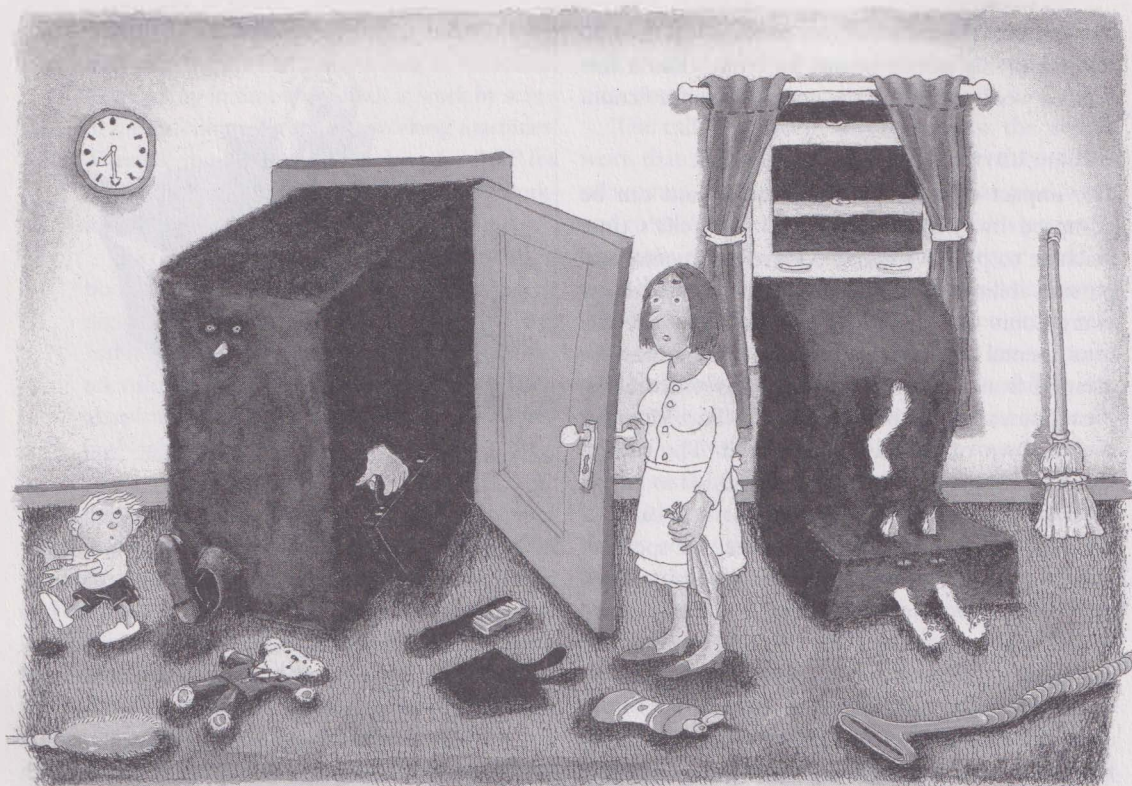


sportspeople. (For some reason, the replacement of joints is distinguished from performance-enhancing drugs.) These interventions are only beginning. Scientists at Flinders University announced in July 2002 that spectacles devised to help the body counter jetlag could be used by shift workers to reset their circadian rhythms.

In addition, the coping with time pressures has brought forth thousands of new commodities which affect every nook and cranny of life: the zipper in place of the hook-and-eye; instant coffee and the tea-bag; nail polish which dries in a minute; non-iron fabrics and dry-cleaning; takeaway fast food, the prepared stir-fry, or meals that brought about a rephrasing of the vulgar materialist maxim, to read 'You are what you heat'.

Despite the array of aids to help us cope with the lengthening or intensification of work, some strata have fallen behind in the race for paid employment. Someone who would have been designated mentally or physically 'slow' in 1750 could still have been a useful agricultural labourer, contributing more than he consumed. His prospects today are uncertain. Prolongations of the body and brain have provided more chances for the most extreme disabilities, as shown by Steven Hawking. Others find they are no longer employable because their bodies and brains cannot keep up with the equipment that has reduced the physical effort. They wear out in their forties. Still others find the social and mental pressures of chasing after jobs too great, and retire hurt.

The Coalition's attempt to increase the working hours required from those designated 'disabled' should direct attention to the wider significance behind that bureaucratic category. First, the pace of



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life and work has produced a new definition of the 'unfit'. Social Darwinists preached that the fittest would survive the class struggle. Taylorism came closer to Darwin's meaning of 'fitness' by promising to match each worker with the task to which they were best adapted.<sup>29</sup> Since then, speed and endurance have been increased so much that Taylor's ideal labourer as trained ape would now be out of a job.

Secondly, a truly radical meaning should be attached to 'disabled'. Throughout the workforce, how many jobs leave their operatives feeling that our abilities have been used to the full? In that sense, a majority is being 'disabled' by the conditions of our employment, irrespective of hours or intensity. The goal of integrating life and work has to be more than a drop in weekly working time to six hours of apple-polishing. Workers need to have creative endeavour in democratic organisations restored to the program of reform of the workplace.<sup>30</sup>

The World Bank vice-President for PNG and the South Pacific envisages a free market in labour to match those being installed, under the rubric of globalisation, for investments, products and serv-

ices. In short, he wants labour power to be another commodity. Joseph E. Stiglitz, who had been second in command at the World Bank, has complained about neoclassical economists' thinking of labour-power in that way. The truth is that they are merely expressing how labour is treated in its exchange relations with capital.<sup>31</sup>

The labour movement will never reclaim the initiative from the Abbotts of the world until we can recreate a vision of work which challenges more than the demands of Capital for unpaid overtime or overcome its low regard for child care. The Coalition intends to destroy unionism, not just to tame it. In their ratty way, Abbott, Reith and Howard have a firmer grasp of history as class struggle than Crean, Tanner or Burrows. Workers need a vision of our work as humanly fulfilling if the tactics for rebutting attacks on our rights are to achieve even that limited aim. Defence as much as defiance requires reclaiming the body of knowledge that the labour movement had won through industrial conflict, the insights from *Capital* and an appreciation of ourselves is more than commodities.

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21. Bittman & Rice, 'The Spectre of Overwork'.
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# THE DISCOMPASSION INDUSTRY

## The campaign against welfare bodies

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, Australian neoliberal think-tanks—particularly the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS)—have mounted a fierce critique of welfare spending and the welfare state. Widely represented in the mainstream media, these think-tanks claim to offer impartial and disinterested expertise. Their intellectual integrity, they claim, is ensured by their multiple sources of income.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, these think-tanks are motivated by political and ideological bias.<sup>2</sup> They have little in common with genuinely academic or scholarly institutions, because their *raison d'être* is to promote the economic interests of the corporate sector, particularly larger companies and financial interests that are integrated in the global economy.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, their principal funding comes from powerful corporate networks. For example, the CIS has an annual budget of approximately \$1.6 million, with donors including McDonald's, Shell, ANZ, Macquarie Bank, the Pratt Foundation, and Philip Morris Corporate Services. The CIS Board includes a number of prominent bankers, financial advisers, and other corporate identities including Andrew Kaldor, Michael Chaney, Robert Champion de Crespigny, Marco Belgiorio Zegna, and Western Mining figures Donald Morley and M. John Phillips. The Chairman is Alan McGregor of James Hardie Industries, and the Deputy Chairman is Michael Darling, former Director of the Australian Stock Exchange.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the IPA receives annual funding of approximately \$1 million. Current chairman is John Prescott, former CEO of BHP, and now Chair-

man of Horizon Equity. His Board includes representatives of such companies as Clough Limited, Rio Tinto, ANZ, AMP, and Deutsche Bank. Reputed financial contributors include Rio Tinto, Western Mining, Philip Morris, Telstra, and News Limited.<sup>5</sup>

Seeking to influence both sides of politics, the CIS and IPA are not aligned to a particular political party. Nevertheless, they maintain an explicit bias in favor of neoliberal ideas.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, their major engagement is with the Liberal Party—John Howard and Peter Costello personally attended their recent annual conference. Some current and retired Labor Party figures are also close to the CIS: former Federal Ministers Peter Walsh and Gary Johns, NSW Premier Bob Carr, and until a recent fallout, Mark Latham.<sup>7</sup> Conservative and ALP governments at federal and state level have been influenced by their arguments.<sup>8</sup>

What distinguishes these think-tanks from other neoliberal political groups and figures is that they are not inhibited by pragmatic political or electoral concerns or alliances. Consequently, they are able to generate extremist ideas without fear or favor, being accountable only to their financial backers. As such, they seek to redistribute income from the poorest groups in society to the most affluent, from the most to the least needy.<sup>9</sup>

### PUBLIC CHOICE THEORY AND FREE MARKET DEMOCRACIES

These think-tanks' campaign against the welfare state is driven by self-serving theory and dogma. According to neoliberal theory, the process of democratic government is frequently hijacked by 'public inter-



est' pressure groups which allegedly manipulate the redistributive process to their own advantage.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the welfare state and its services supposedly operate in the interest of the well-paid social workers who administer its services, rather than that of the disadvantaged. These producers of the welfare services, then, have a vested interest in maintaining and expanding welfare programs that have little to do with alleviating poverty and far more to do with enriching themselves.<sup>11</sup> This is a perverse argument since (in my experience as a social-work educator) most students enter the human services field precisely because they value broader social justice objectives over personal material gains.

Nevertheless, this argument is based on the economic doctrine known as public choice theory, an economic methodology that evolved from the work of US theorists such as James Buchanan, William Niskanen, and Gordon Tullock. Although there is no intrinsic connection between public choice theory and neoliberal perspectives, most adherents firmly support the primacy of the free market, and oppose government welfare programs.<sup>12</sup>

Public choice theory argues that all individuals, whether in the public sector or the private sector, act in their own narrow self-interest. Politicians seek to gain support, for example, by satisfying the demands of organised pressure groups at the expense of the common interest. The only constraint on this pursuit of self-interest is the market.<sup>13</sup> This argument fits neatly with the popular misconception that a free market equates with democracy. It ignores the inequities of the marketplace that often undermine the social and political rights of the collective.

Consequently, public choice theorists favour private rather than public provision of goods whenever possible. They believe in a slimmer, allegedly impartial state which will be unconstrained by the demands of obstructive interest groups. Arguments for efficiency should take precedence over alternative concepts such as equality of opportunity and social cohesion.<sup>14</sup>

In short, neoliberal theorists refute the case for government intervention and welfare spending, not by an analysis of the actual workings of the welfare state, but by arguing that income redistribution and welfare spending is inspired by powerful interest groups.<sup>15</sup> The broad implication of this argument is that groups concerned with welfare spending (often pejoratively labelled the 'compassion industry')

should be excluded as far as possible from public policy debates. Instead, let those who are uninformed and 'impartial' make the decisions.

Public choice theory also reflects the neoliberal obsession with the 'new class'. 'New class' refers to an alleged takeover of the welfare state and the public sector by middle-class professionals, environmentalists, feminists and New Left Marxists who claim they are acting in the interests of the poor and underprivileged, but are actually pursuing a hidden political agenda aimed at radical social change.<sup>16</sup>

As Boris Frankel has noted, the neoliberal concept of 'new class' does not refer to a socio-economic class, "but only a loose category conveniently linking together all those who happen (for a wide variety of reasons) to oppose their views". According to Frankel, it is not whether a person is employed in the public or private sector which determines his/her membership of the 'new class', but adherence to anti-free market views.<sup>17</sup>

#### ATTACKS ON WELFARE LOBBY GROUPS

In line with public choice theory, neoliberal think-tanks campaign against the activities of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)—the peak council of the community welfare sector—and other welfare lobby groups, calling them unelected and unrepresentative, and suggesting that their main concern is their own professional advancement, rather than the relief of poverty.

For example, according to former National Party Senator and current Institute of Public Affairs Research Fellow John Stone:

ACOSS contains a significant number of denizens of the New Class who have parlayed their volubly expressed compassion into various forms of personal advancement, increased income, more comfortable life-styles and so on. Their chief activity is not directed to, for example, the relief of poverty, but to devising various more or less complex programmes which they or their industry colleagues then administer, to the greater good of the smaller number.<sup>18</sup>

Stone vigorously attacked ACOSS during the 1998 tax-reform debate, arguing that it had reversed its opposition to a GST solely because it realised that a new tax was the only means of funding its "ever-growing wish-lists of more, and bigger, social wel-

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fare benefits". According to Stone, ACOSS had "by its incessant past spending demands, done more to jeopardise the budgetary outlook than almost any other institution in the country".<sup>19</sup> Another IPA contributor, Bob Browning, alleged that ACOSS and its state affiliates had a "vested interest in expanding both the welfare bureaucracy and the associated publicly-financed community sector".<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, P.P. McGuinness, editor of *Quadrant* and long-time supporter of the CIS, has launched many attacks on ACOSS. He has argued that the "main purpose" of welfare payments is not to reduce poverty, but to "generate income and employment for bureaucrats and the welfare industry".<sup>21</sup> He has accused ACOSS of entering debates solely to "enhance its own power and influence".<sup>22</sup>

More recently, former ALP Minister and current IPA Senior Fellow Gary Johns suggested that ACOSS represents its own interests over those of the poor. He accused ACOSS and other welfare groups of receiving more than three million dollars of government funding per year under false pretences. Johns suggested that information about ACOSS's real activities is denied to the public.<sup>23</sup>

Absolutely no evidence is provided to support this campaign. None of the critics appears to have any actual working knowledge or experience of the welfare sector. Conversely to their claims, human service employees are actually among the worst-paid members of the workforce. Most are women working in casual, part-time or poorly resourced positions with highly stressful and challenging client groups and individuals.<sup>24</sup> It is disgraceful that neoliberals seek to deny social-welfare workers the right to the same career status and opportunities as members of other professional groups.

The intended exclusion of welfare lobby groups from participation in policy debates is a violation of the democratic process.<sup>25</sup> As noted by Head, "... the market-liberal agenda for deregulation would most benefit transnational corporations and the speculative sectors of capital".<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the evidence from Victoria's experience during the Kennett Government (1992-99) suggests that neoliberal think-tanks not only possess an increasingly privileged access to government via membership of Commissions of Audit and so on, but are also able to benefit financially from the policy outcomes of such processes by acting as advisors on the privatisation of public utilities.<sup>27</sup> The very advocates of economic rationalism themselves are likely to benefit from any withering or 'rolling back' of the welfare state.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, the public choice critique of the welfare state appears more concerned with legitimising the interests of the powerful and the wealthy and delegitimising the agendas of those groups who seek increased government spending.

#### CONTESTING THE SOCIAL EFFECTS

Neoliberal think-tanks have consistently favoured policies that enhance the economic freedom of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of equity and social justice. For example, key neoliberal philosophers such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman directly argued that economic inequality was the engine of economic and social progress and that attempts to promote egalitarian outcomes would undermine economic growth and freedom.<sup>29</sup>

So it isn't surprising that policies involving cuts to welfare services and programs have consistently led to greater poverty and inequality.<sup>30</sup> A study by the United Nations Development Program documented increasing inequality in OECD countries during the 1980s. The study found particularly large increases in poverty and inequality in countries such as the United Kingdom and the USA which had reduced progressive taxation and social welfare spending. In contrast, many of the European countries which had retained social protection experienced smaller increases.<sup>31</sup>

In Australia, the differences in the distribution of income between the highest and lowest income earners increased from a ratio of 3.70:1 in 1973/74, to

In the face of overwhelming evidence of increased poverty and inequality, the CIS mounted a last-ditch counter-attack. Any redistribution of income, it said, is simply immoral, and equivalent to the coercive expropriation of income and property from the Jews in Nazi Germany.

6.14:1 in 1995/96. Even after allowing for variables of tax, welfare benefits and family size, high-income households now have on average more than four times as much to spend as low-income households.<sup>32</sup>

These statistics are inevitable outcomes of neoliberal policies that actively promote greater social and economic inequality. Neoliberals generally respond to such statistics by attributing disadvantage to individuals' incompetence or immorality. However, these statistics present political dilemmas for neoliberals since public opinion may be alienated by evidence of greater inequity and social injustice.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, ACOSS and associated welfare groups and researchers offer alternative definitions of the causes and potential solutions to social problems. For example, they believe that structural factors such as social and economic deprivation and inequality are significant influences on the prevalence of poverty. In general, they propose policy solutions based on greater government intervention via increased taxation and more generous welfare payments to promote fairer distributions of income.

#### THE 'POVERTY LOBBY'

Neoliberal think-tank attacks on the so-called 'poverty lobby' have a long history.

As early as 1984, the CIS launched a furious attack on a statement titled 'Changing Australia', by the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches, calling for a fairer distribution of national wealth and income. The CIS organised seminars in Sydney and Melbourne to attack the statement, and also published a book titled *Chaining Australia: Church Bureaucracies and Political Economy*.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, IPA statements attacked ACOSS for allegedly exaggerating the level of poverty in Australia and advocating higher taxes and a fairer distribution of income. The IPA argued that ACOSS's policy proposals would undermine work incentives and prevent wealth creation.<sup>35</sup>

The IPA has contested statistics of high poverty rates in Australia, arguing that poverty rates in Aus-

tralia are relatively small, that the Henderson Poverty Line measures income inequality which is not the same as poverty, and that welfare groups deliberately exaggerate poverty rates out of 'self-interest'. According to the IPA, "Beyond an irreducible minimum produced by bad luck or folly, there should be no poverty in Australia".<sup>36</sup>

The CIS also denies the existence of any significant financial-related poverty in Australia. Consequently, it launched a number of attacks on groups such as ACOSS which urge increased welfare spending. According to the CIS, ACOSS objects to any attempts to promote greater self-reliance amongst welfare recipients, and is motivated by a "politics of envy".<sup>37</sup> While the ACOSS perspective assumes that poverty is the result of unfair structures, and that income redistribution from high income earners to the poor is the solution,<sup>38</sup> the CIS points to behavioural explanations such as school truancy, illness, substance abuse, promiscuity, and gambling.<sup>39</sup>

The CIS has also attacked the Smith Family for allegedly exaggerating poverty levels in Australia.<sup>40</sup> Using a relative measure of poverty—where poverty is defined as a condition of relative deprivation or exclusion from normal social and economic activities and participation—the Smith Family and the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) argued that poverty levels had risen during the 1990s from 11 per cent to 13 per cent—to the point where one in eight people was living in poverty in 2000.<sup>41</sup>

According to the Smith Family, the incomes of poor families had increased by around \$38 per week over the past ten years. This was only half the rise in average incomes, which had increased by \$66 per week. The average income had been driven up mainly by large increases to the top 5 per cent of income earners who had seen their weekly income increase by \$172. The researchers concluded that the gap between the poor and average incomes had increased from \$80 in 1990 to \$109 in 2000.

These statistics presented a serious political chal-

These think-tanks' attacks on welfare groups, widely represented in the media, reflect a combination of ideological and political agendas. Driven by dogma, they seek to discredit the interventions of groups such as ACOSS by painting them as self-serving lobbyists.

lenge to the CIS since they suggested that neoliberal policies had not benefited all Australians including the poor. This raised the prospect of further government intervention including increased welfare spending and higher minimum wages to remedy the situation. Consequently, the CIS attempted to discredit both the statistics and the motivation behind them.

The CIS argued that poverty should be defined in absolute terms—whereby people lack sufficient resources to survive—rather than in relative terms. According to the CIS, poverty had actually decreased from 11 per cent to 8 per cent, and the Smith Family had confused increased inequality with worsening poverty. The CIS also argued that welfare groups such as the Smith Family make misleading and inflated claims about poverty to promote an agenda of income redistribution. Instead, they argue, we should be reducing state benefits, and encouraging greater self-reliance.<sup>42</sup>

However, genuine poverty researchers have questioned the CIS's conclusions. They argue that the Smith Family's poverty line is a conservative poverty benchmark, that definitions of poverty need to reflect average community living standards, and that the CIS's critique contains numerous technical errors and misinterpretations.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the CIS mounted one last-ditch counter-attack. Any redistribution of income from the affluent to the poor, it said, is simply immoral, and equivalent to the coercive expropriation of income and property from the Jews in Nazi Germany. And any argument to the contrary involves nothing more than "old-style socialist thinking".<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These think-tanks' attacks on welfare lobby groups, widely represented in the media, reflect a combination of ideological and political agendas. On the one hand, driven by ideological dogma, neoliberals seek to discredit the interventions of groups such as ACOSS by painting them as self-serving lobbyists.

On the other hand, neoliberals face serious challenges when their policies are exposed as failing to produce more effective and fairer outcomes for all. The neoliberal response is to damn both the argument and the messenger. Empirical evidence is derided as inaccurate or incompetently calculated; the poor are blamed for their own poverty; government intervention is described as counter-productive. And if all else fails, the motives and agendas of the messenger are smeared.

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## Winning the game of no chance

I RECEIVED A CALL from the CES in the morning. An interview had been arranged for me for that afternoon. I was tempted to forget about it. The position was with a large insurance company and I had no chance, but anything could happen.

“Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

It was the toughest question of the interview, the decider. I knew this was the moment. I’d answered earlier questions with blatant honesty. What do you know about insurance? Nothing. Why do you want to work here? I want a job. Youthful enthusiasm coupled with stupidity inspired me to have a crack at the big question. I looked at the three interviewers, they stared back. I knew hesitation would be seen as weakness. It came to me in a flash. “I want to be sitting where you are.” They looked at each other and after a moment of silence I was thanked and ushered away. The following Monday I started work.

Ten years later I’m not sitting where they were. I’m being asked the questions that could lead to employment, but those questions have changed and the seat I sat in ten years ago has been replaced with a game of musical chairs run by nameless consultants.

It’s hard work getting a job, let alone climbing towards a career. Unemployment offers its own disadvantages, primarily with regard to self-esteem, financial insecurity and the paralysing inability to plan the future. It reduces people to fortnightly stints of panic and relief. Employment, on the other hand, offers the world, mythic possibilities abound. Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, shopfloor to president, geek to world ruler, the sky’s the limit in a world that’s just a phone call away. Make that call, take the tests, submit to a police check and go to interviews with a positive frame of mind and love for your fellow applicants. Ignore the quarterly statistics compiled by the ANZ, don’t worry about the decrease in advertised jobs, if it’s employment you want then nothing can stop hard work and determination.

‘Marketing Assistant Executive’, no experience necessary, excellent salary and bonuses, etc. A phone call put me through to Mike, the area manager. Over the course of a half-hour interview I

impressed and was through to the next level, a real interview. I had no idea what the job was, what the pay amounted to or the nature of the ‘bonuses’. What I did know was that J., who started the company, was now a millionaire and with hard work we could all be just like her. Fine, as long as there was a weekly pay packet and we weren’t marketing TVs to the third world.

The interview was attended with the usual nerves. A foyer of spiky-haired youths scattered around like film extras, no-one speaking but all clutching ominous black portfolios like they were machine guns. I registered with the receptionist who gave me an inane psychological test to complete. I passed by being able to complete it, and was ushered in to the area manager. Mike was dynamic, successful or about to be, and very evasive. The position was for marketing an ‘entertainment package’ and clients included Hoyts and Village Roadshow, names thrown around with casual repetition. Pay? Unlimited.

After a successful interview I joined three others for a first-hand look at the business. With an ‘executive’ as our guide we headed out to conduct some business, a glimpse at the possibility of success. Instead of the company car we headed to the train station. Instead of the offices of Hoyts we headed to the suburbs. What were we doing? I questioned our ‘exec’. He’d been on the job three months on \$250 a week, working twelve-hour days, covering his own costs and so far had not seen a bonus but was sure of their existence, since J. was a millionaire. I looked at him, turned around and walked home.

I went back to the papers. Applying for jobs in which you are qualified or experienced is the obvious way but there are others.

When you pick up the phone to make first contact a door opens into another world. I was applying for a job with the government, for a Customer Service Officer in the Department for the State of Victoria. After my last experience I wanted something with a bit more openness about what the job would be. This was it, everything was laid out before me, duties, hours, responsibilities and pay. At

twenty thousand a year this was an entry level position that would hand over about \$330 a week for the old nine-to-five. I was keen.

I made the call. Again I had a short phone interview which lasted about half an hour and ended with the woman saying I would be called back if successful. The call came later that afternoon notifying me that an interview would take place the next day and that it would be a group interview.

I entered the room to find ten others sitting in a neat semicircle behind plain desks. I joined the ranks, smiled and waited. Eventually there were eighteen of us, an equal balance of men and women with ages ranging from 19 to 50, the men being the older group. I looked around and could tell some of us wouldn't make it out alive. The older guy with the brown suit and balding head would be overlooked, and a couple of the women had forgotten to change their shoes after being out dancing.

The rest were possibilities. Most of us fitted the description and did not deviate by a single hair. Rob, the man next to me, was overqualified but would take the job anyway. I smiled at him and thought about leaving. Without realising, I was suddenly sitting very upright as three people came into the room. The Consultants had arrived; it had begun.

If anyone has ever been able to concentrate on the 'job' while being subjected to a group interview, they deserve it. Our interview soon turned into a series of skirmishes in which the injured were left to nurse their wounds while the rest of us fought for glory. We were led through a series of 'games' involving name tags, short biographical speeches and an impromptu drawing lesson where a team member would speak and the others would draw. Finished pieces were allowed to be kept as mementoes.

The real test came when we formed small groups of four or five and worked together to solve a workplace problem. A speaker would present the group's findings. Our problem was to do with the pros and cons of 'the team' and how to promote a team environment in the workplace. Social drinking was my contribution but it fell on deaf ears. Rob quickly took charge and made a gorgeous presentation but I was not to be outdone. In a rare display of initiative and with complete disregard for teamwork I stepped forward to have my say. It was the last mistake Rob would make.

The Consultants were overjoyed. I had described clear and distinct issues related to the problems of

teamwork and in a cunning twist I had highlighted problems in all the previous presentations. Had this been *Survivor* I would've walked away with the prize.

Towards the end of the games, Cindy, the young woman who enjoyed working on Holdens (immediately out of the running), did what the rest of us had failed to do. She asked a question. How many people applied for the position? Over two hundred. How many made it to the next level? Nearly one hundred. We had thought we were the only group interview but no, there were five groups. Our faces fell. We looked like dogs whose bones have been taken. Cindy pressed on in what can only be described as the best defensive retreat I've ever seen, destroying the attackers as she made her way back to reality. Her last moment took us all by surprise. How many positions are there? One, the Consultant whispered.

The Consultants were on the back foot. Already two of them were making for the door. The interview was over, we would be contacted. Rob shrugged his shoulders, swore, laughed and went off to his next interview. I stood for a moment looking at the sad faces that filed out the door. I was ashamed. I had attacked and hurt each and every one of them. I ripped my name tag off and followed them out the door. Cindy had done something; somehow she had restored our pride and because of that not one of us would be called back. I was pleased.

I did the calculations. It would have cost more to conduct the interviews than the yearly pay of the position offered. Employment is an industry and we were all fodder, statistics for the Consultants.

I got the call. The next group interview would be in two days. I turned it down. If anyone should have been there it was Cindy, but somehow I knew she wouldn't have gone either.

Someone got the job, someone who knows how to compete and knows when to put the knife in the back. Someone who doesn't like Holdens and hasn't been dancing. Someone who now works for the Victorian Government.

A couple of days later I got a job as a waiter. The pay was good; the hours were crazy but the people were fun. No-one had been asked to wrestle with other applicants to see who would get the job and no-one had been asked where they wanted to be in ten years. No-one was asked to do anything except work and that's all I wanted.

## MILKING THE SYSTEM

How corporate welfare fleeces the taxpayer, destroys the environment and corrupts public policy

EARLY IMAGES OF WELFARE depict a queue of the destitute, bowl in hand, shuffling in the bitter cold for their ladle of gruel. That image is distant in most Western democracies today, due largely to social security payments guaranteed by legislation—the ‘dole’. Not so easy to picture is the image of a businessman driven in a limousine to collect a multi-million dollar cheque. No queues and no stigma: and why would there be? Countless euphemisms for the corporate dole prevent such stigma: industry assistance, tax expenditure, subsidy, grant, seed-funding—generically referred to as ‘incentives’.

Common to both social and corporate categories of government support is the source of the funds—the tax dollar from the pay packets of ‘pay as you earn’ workers. Yet unlike social security, most assistance to corporations is shrouded in mystery and difficult to locate in government budgets. This alone should ring alarm bells, but the topic has escaped the scrutiny of journalists and commentators. With the exception of The Greens and some independents, politicians have also avoided debate because the very beneficiaries of corporate welfare are generous donors to major political parties.

Even so, a number of government-commissioned reports since the mid seventies question the form and quantum of corporate assistance. A report by the Industry Commission in 1996 warned against ‘bidding wars’ for business investment between States. Despite this, the latest Productivity Commission report shows a steady increase in government support to industry. Government assistance to industry far exceeds monies spent in unemployment benefits; yet it is always social welfare that

governments scrutinise and cut back. While the dole recipient, since 1997, has been obliged to ‘work for the dole’, corporations are free from comparable ‘mutual obligation’.

### WHAT IS CORPORATE WELFARE?

Corporate welfare is any benefit or assistance that business receives from governments, whether in cash or in kind. It is delivered via many programs and is offered in various forms including direct payments, tax deductions, research and development grants and sometimes ad hoc payments.

Since federation, though more evident since the Second World War, the three tiers of government have granted financial assistance to industry in one form or another. It was hoped the support would bolster the fledgling economy, broaden its restricted industrial base and create an abundance of jobs. Many of the arguments used in 1901 continue to be applied today, particularly the drive for increased employment. The current approach has also turned towards development of Australia’s role in the global economy.

A feature of world trade and the associated processes of globalisation is an increase in power assumed by transnational corporations whose budgets are larger than that of many nations. This power has limited the degree of intervention possible by governments and prompted them to facilitate foreign direct investment without penalties to domestic industries and business.

Since the 1970s, no Australian government has found it politically expedient to abandon substantial payments to industry, particularly tax concessions



## Figure 1: Productivity Commission facts

- The mining sector gets approximately **\$275 million** each year and has done well out of the recent allocation by the government from the Cooperative Research Centre budget of over **\$400 million**.<sup>1</sup> **Rio Tinto** alone managed to get **\$70 million** in addition to the **\$35 million** grant it received in October to establish the Foundation for Minerals.

- The automotive industry, a beneficiary of a rigid tariff structure for over a generation, has landed itself further government funds to the extent of **\$4.2 billion**. This is in excess of payments made to individual car manufacturers. **Mitsubishi**, in the previous term of this government, received **\$200 million** to maintain production of 30,000 vehicles per year in Australia, notwithstanding the fact that Australia's population of 19 million would continue to be served by three major motor vehicle producers (GM, Ford and Toyota). It has been calculated that each job created is subsidised by up to **\$295,000**. All it took for Mitsubishi was the threat of closing shop. General Motors Holden got a similar deal. Nothing is in place to prevent them departing Australia at any time.

- Primary producers receive somewhere in the order of **\$700 million** each year<sup>2</sup> and are now in line for a top-up of **\$500 million** in drought relief.<sup>3</sup> This is in addition to **\$270 million** spent on drought relief between 1994 and 1996.<sup>4</sup>

1. Department of Primary Industry and Energy, 1997.

2. Senator Bob Brown, press release, 2002. See Australian Greens website <[www.greens.org.au](http://www.greens.org.au)>.

3. Productivity Commission, *Trade and Assistance Review 2000-01. Annual Report Series 2000-01*, AusInfo, Canberra, December 2001.

4. Tony Walker & Chelsey Martin, *Financial Review*, 9 December 2002.

to which many sectors have become accustomed. In fact, faced with increasing external pressures, domestic corporations have strengthened their call for greater government assistance and pushed for government commitment of certainty in policy measures.

### COMMONWEALTH ASSISTANCE

It is very difficult to estimate the quantum of corporate welfare. This is because payments are couched in terms and means of distribution not accessible to the ordinary citizen. The Commonwealth's contribution can only be traced through ad hoc announcements accompanying media releases, budget papers, tax expenditure reports and the like. A useful document prepared by the Productivity Commission tallies the totals for specific sectors. Figure 1 shows some interesting examples.

The sort of financial largesse revealed in Figure 1 indicates federal ministers' thinking: that Australia will attract multinational corporations with offers of cash assistance. However, much of this assistance

goes towards projects in which these corporations intend to invest anyway.<sup>1</sup>

### STATE AND LOCAL 'INCENTIVES'

In 1996 the government funded a special Productivity Commission report, *State, Territory and Local Government Assistance to Industry*.<sup>2</sup> Its final public release was held up for over fourteen months by the government. The report highlighted the wasteful nature of incentives paid to secure and maintain large companies within a state or territory boundary.

Considerable amounts are outlaid by states as a direct consequence of inter-state rivalry resulting in a bidding war. Figure 2 (overleaf) is an inventory (by no means exhaustive) of state-based welfare for the 'footloose' companies.

When both the federal and state governments pool their welfare dollars the result is even better for the corporate recipients. For example, the Commonwealth and Queensland governments backed

Two companies, whose CEOs are close friends of John Howard, have made generous donations to the Liberal Party. The government reciprocated by handing Visy \$40 million to start up a Tumut Pulp Mill and the Manildra Company was handed a virtual monopoly by the Coalition government for its ethanol fuel mix.

the Australian Magnesium Corporation's Queensland plant with loan funds and guarantees to the tune of \$200 million. A second magnesium producer, SAMAG, has put out its hand in South Australia, demanding \$130 million or it will go to New Zealand.<sup>3</sup>

#### COMPETING FOR CORPORATE WELFARE

Concern over competition between states within Australia has not received nearly the level of attention given to competition between nations—an issue constantly reviewed by numerous international organisations such as the OECD, APEC and WTO. In fact, all this frenetic support of industry flies in the face of the fledgling rules laid down by these organisations of free trade.

A research report, *Multinationals and Governments: Issues and Implications for Australia*,<sup>4</sup> queries the notion that incentives actually give any benefit to the host country providing them. It found that the financial incentive to attract a large corporation to a country can be counter-productive because of the 'prisoners' dilemma'—where competitive incentives give rise to a situation where all nations are worse off than if they had made no incentives available at all.

#### WHAT IT COSTS US ALL UP

In November 2002, six years after the report was tabled, the Productivity Commission chairman stated that incentives paid by state governments (excluding any Commonwealth funding) to entice business projects had increased more than one third in actual dollars.<sup>5</sup> Despite the 1996 Commission recommendations against the practice, bidding wars between state and local governments now cost Australia \$5.7 billion per year. With the estimated Commonwealth government outlay included, all Australian governments spend a total of \$9.4 billion dollars over a twelve-month period on industries and individual companies that may have behaved in the same way without it.

Add to this the \$3 billion fuel tax breaks and we are looking at a massive \$12.5 billion going out each year.

Yet the announcements and budgetary items tell only part of the story. Not all forms of government assistance to industry have been measured. In particular, data on revenue forgone at the state and local government level are generally unavailable, as is the extent of any assistance from the underpricing of government-owned natural resources and infrastructure—a common benefit to logging and mining companies.

#### A FALSE ECONOMY: THE ENVIRONMENT

While market and user-pay principles are increasingly being applied to many public services, including education and public transport, these principles are not being applied to primary industry. A leading environmental economist, D.W. Pearce, believes that the end price of a natural resource should account for three distinct components of its cost: the direct costs of extraction, harvesting, or use; the user cost, or benefits forgone by society by consuming the resource rather than leaving it for future consumption; and any environmental externalities associated with its extraction and use (for example, the clean-up of industry-polluted river systems).<sup>6</sup>

Under-priced resources supplied to any consumer encourages over-utilisation of that resource. A market distortion will persist, until the true value, including environmental costs spent by the nation in rehabilitation of the environment, is accounted for in the price tag of all consumables. The emerging picture is one of publicly owned natural resources supplied to privately run agricultural, forest and mining industries at very low prices, with increasing government expenditure on the rehabilitation of an environment that has suffered at the hands of non-sustainable industries.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics survey assesses total expenditure on environmental protection per

## Figure 2 : State bidding wars

• SA provided **\$85 million** to hold on to **Mitsubishi** and provided **between \$16 million and \$30 million** to have **Westpac** establish its loan centre in Adelaide over Campbelltown, NSW. • WA provided **\$125 million** for a **Rio Tinto** plant • VIC spent **\$150 million** subsidising the **Grand Prix** • NSW handed over almost **\$30 million** but then lost the **Kodak** company • After granting **Foxtel** a waterfront lease, the NSW government reportedly said, "Foxtel has made a wise choice in opting for Sydney despite being aggressively courted by several other states". The NSW government gave **Fox Studios** the Sydney Showground for a total incentive package estimated at **\$39 million**.

year as somewhere around \$8.6 billion.<sup>7</sup> Of this, \$3.4 billion is estimated to be incurred by the corporate sector. The sad irony is that while taxpayers continue to pay increasing amounts to repair the environmental damage, they also continue to fund many perpetrators of that damage.

Scant attention has been afforded to subsidised natural resource inputs available to industry even after the former Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories cracked open the issue in its informative and refreshingly candid study, *Subsidies to the Use of Natural Resources* (1996). The study documents the failure of governments to achieve normal rates of return on natural resources supplied as inputs and their inability to recover the running costs from agencies that administer these inputs. This anomaly of not fully accounting for government assistance given by way of under-priced inputs is yet to surface as a political issue.

There is much evidence now to show that our environment has been deleteriously compromised by company activities and government policy. During his recent visit to Australia, Dr David Suzuki said:

I would have thought the thing you want to do, since the private sector is so important, is stop all the bloody perverse subsidy that we are giving to the bad things. Let's get fiscally responsible. Fiscal responsibility is to stop giving money-aid to the fossil fuel sector, to the mining sector, to the forest sector, to the automobile sector. When you start looking at the subsidies, the taxpayer dollars, that are going into the bad things you've got a massive potential there, a treasure chest of money that could be taken and go into supporting things like

solar energy, where Australia should be a world leader, into looking for alternative fuels and getting greater fuel efficiency.<sup>8</sup>

### CORPORATE DEPENDENCY

Evidence also shows that some primary production sectors receiving government assistance are co-dependent on this funding being recurrent. Ongoing state assistance to Tasmanian mining, forestry and hydro industries illustrates this. In *Corporate Welfare: Tasmania's giant resources rip-off*,<sup>9</sup> an economist identifies government assistance worth \$109.4 million per year as foregone revenue. Victoria, like Tasmania, props up its natural resource industry through massive recurrent government assistance.

While the Senate has not yet voted on a Bill for an inquiry into the activities of Forestry Tasmania, the Victorian forest industry was the subject of a report when the *Forests Act 1958* was audited under the Commonwealth government's National Competition Policy in 1998.<sup>10</sup> The findings reveal examples of co-operative arrangements between the Victorian government and logging companies and excessive and recurrent government assistance to this industry. As stated in the report, these arrangements are hampering competition between native forests and plantations by under-pricing native saw logs and by the grant of long-term logging licenses in native forests.

Industries such as tourism, recreation or conservation could have been viable alternatives had the true costs of supply been charged by the government. Instead, supply of timber to companies committed under 'evergreen' licenses, rolled over every five years, in effect becomes perpetual. Not

Despite the Commission's recommendations against the practice, bidding wars between states and local governments now cost Australia \$5.7 billion per year. Add to this the \$3 billion fuel tax breaks and we are looking at a massive \$12.5 billion going out each year.

surprisingly, the audit expressed concern over the government's conflict of interest with its monopoly over the allocation of timber and its responsibility for conservation and recreation in forest areas.

#### WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

In Australia, corporate pressure on governments to continue industry assistance is intense. Formidable corporate lobby groups exert pressure on governments at every step of the policy-making process to maintain or further increase government assistance.

In a less overt way, the reward for governments for changing or maintaining policy in response to gratuity payments by corporations should be considered as an issue in probity. A compilation of donation payments to parties in the Australian Electoral Commission reports is of particular interest because it lists the receipt of funds during election years, when tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars are paid by companies to their preferred political party. What is not listed are trusts used to channel these funds without disclosure of the donor's identity.

*Paying the Piper* claims that "Ten thousand dollars or even a million dollar donation may make politicians' mouths water, but they are peanuts to corporations, and excellent investments even if they only sway legislators occasionally". In Australia, financial gifts tend to be donated to parties rather than individual politicians and amounts over \$1500 must be declared to the Electoral Office.<sup>11</sup>

There are many examples of donors to political parties actually receiving direct government assistance. Two recent examples involve Visy Pty Ltd and Manildra Pty Ltd, whose CEOs are both friends of Prime Minister John Howard, which have both made generous political donations. Visy received \$40 million to start up a Tumut Pulp Mill and the Manildra Company was handed a virtual monopoly by the Coalition government for its ethanol fuel mix, by slapping a 38c excise on imported ethanol.

Most corporations hedge their bets by donating

to both major parties but give a bigger amount to the party in government. Direct access to ministers is also sought by many CEOs of large and powerful companies.

#### WOULD THESE INDUSTRIES SUFFER?

Would the same industries continue their operation if no financial assistance were available? There is no ready answer to this question. However, logic would suggest that if subsidies were withheld companies would establish in a region where it would be most efficient, taking into account the true cost of resources, and cleaning up. This may not be a bad outcome considering that substitute products would be more competitive and therefore attractive to users and alternatives such as low-emission fuels, plantation timbers, solar and wind power would become the preferred products.

#### THE MYTH OF INCREASED EMPLOYMENT

A major justification espoused by governments when promoting a corporate package or scheme is that the money will increase or maintain jobs in that industry. Politicians appear to regard industrial growth and industries as the job producers. On these grounds they appear more deserving than the jobless. In the mining, forestry and agriculture sectors employment has significantly decreased and continues to fall despite continually increasing government assistance.

New socially and environmentally beneficial corporations and restructured existing industries may offer increased employment and satisfy the relevant environmental criteria for government assistance, but will depend on an educated and better skilled workforce. A 'clever country' may be Australia's answer to reduction of both corporate and social welfare and may make wise use of future government financial assistance. The *State of the World Population 1999 Report* stressed that "quality of life will depend on policy and funding decisions taken in the next 10 years".<sup>12</sup>

Governments claim assistance to corporates will increase or maintain jobs in that industry. In the mining, forestry and agriculture sectors employment has significantly decreased and continues to fall despite continually increasing government assistance.

#### MUTUAL OBLIGATION AND DOUBLE-SPEAK

For the jobless, the process of attainment is difficult, frustrating, time-consuming, and even humiliating. Corporate welfare, on the other hand, is easy to access, remains unaffected by the stigma of dependency and is rarely conditional on achievement of desired goals. Olsen and Champlin's American study refers to this as "welfare dualism" and cites that in the "narrow and compartmentalized view of the welfare state, only the poor receive aid, corporations receive economic incentives".<sup>13</sup> Another account of this double standard in the study suggests that "to make the rich work harder, corporate welfare must be easily accessible, personally gratifying, and unlimited. The poor need discipline, while the rich require rewards".

#### WHAT MUST BE DONE

The most important measure that any government can take in this area is to make available to the taxpayer all relevant information surrounding the expenditure of tax dollars. It is a simple and honest ask—let the owners of the money be told where their money is spent. Signs are that this is not likely. The government responsible for enacting the *Charter of Budget Honesty Act 1998* has actively avoided the intent of that legislation.

The Victorian Auditor-General exposed the lack of government transparency and accountability in Victoria. He claimed that "Parliament is not in a position to be responsible where parliament itself is 'in the dark' regarding the activities of the Crown". One insidious way of parliament being denied information is when "State governments have claimed 'commercial in confidence' to avoid public scrutiny of government business relations and the operations of government business enterprises".<sup>14</sup>

'Commercial in confidence' surfaces as a basis for exempting documents for disclosure under the *Freedom of Information Act (1982)* (FOI) under the heading of 'Documents relating to business af-

fairs' (Section 43). A number of measures are recommended by Rick Snell, a university lecturer, to strengthen the objectives of the FOI Act, particularly making exemptions subject to a public interest test.<sup>15</sup>

On the importance of a strong FOI, Senator Brown is quoted as saying, "The Public is the government's *raison d'être*. Perhaps that line should be repeated ten times aloud before every session as a constant reminder to us all. Strong freedom of information legislation enshrines that principle and gives it legal binding".

Government measures can be introduced to make industry assistance subject to a more transparent and justifiable process. In an American article, 'Business Welfare', the author points out how 'right-to-know laws' and 'clawback provisions' are more widely used in the US and, "the latter, common in Western Europe, require firms to payback all or part of a subsidy if they fail to deliver, underperform or over-promise".<sup>16</sup> After all, risks associated with one-way transactions from direct outlays, or recurrent payments to industry should be critically evaluated by taxpayers.

It is necessary that Australia follows international examples and enacts legislation which will force recipients of corporate subsidies to be more transparent and accountable in social, economic and environmental terms. A good start would see government assistance supplied solely by direct budgetary outlay instead of the current practice of offering government assistance by way of tax concessions (called tax expenditures for extra confusion). Any deductions through the *Tax Act* are automatically covered by its secrecy provisions. If government assistance were only by way of direct outlays then all corporate welfare programs in future could be subjected to a formal environmental impact statement (EIS) before implementation.

In what seems to be another warning signal, the most recent *Productivity Commission, Trade and Assistance: Review 2000-01*, declares that "budgetary assistance favors recipients at the ex-

pense of others, and their combined impact can result in high levels of assistance to particular companies or industries". It goes on to say, "budgetary assistance schemes are not transparent, making it difficult to monitor their benefits and costs, and their net effect on the direction of economic development in Australia".

The environmental wealth of the nation must be ascribed a monetary value. For this to occur it would also be a small step forward to consolidate all forms of corporate welfare to industry in one transparent document. The result would be transparency on two very important fronts—environment and business. The citizen and taxpayer has a vital interest in both.

While social welfare is crucial for individuals to survive, it is extremely difficult to justify governments' willingness to hand out taxpayer dollars to mostly healthy businesses. When that handout totals somewhere in the order of \$12.5 billion per year it is time we bid farewell to industry welfare.

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## OPINION | Judith Bessant

### Latham's shareholder democracy: welfare for the rich and market tips for the poor

HOW SERIOUSLY should we take the claim that poverty, rising street crime and the 'social exclusion' visited on 'the underclass' are a product of the welfare state? Such claims by Third Wayers like Mark Latham and Peter Botsman sound very similar to those of neoliberal Tony Abbott. Latham warns that

an overly generous state has produced a culture of welfare dependency and growing taxpayer resentment and discontent. He argues that in the new 'post industrial society' there are 'winners and losers'. Winners are those with advanced skills and high productivity that involves them in internationally

exposed production with high earning capacity. In a 1996 paper presented to the Centre for Independent Studies he stated:

the economic restructuring and internationalisation [that winners reaped benefits from] has for a significant number of people, lifted the veil of ignorance [about welfare] and consequently weakened legitimacy of the welfare state.

For a significant proportion of workers, however—typically, semi-skilled employees in the non-trade sector—change is seen as a threat. Increasingly there is a mood among this group [of winners] pointing to the double standards in the welfare system: being exposed themselves to the continuous change in the workplace while others are the beneficiaries of guaranteed government incomes. This mood . . . has aggravated a latent source of social tension: those who add value to the economy and pay their taxes resent the transfer of these resources to recipients not involved in the production process.

Absent from this is any acknowledgement of welfare benefits paid to corporates, small business and wealthy individuals. Government assistance to industry far exceeds expenditure on unemployment benefits and far exceeds the \$18 billion paid to people on sickness and disability benefits who, to Latham, are ‘passive’ and ‘demoralised’ members of an ‘underclass’.

A rationale for corporate welfare is that it helps Australian business ‘compete’ in the global economy. In the context of increasing protectionist policies of trading partners like the US and Japan, Australian corporations have increased their claims for various forms of government assistance. Successive governments have adopted ‘free market’ and ‘competitive’ policies by cutting their investment in public goods like schools, health care and welfare while providing more welfare to the rich. Applied to the corporate sector, Latham’s logic would assert that businesses receiving government welfare ought to be restructured and required to meet activity tests that ensure they develop the means to compete successfully without government subsidy.

He suggests that the solution to welfare dependency and poverty rests on the development of a ‘stakeholder welfare state’ that includes an ‘asset

strategy’ for the poor so they can pay for the basics they need (i.e., education, health). Incredibly, he suggests that the poor can help themselves by getting into the stockmarket. The federal government, he says, should introduce a First Share-owners’ Scheme to strengthen Australia as a shareholder democracy, especially among low income groups.

This flight of imagination reveals a striking ignorance of the mountain of debt that people on low incomes experience and the nature of poverty. The problem for many Australians is not whether there is money to buy shares, but whether there is enough money to pay the electricity bill so the power won’t be cut off, or whether there is money to feed the kids tonight, or pay for the school excursion tomorrow.

His other reform measures include the establishment of a “network of saving accounts with strong incentives for poor people to put money aside and accumulate assets. The accounts would be available for a range of purposes such as education . . . and equity investment.” He proposes that we redress poverty and social exclusion by teaching the poor to save. This settlement-house-cum-community development approach of Latham’s and Abbott’s assumes people are poor because they have not learnt the good habits of parsimony, prudence and the virtues of saving. Because they are welfare dependent, passive and lack sufficient enterprise spirit they are unable to become active contributors to social capital and stakeholders in the reformed welfare state.

In many ways Latham surpasses many neoliberal enthusiasts in his support for welfare cuts. His Third Way ‘justifies’ a full-throttled shift towards the right. For this reason it is important not to ignore his absurdities and anomalies in the hope they will go away. There are pressing reasons to examine the flawed assumptions on which his views are based. He and other advocates of Third Way politics profess to be progressive, yet the politics and policies they advocate expand and reinforce the most extremist neoliberal politics. The outcomes he proposes are impractical and undesirable for any society that wants to identify itself as a modern democracy.

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## THE DEATH OF MRS HENDERSON

The story begins with a young man rummaging through some bits and pieces in a small plastic container. The young man's brow is creased with concentration, or so the Author seems to believe. The Author has already made a glaring mistake. I am standing in the sun, an oversight easily neglected in the rush to establish situation. Unfortunately this oversight will inevitably lead to fabrication, something that I, as the key protagonist within this story, will attempt to subvert.

In the second paragraph the young man, who has now been endowed with some physical features, but not yet a name, selects a small object from among the many that jostle for his attention. At this point there is some description of his hands—the bluntness of his fingers, a brief, yet no doubt significant, reference to the soil beneath his nails—and another mention of his facial expression, which, in deference to you, the Reader, has been given a subtle hint of malicious intent.

This is another of the Author's shameless fictions. While it is true that there is some soil beneath my nails and my fingers are indeed blunt, my expression has been entirely misinterpreted. I don't blame you, despite the fact that it is your presence which demands the Author take my somewhat wry smile and then intentionally misconstrue it for the sake of arousing curiosity. After all, we are both the victims of this story.

The Author goes on to suggest—and this is unforgivable—that in the centre of the young man's hand is a single bullet. He stares at it for a moment, as if in consideration, then closes his fingers around its cool metal skin. Without pausing to consider the two young women who stand only metres away, he walks, with careful deliberation, to the car parked on the opposite side of the road. He fumbles in the glove box until his hands alight on the revolver he has stored there. He turns it over, clicks open the cylinder, and with a flourish worthy of any number of mass-produced American films, spins it before driving the bullet home and pushing the cylinder back into place.

This all occurs in the fourth paragraph. Even if the Author had, by some great leap of the imagination, managed to tell the truth, surely you, the Reader, find this hard to believe. Moments ago you were introduced to a young man rummaging through odds and ends in a small container in broad daylight, an event that was, after all, made suspect by the Author's misinterpretation of a single benign expression. As a Reader you must be aware of what the Author is doing. How can you be sure of what I have in my hands? For all you know I might have just found an old cassette I've had sitting in the glove box for the past year. Obviously we are dealing with a somewhat simplistic imagination. To get you in, the Author has concocted, or should we say



reconstituted, for this is an exhausted genre, a story about a gun. And that bit about turning it over and spinning the cylinder. Does that really exist outside the fictional world? Rest assured, Reader. I am on your side.

As the young man sits in the driver's seat with the revolver held loosely in one hand, a telephone rings. He takes a small cell phone from his pocket, pauses to listen and mutters a few words, then returns the phone to the folds of his jacket. He puts the gun back into the glove box and drives away.

The Author has, not surprisingly, failed to mention what was said during the telephone call. This ridiculously transparent oversight is no doubt intended as a means of creating dramatic tension in an otherwise lacklustre narrative. It is obvious what the Author is doing. Lacking the imagination to construct believable dialogue, the Author has assumed that you, the Reader, will accept this as a moment of competently crafted suspense. The Author cares little for either of us. We are no more than pawns of the Author's misguided ego.

In the eighth paragraph the narrative takes a huge leap and arrives at the darkened apartment of an unseen and anonymous individual. The presence of this individual is alluded to through a lengthy description of a dimly lit room humming to the drone of late-afternoon television. The young man, who has carefully closed the door behind him, walks silently down the hall towards the room, the revolver cocked and poised against his temple. There is a brief discussion about the sound of the young man's breath, followed by a somewhat convoluted description of the noise his clothing makes as he moves.

Eventually, after the obligatory moment of suspense involving a rogue floorboard, he arrives at the room. The young man positions himself in the doorway, and the individual, aroused by a convenient flash of intuition, turns.

It is quite obvious, from these last two paragraphs, that I lie under authorial condemnation. In the selfish pursuit of a cohesive narrative and a tidy ending, the Author has failed to mention the fact that, while I did indeed receive a telephone call (which, by the way, had absolutely no connection to the events being portrayed), I was nowhere near the aforementioned apartment when all of this unfolded. This is yet another example of the Author's shameless propensity for fabrication. Between the seventh and eighth paragraphs there is a yawning chasm which you, the Reader, must no doubt question. The Author, unable to reconcile a taste for the overwritten dramatics of Hollywood with the mundane truths of the key protagonist's life, has decided, in the most overtly defamatory way, to lie.

The Author goes on to describe the shooting in a tedious paragraph in which facial expressions, the noise of the gun and the unsettling sound of the television all play a significant role, and then, in what I can only assume was a pique of self-righteousness, ties up the story with the revelation that the victim is the young man's wife.

Within the space of 1,023 words the Author has not only destroyed any sense of my own credibility by constructing a highly distasteful story based on a handful of misguided interpretations and an admittedly poor alibi, but has used the terrible death of my wife as a means to fulfil a highly dubious fantasy of literary glory.

I am not the only victim. You, dear Reader, have been implicated as well.

What are we to do? How are we to rally against this insidious manipulation? I have only your best interests at heart, Reader. I have done my part, chosen, despite the limitations that are mine alone, to expose the true mechanics of this selfish fabrication. The rest, dear Reader, is up to you.

## Assorted Brickwork

Two walls away  
Jerm begins his midnight shower.  
As a child  
he would curl himself, a fetus  
sleeping next to the running taps.  
His addiction the sound  
of water hitting white porcelain.

Thirty-two walls and a tram stop away  
in Safeway  
'lite' milk is presently on special  
and Indo noodles are  
eight bucks a box.

Approximately five hundred and seven walls and  
six-and-a-half suburbs away,  
you are at rest.  
Your hair spreading out on your pillow  
like pools of Jamaican coffee  
aromatic and in rings.

Half a world of walls away  
Aron will be preparing his breakfast  
organic bread and cream cheese,  
and setting down to read the *New York Times* where on the cover  
his president makes another swipe at war.

Still more walls away George W Bush will be sleeping,  
a dictionary next to his bed open on the word 'terrorist'.  
Years ago, after a course in speed reading,  
he learnt how to take in knowledge just by being close to the definition.

Back within these walls a young man lives next to piles of books  
in the understanding that digesting pages  
means he won't have to go out,  
though the house really  
needs milk  
and it's his turn  
to get it.

EDDIE PATERSON

## floating fund

In addition to the many cartoonists and businesses who supported the *Overland* fundraising auction (24 November 2002), we would like to thank our friends and supporters for generously giving to keep *Overland* afloat. Thanks this quarter are due to: \$200 P.D.; \$150 D.G.; \$120 P.G.; \$100 M.L.; \$50 M.R., M.P.,

B.J.S.; \$36 D.&B.H., J.K.; \$30 J.P.; \$22 V.D.; \$15 L.D., J.B.; \$14 J.T., K.S., J.M.D., J.H., A.C., D.B., M.G., C.C.M.; \$12 M.M.; \$10 C.J.G., P.T.; \$9 V.&J.B.; \$7 H.H.; \$5 M.T.; \$4 W.&R.W., J.R., D.B., E.W., P.G., B.B., P.H., G.R.S., S.M., B.N.S., R.I.; \$3 G.G.; \$2 B.D., M.G.; Totalling: \$1090.00.

Voices on the wind

**RAYMOND EVANS**

Diane Bell: *Daughters of the Dreaming* (Spinifex Press, \$34.95)

Thom Blake: *A Dumping Ground. A History of the Cherbourg Settlement* (UQP, \$30)

Peggy Brock (ed.): *Words and Silences. Aboriginal women, politics and land* (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95)

Richard Broome: *Aboriginal Australians. Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-2001* (Allen & Unwin, \$35)

Elaine Brown: *Cooloola Coast* (UQP, \$40)

Rosalind Kidd: *Black Lives, Government Lies* (UNSW Press, \$12.95)

Dawn A. Lee: *Daughter of Two Worlds* (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, \$20)

Deborah Bird Rose: *Dingo Makes Us Human. Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (CUP, \$34.95)

Sarina Singh et al: *Aboriginal Australia and the Torres Strait Islands: guide to Indigenous Australia* (Lonely Planet, US\$19.95)

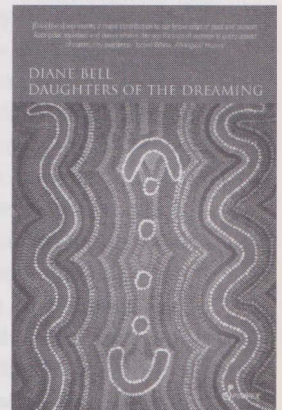
The term ‘aboriginal industry’ is heavily laced with cynicism and fear. To rightward-thinking commentators, it summons up something insidious, located mid-way between a conspiracy and a *putsch*. It denotes venality (“They get more than we do”); deception (“They invent ‘sacred sites’”); and upset (“They want us all feeling guilty”).

In reality, there is no such monolith. As these nine volumes show, Aboriginality walks many pathways, pursues many different goals and represents not one, but many different ‘industries’. What these studies also indicate, however, is that there *is* something which might be termed an Aboriginal *Publishing* Industry, albeit one still largely dominated by white authors. Its output appears to be almost as large as its readership in a nation still stubbornly resisting being ‘told’ its more confronting stories. And its subject matter is complex, intricate and bewilderingly diverse. A small review article can merely struggle to encompass its abundance.

Only one of these volumes—Dawn Lee’s slim *Daughter of Two Worlds*—is written by an author of Aboriginal ancestry. Another, the Lonely Planet’s *Guide to Indigenous Australia*, contains multiple Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contributors. Four other texts are written by white historians, and two by white anthropologists. Finally, *Words and Silences*, edited by Peggy Brock, contains chapters by both anthropologists and his-

torians, traversing the theme of Aboriginal women, politics and land, with a single chapter by a female Nyungar lawyer, Hannah McGlade. Three of the books—Richard Broome’s general history, *Aboriginal Australians*, Diane Bell’s *Daughters of the Dreaming* and Deborah Bird Rose’s *Dingo Makes Us Human* are republished ‘classics’, first appearing in 1982, 1983 and 1992 respectively. In a world of web-pages, sound-grabs and generally disposable ‘knowledge’, the criteria of ‘classic’ has come to apply to any text still having something worthwhile to say after a decade or so; but all three of these studies rise majestically above this dubious nomenclature.

Broome’s *Aboriginal Australians* has performed an enormous task of educating and enlightening in its twenty years’ existence. Selling now more than 35,000 copies, it has commercially out-performed even Henry Reynolds’ most popular titles. Its second edition in 1994 contained a composite chapter covering the eighties, and this latest offering takes us to the close of 2001. Broome stands his ground on his first eleven chapters, however, finding upon re-readings that he still does not disagree with his “former self too violently”. Even his third edition Preface repeats sentences and paragraphs from the former two, all reprinted here. But in it, there is a more impassioned plea for all Australians to embrace the contradictions of their past—“a dark mo-



ment” in Western colonial expansionism set against “the growth of an admirable advanced democracy”. I would add that this has been one awfully long ‘moment’; and that the ‘admirable’ aspect of Australian democracy has, of late, lost a considerable degree of its gloss. Broome’s new chapter, ‘Aborigines Under Siege’, appears also to recognise this; for although he struggles hard to convey a sense of balance between achievement and oppression—and despite vital glimmerings of hope—this latest overview is predominantly a grim and sorry tale indeed.

Bell’s *Daughters of the Dreaming* is also a third edition publication. Though Bell wrote in her second edition Foreword almost a decade ago, “Were I to write *Daughters* now I would do it very differently,” she too has made no significant alteration to her original text, since adding a conscientious Epilogue to answer her critics, in 1993. Apart from a new foreword and a moving dedication to her friend, teacher and colleague, Topsy Napurralla Nelson, whose painting of *yawakiya* Dreaming graces the front cover, no more has been added. When it first appeared in 1983, *Daughters* was controversial and iconoclastic within the anthropology profession for the new light it cast on the importance of women’s power and knowledge in Aboriginal communities—like that of the Wallabri settlement Bell studied in the central desert region of the Northern Territory.

As an historian working on frontier relations in Australia, what I found most problematical with Bell’s account in 1983—and still do—was/is her argument that Aboriginal women’s sexual relations with white men were based upon choice, consent and personal enrichment. “Women today claim that their grandmothers entered into these relationships because their sexuality and their feelings were theirs to bestow as they wished.” She writes:

They say they willingly went to white men, that they enjoyed the love-making and the payments they received. Women exercised their own initiative, and secured goods, admiration and pleasure for themselves.

Aboriginal men interfered in this mutually advantageous situation by removing women from the gaze of white men, Bell continues, and thus limited the women’s strength and independence by the imposition of unsolicited “protection”. This analysis appears entirely innocent of the historical realities of

frontier relations in Central Australia, and their oppressive, over-arching, inter-racial violence. This oversight is compounded in the book’s epilogue, where the issue of “assault, rape and murder” is finally examined. For the “gang rapes of young girls, being beaten to a pulp, and a death toll for women that exceeds the deaths in custody” are all sheeted home to current Aboriginal male perpetrators, without any historical contextualisation for this “terrifying pattern of abuse”.

Bell’s analysis stands in stark contrast to that of Deborah Bird Rose’s *Dingo Makes Us Human*, which is centrally informed by an historical consciousness of the matrix of ‘power and terror’ in which colonial relations are formed. Especially read in conjunction with its companion volume, *Hidden Histories*, Rose’s study of Yirralin and Victoria Down in the north-western reaches of the Northern Territory, bordering the Kimberley district, is a searing revelation of “the brutality of the process . . . the great Australian holocaust known as colonisation”. Rose assesses that a pre-contact population of four to five thousand people was reduced by slaughter and disease in half a century to a mere 187—an attrition rate of up to 95 per cent. The forty-five or so remaining Karangpurra people, who in the 1880s had numbered around 1500, could trace their ancestry in 1980 back to one male survivor of three or four decades of “intense killing”. Apropos of Bell’s dismissive explanation of inter-racial sexual relations further to the south, Rose asserts that Aboriginal women were not in a position to refuse European men, because of the latter’s greater power and because starvation “forced women into prostitution”.

Rose’s writing overall is marked by prescience and empathy, as well as a capacity to achieve a rare marriage between theoretical insights and a personalised expressiveness which plucks at the heart.

BOTH BELL AND ROSE appear again in new chapters in Peggy Brock’s edited *Words and Silences*. In this collection, Brock highlights the often neglected issue of women’s rights in land, as her contributors interrogate from various angles the gendered nature of Aboriginal societies. Through the observations of key Aboriginal informants, such as Maureen O’Donnell and Isabel and Barbara Flick, Heather Goodall constructs an intimate appraisal of the Western Women’s Land Council of NSW in the mid-80s; but the core of the book is the sterling

contributions of Bell and Rose. Diane Bell since 1996 has worked doggedly with Ngarrindjeri women in their struggle against the bridge to Hindmarsh Island—a protracted legal battle which, Richard Broome quips, “had more legal turns than a lawyers’ car rally”. For Bell, however, the issue is no laughing matter, as she questions why the twenty-five Ngarrindjeri women’s traditional knowledge was rejected as concocted by a Royal Commission in 1995, headed by a non-Aboriginal woman; and concludes, “. . . the research on which the Royal Commission was based is flawed”.

Her forensic examination, much further elaborated in *Ngarrindjeri Waruwarrin* (1998), is a poignant case study of Rose’s central contention: that knowledge of sacred sites, particularly women’s knowledge, is in itself sacred—and sanctified principally by its aura of secretiveness. “Silence is crucial . . . control is exercised through judicious management—opening and closing, revealing and concealing”. The power of the knowledge lies in its shielded exclusivity. Thus, as Bell states, “people only reveal as much as necessary to protect a place and do so at the last minute”. European skeptics, like John Howard’s former speechwriter, Christopher Pearson, view this as chicanery; in reality, what is being played out here is the agonising double-bind of being forced to protect a place at the expense of surrendering, verbally, its empowering knowledge, at the behest of what Rose has termed “deep colonising”:

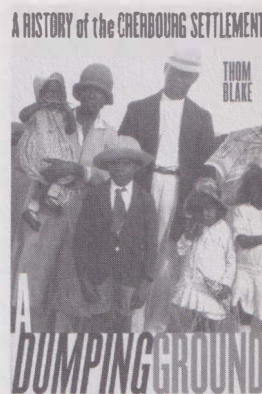
a cluster of practices which . . . probe ever more deeply into the conditions of Aboriginal people’s lives and bodies, severing people from the sociality of connections within which they are embedded and reconstituting them as defenceless individuals.

THREE OTHER OF THESE STUDIES, all exploring Queensland’s racial history, further expound upon ‘deep colonising’s’ deeper lineage. Elaine Brown’s *Cooloola Coast*, a study of Aboriginal-settler relations in the Noosa to Fraser Island strip, appears to be marketed as a tourist guide. Yet in reality, it is a carefully researched race contact history of a comparatively thinly populated region, where the fate of the Dulingbara people is cautiously divined from fragments of European record. For instance, when she deals with three probable massacres of the

Dulingbara by gun and poison at Murdering Creek, Teewah Beach and Lake Weyba, probably in the 1850s, Brown is prompted to comment upon how the absence of precise dates and details “illustrates the difficulty of obtaining direct evidence about alleged atrocities during the frontier period”.

The other two Queensland titles, Thom Blake’s *A Dumping Ground* and Ros Kidd’s *Black*

*Lives, Government Lies*, are in the handier position of being able to call upon precise information in compiling their studies. For under the aegis of segregating and assimilating policies, institutionalised Aborigines became the most bureaucratically policed people since the convicts. In the past, however, the massive paper-trail this intense surveillance has bequeathed to present generations was not so easy to negotiate. Aboriginal peoples are not the only ones to understand the power embedded in enforced secrecy! Thom Blake needed to engage upon a Ulyssean search through the Queensland State Archives during the 1980s in order to piece together the details of this forbidding story of oppression, criminal negligence and exploitation at Barambah, as Cherbourg was first called. I knew of this at close hand, as I supervised the doctorate from which this book emerged. Blake balances his documentary research with a score of in-depth interviews with Aboriginal informants which reveal not only the personal impacts of authoritarian rule, but also the daily struggles to offset and subvert it. These were devious and difficult resistances indeed on what was later to be called Queensland’s showpiece reserve in the south-east of the State; for, as Blake discloses in a footnote at the end of the book, open, frontal mobilisations, such as that mounted by William Cooper and Jack Patten in New South Wales, and William Harris in Western Australia, failed to emerge in inter-war Queensland. As Cherbourg’s superintendent informed Chief Protector Bleakley in 1939, an attempt by two inmates, Jacob Chirnside and Martha Sandow to begin an agitation on behalf of the Aboriginal Freedom League, “or whatever they call themselves”, had been rapidly scotched. “I have advised that I would disperse these meetings and if necessary lock up the speakers,” he reported.



Blake's devastating examination of a single Aboriginal settlement acts as complementary microcosm to Kidd's compact, macrocosmic essay on "the biggest social experiment in our history"—the removal and incarceration of tens of thousands of Aborigines, not only children, but people of several generations over a period of some seventy years. Rather than trawling extensively for the largely damning sources, Kidd was in the happy position of having the documentation all come to her. Marcia Langton, Jiman descendant and well-known scholar and activist, presented her with open access to Government files, ticking away like a dusty time-bomb, while serving in a Senior Executive position in the Queensland Public Service. "[O]ver 15 months of research," Kidd recalls, "my senses were stunned into disbelief. I became determined that these scarcely believable machinations of bureaucrats and politicians would be as widely and as accurately exposed as my skills would allow." The ultimate outcome was the detonation of that bomb in the publication of Kidd's blistering *The Way We Civilize* in 1997. Its reverberations are still being felt. This handier, abbreviated account of some sixty-four pages is a distillation of all the shame, disgust and rage that the earlier, larger study carries. The story which the unculled, official documents themselves tell is a litany of "deliberate and persistent breaching of State and federal laws, of decimated community workforces, of devastated social fabric, of pathological overcrowding and jeopardised health". "How many preventable child deaths," Kidd asks, "[h]ow many beatings, stabbings, jailings and ruined lives are traceable to these carefully, knowingly implemented policies?" Though this is the shortest account in the batch, it stings like a bee.

WHICH BRINGS US to the two volumes written wholly or partially by Aboriginal authors. Dawn A. Lee's *Daughter of Two Worlds* is a family history and an autobiographical account which traces her heritage back to the union between William Willoughby, a Northern Ireland Peer and a young Kerrup-jmara woman, Susannah, from the Lake Condah region of Western Victoria. The reader discerns within a few pages that this is not conventional, mainstream history when John Batman, Melbourne's acclaimed founder, for whom Willoughby worked as business manager, is depicted with his nose decaying from syphilis and so invalidated by the disease "that he was

pushed and pulled in a wickerwork perambulator around Melbourne by four Aboriginal servants". Batman's wife, Eliza, with whom Willoughby had an affair and later married, was subsequently reduced to prostitution and finally "beaten and kicked to death" by an unknown assailant in Geelong.

Lee's family story encompasses many of the themes touched upon already—Aboriginal resistance, known in this region as 'The Eumeralla War', and the "armed settlers, police and poison" which crushed it; the forced expropriation of Aboriginal women and the rounding up of the Gunditjmarra people onto the oppressive Lake Condah mission—"Camp Concentration", as Lee terms it. Her extensive family, on both its Aboriginal and white working-class sides, suffer extensively across the generations from most of the indignities inflicted upon the poor and powerless—deprivation, terrible illnesses, fatal beatings, removals and a death in custody. "I don't know how they kept their sanity," Lee remarks of her parents; but they did, as well as their sense of humour. Lee herself became a professional singer in the 1940s and an uncle, Norman McDonald, was the acclaimed Essendon half-back-flanker, 'Macca'—"the most decorated Aboriginal footballer ever". Male family members also served as Anzacs in both World Wars. As a light-skinned woman, Dawn Lee has endured her own version of the catch-22 of white racism in Australia. As a child, she was beaten up by non-Aboriginal children for being a 'blackfella'; yet as an adult, her Aboriginality now remains continually in question due to her light complexion.

FINALLY, the Lonely Planet's *Guide to Indigenous Australia* is another fertile product of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaboration. Three of the eleven members of the editorial team have Aboriginal ancestry as well as fifty-one of the seventy-one contributors. Over three years, a "screaming beast of a manuscript" has been transformed into a travel companion with an arresting difference. In what other visitor's guide to Australia would one expect to read: "This country is built on lies, massacres, genocide, imprisonment, poison, stolen children and the ongoing Bullshit of Western politics" (Jason Davidson)? "With this guide in your backpack or glovebox", its Introduction assures us, "you'll find a very different Australia from the one most often presented to the world." You surely will! Yet while this thorough compilation hardly misses a beat in

recording the sinister consequences of Australian colonialism (even John Batman's probable 'cerebrovascular' syphilis is noted), its strongest suit is in its identification of hundreds of sites of positive Aboriginal achievement, despite all the horrors inflicted by Western dispossession.

Ironically, chances are that overseas tourists, armed with this guide alone, will quickly know considerably more about Aboriginal Australia than your average local punter, or even that merry band of assimilators and denialists who presently inform/infest the mainstream Australian media. Apart from recycled versions of their own prejudice, I wonder just what do these people read? Certainly not enlightening books like these. How confronting this new knowledge must be to their rigidly expressed perspectives. And how comfortingly simple to consign it into oblivion with yet another blast of ignorant white noise.

Raymond Evans teaches Australian History at the University of Queensland. His latest book is *Fighting Words: Writing about Race* (UQP, 1999).

## Juiced-up history

### JENNIFER ROSE

Christine Halse: *A Terribly Wild Man* (Allen & Unwin, \$35)

Scott Cane: *Pila Nguru: The Spinifex People* (FACP, \$49.95)

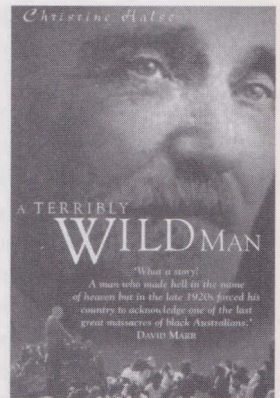
In her biography of missionary Ernest Gribble, Christine Halse tells us that "Humanitarians are often naively portrayed as saints or sinners". It is perplexing then that the cover of *A Terribly Wild Man* poses that exact question: "Saint or Sinner? Turbulent priest or dedicated shepherd?" I found Halse's biography frustrating, perhaps because she is not writing as a historian. Rather, she is piecing together historical evidence and a psychological profile of Gribble, to produce a narrative that shifts uncomfortably between sound historical information and emotive and at times problematic analysis.

Ernest Gribble reluctantly became an Anglican missionary to continue the work of his father at Yarrabah in North Queensland, just south of Cairns,

in 1892. His missionary career spanned seventy years until his death in 1957. His career took him to the Kimberley's Forrest River Mission, and eventually to an Aboriginal settlement on Palm Island. It saw him dismissed from the first two appointments following allegations of mismanagement, cruelty to residents and staff and with very serious questions surrounding his mental health.

The premise of Halse's biography is, quite rightly, that the story of race relations at this time was not a one-dimensional narrative of 'bad missionary' versus 'Aboriginal victim'. Providing us with glimpses into Gribble's fractured and troubled psyche, Halse successfully draws out the complexities of the missionary drive—the devotion to the welfare of their 'charges' mixed with the cruel denial of Aboriginal rights to determine their own future and preserve their culture. Gribble's involvement in campaigns to reveal violence inflicted on Aboriginal people of the Kimberleys, particularly his fight to expose the whitewashing of the massacres of an undetermined number of Aborigines by police patrol groups in 1922 and again in 1926, sit uncomfortably next to his own abuse of 'residents' on the mission. Gribble enforced regimented schedules, forced marriages, stole children, prohibited cultural practices, and inflicted violent punishments for breaching the all-pervasive rules of conduct.

While Halse provides some very interesting insights into Gribble's complex and dysfunctional missionary agenda and the broader mechanisms of Aboriginal politics of the time, these contributions are at times diminished by the use of romantic language and imagery to juice up the story and sustain the reader's interest. Halse is generally sensitive to the mistreatment of the Aborigines on Gribble's missions. But in a problematic introduction to the topic of the sexual abuse and rape of Aboriginal girls by white missionary workers, the reader is presented with a picture of "young Aboriginal girls with their long legs and luminous, ebony skin" taking "frank pleasure in the sensual firmness of their budding womanhood" before Halse describes the perpetrators of sexual violence as "casualties" of desire. I had to ask myself if, in delving into the psyche of



Gribble, Halse didn't unwittingly take on board some of the sensibilities of the day.

In contrast, Scott Cane's *Pila Nguru: The Spinifex People*, provides the reader with some very engaging insights into the mystical cosmology of the Spinifex people without delving into any romantic western concepts of the exotic Indigenous other. In the first chapter, Cane makes us privy to his 'spiritual journey' into the desert with some of the Spinifex people, for whom he is working on a community development plan. Camping in the bush, he is illuminated with an experience of coming to some understanding of the Spinifex Tjukurrpa, which can be crudely translated to mean the complex and multi-dimensional basis of their cosmology, their law, the rules of their social interaction and the avenue through which their relationship to land is articulated and maintained.

The Spinifex Tjukurrpa is articulated through a series of paintings produced to record the Spinifex people's relationship to their land through the Spinifex Arts Project, established as part of the process of pursuing their successful Native Title claim. The beautiful glossy reprints of these paintings are one of the features of the book.

The Spinifex people, by virtue of their geographical isolation on the West Australian side of the Great Victoria Desert, lived without having to endure the impact of White Australia's colonial invasion, until nuclear testing at Maralinga in the 1950s forced many of them off their homelands.

Much of Cane's narrative is anthropological, an in-depth account of the Spinifex people's cultural practices and beliefs and social processes. This is not a disengaged analysis, and the reader is acutely aware of the presence of the Spinifex people in the text. While Cane narrates, the perspectives and practices of the Spinifex people remain at the centre of the story, leaving some lasting impressions. The Spinifex people's attempt, in 1996, to digest the fact that their land had been granted to someone else some eighty years ago, without their knowledge, is poignantly described by Cane:

They were, to put it mildly, stunned that their land had been given to people they had never seen and who had no traditional claim to their country. They were angry, stating, among other things, that they had never seen these people in the desert 'clearing out rockholes' or otherwise 'looking after' the country.

The complex relationship between the Spinifex and their land, their intricate systems of custodianship and preservation of that land stand in stark contrast to the hollow doctrine of Terra Nullius.

Jennifer Rose is a social researcher, completing her Masters in Public History. She was coordinator of the 2002 Victorian Sorry Day Committee.

## Essential reading for massacre denialists

**BILL THORPE**

Patrick Collins: *Goodbye Bussamarai: The Mandandanji Land War, Southern Queensland 1842-1852* (UQP, \$34)

If ever a book could convince those who forget or deny the facts about the often bloody and violent way in which Australia was 'settled' and, more importantly, provide a definitive account of how this continent was won for the British empire and for every Australian citizen since, it would have to be Patrick Collins's account of the 'Mandandanji homeland' in south-west Queensland. This area covers the present-day towns of Roma, Mitchell and Surat, and the Maranoa and Balonne rivers.

Collins's regional study is the most detailed and scholarly reconstruction of the sites of conflict, violence and fatal encounters between Aborigines and settlers ever published about the Queensland frontier and, to the best of my knowledge, for Australia. In this respect, Collins has taken Australian frontier historiography to a new level. This long book with its seventeen chapters, four appendices, hundreds of endnotes, and an impressive bibliography, attests to its exhaustive scope and erudition. Interestingly, Collins claims he is not an historian and "learned nothing about frontier conflicts" when he studied Australian history in the 1960s. Collins's discussion of what happened on the Macintyre, a situation I am reasonably familiar with, is the most comprehensive I have seen. The Yamboucal massacre of 1852, which I had not seen an account of before, resembled the notorious and well-documented Myall Creek massacre of 1838 in that the main victims were Aboriginal people employed as station hands. Likewise Collins brings to light an-



other little-known massacre, that at Yuleba Creek in 1850.

Perhaps the book's most impressive feature is the complexity and contexts of situations when there was anything to do with Aboriginal/settler encounters—and not just the 'collisions' and 'dispersals' (i.e. massacres and armed conflicts). In almost every case Collins examines, he describes the people involved, from Colonial Office officials like Lord Grey, through colonial governors like Fitzroy and squatters like Henry Dangar, to less important but arguably more decisive figures nearer or at the 'coalface' of frontier policing such as Crown Lands Commissioners Durbin and Roderick Mitchell; Balonne settler Richard Walker (who ran his own informal 'native police' force); Native Police sergeant Dempster; and sundry station hands whose murderous sorties against the Mandandanji went virtually uncontrolled. From all this, and his careful scrutiny of the available evidence, Collins calculates that seventy-five Aboriginal people were killed "from a small sample of incidents", two hundred lost their lives at Warroo in 1848, and the death count in "violent East Maranoa" was at least 150 and "double that number is not fanciful", given that the original Mandandanji population was swelled with displaced refugees from adjacent regions.

*Goodbye Bussamarai* is both a history and an exemplar of historical method. This dual character of the book is a real strength. Collins's determined and scrupulous empirical spadework serves as a model to anyone, historians themselves included, about the sheer hard work involved in dealing with material about contentious issues like massacres, and in piecing together a narrative of events when crucial documents are either missing or destroyed. Throughout the process, Collins has no trouble in dismissing questionable evidence, and interrogating sources like a tough and persistent detective. His rigorous practice echoes E.P. Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*: historians are trained (or should be) "in a discipline of attentive disbelief".

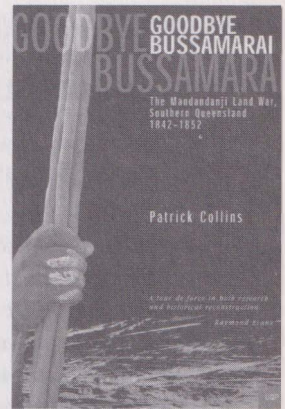
Notwithstanding this book's many qualities, I have three reservations. The first is a relatively minor one about the book's title. Despite Collins's disclaimer that he did not write a biography, the Aboriginal elder Bussamarai himself is a somewhat fleeting presence. Most of *Goodbye Bussamarai* is actually about the imperial and colonial players in the taking and holding of Mandandanji land. Sec-

ondly, I found myself struggling to make sense of what was actually happening in terms of time, space and people. It is somewhat offputting to be confronted, for example, with an opening paragraph of the first chapter, 'The Mandandanji meet the whites' which begins: "The start of the ruthless competition for the Mandandanji land is not reflected adequately in the two major sources of pre-1848 East Maranoa history . . ." Occa-

sionally, documentary positivism almost overwhelms narratives and events, and the detail threatens to create a lack of proportion. (This latter judgement is probably more of a comment about this reviewer than Collins.) Thirdly, Collins never fully develops in his analysis his counselling and psychological insights to help us understand the ideas, motives and actions of the people embroiled in these events. Consequently he has missed an opportunity, for example, to consider and compare the Youmbuccal Station massacre in terms where Michael Sturma, in his *Journal of Australian Studies* article on Myall Creek, tried to explain as "the psychology of mass murder". I was rather hoping to see a revival of what Collins himself calls "the meeting ground of psychology and history". Ironically, Collins, the 'non-historian', has produced a very fine piece of history but it may be left to others to draw out the existential and psychological dimensions of the "ruthless competition on the southern Queensland frontiers" he has documented so well.

The author, the publishers and those who recommended *Goodbye Bussamarai*'s publication should be commended wholeheartedly for bringing to public notice such a substantial work about a subject which still affronts many people in this country, our present prime minister not least. On this latter point, while supporting "the notion of a national apology", Collins is not guilty about "the actions of past generations". Rather the central issue is trust, which "includes attempting to tell the truth about our past".

Bill Thorpe is a visiting fellow and adjunct senior lecturer at Flinders University of South Australia. He is author of *Colonial Queensland*, UQP, 1996.



## What do you mean ‘your country?’

### ENZA GANDOLFO

Sylvia Lawson: *How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia: Stories and Essays* (UNSW Press, \$34.95)

Sylvia Lawson’s collection of essays, *How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia*, opens with Noam Chomsky. An interviewer asks him: “Do you think the time might come when we might no longer be ashamed of our country?” Chomsky answers: “It depends what you mean by your country.” This question of national identity is central for Lawson. She takes the “complicated moments in the news, a book, a film, a big public event, a famous death—or, in Raymond Williams’s case, a death less famous than it should have been” to examine what it means to be Australian, and reminds us that “what Australia has done and hasn’t done in relation to Indonesia, to Timor to West Papua (for examples) is as much part of Australian reality as ANZAC Day, Melbourne Cup, football and Yothu Yindi.” Lawson explores who we are through history, literature, feminism, politics and cultural theory, weaving together local and global issues, bringing in personal and public events.

Taking the fiftieth anniversary of *The Second Sex* as a starting point in the title essay, Lawson examines de Beauvoir’s writing and its meaning for Australian women. We hear the fictional voices of young mothers first reading *The Second Sex* in the 1960s and those of the diverse members of a women’s reading group formed in 1999. This essay “crosses and recrosses the wavy line dividing memoir from fiction: the reflective narrator, the figure called ‘I’, is a kind of liaison-worker moving between the two”. The narrator, Lawson, is a keen observer. She examines the impact of de Beauvoir’s writing and that of other feminists—including Dorothy Hewett and Dorothy Green—on women, and writes a critical history of Australian feminism. For Lawson, de Beauvoir dies in Australia every time we allow feminism to be eroded.

‘How Raymond Williams Died in Australia’ is a particularly intelligent and poignant essay reflecting on the loss of an important cultural theorist and teacher. Williams’s death, on 26 January 1988, as Australia celebrated the bicentenary, was for Lawson “acutely ironic”. Here was a man committed to

social change; a man who would have been able to give “exactly the kind of cultural analyses” we needed of the celebrations that Lawson describes as a “calculated circus”. His “real death in Australia is in the forgetting of all the work he and others did to set culture, as growth and imagination, at the centre of the struggle for social democracy. With such amnesia, one binding strand drops from thinking and working for the long revolution.” De Beauvoir and Williams were willing “to take on the world” in the pursuit of a better society; their contributions, Lawson illustrates, have shaped our past, our present and still have much to contribute to our future.

The other five essays take us from Australia’s red centre to its main cities, from Britain to Indonesia, to Paris, and to West Papua. Who we are is investigated through our artwork and our literature, through sport and the media, through our icons and through those issues that have exploded into major debates—land rights, migration, and media ownership. As with any collection some essays are not as strong as others; I found ‘Putting the books away with Jack’ particularly dull, especially compared to the others. In this fictional piece a mother and son unpack boxes of books, and discuss feminism, politics and national identity, but the story is self-conscious and falls short.

Lawson is a journalist, critic and teacher. She has had a long involvement with the women’s movement and has been writing about the media, feminism and cultural politics for many years. Her last book, *The Archibald Paradox: a case of authorship*, is a study of the early *Sydney Bulletin*. This latest hybrid collection is a challenging and evocative read. It raises pertinent questions, especially in light of more recent events than those discussed in the book, such as John Howard’s pledge, on our behalf, to give America unconditional support in the ‘war against terrorism’, and the long-term detention of asylum seekers.

Lawson paints a picture of Australia as a complex and problematic nation, a “conflicted, tantalising, difficult place where people read symbols accurately, and know full well what they’re doing when symbolic action is called for; a place where arguments really matter.” Certainly in this collection, she makes the arguments matter.

Enza Gandolfo is a Melbourne writer and PhD student at Victoria University.

“It’s been a terrible ordeal . . .”

## ANDREW MOORE

Bob Ellis: *Goodbye Babylon: Further Journeys in Time and Politics* (Viking, \$29.95)

Unable to comprehend any book that does not include footnotes, I should not be reviewing Bob Ellis’s latest tome. For while *Goodbye Babylon* may be contextualised as memoirs, its CIP details present it solely as recent political history. These include “Australian politics and government—twentieth century” and “history, modern—twenty-first century”—surely a rather limited topic despite the enormity of events in America fourteen months ago and their sequel in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Without the reassurance of scholarly apparatus, it is difficult to comment on the reliability of the thousands of assertions contained in this 638-page book. Could my friend Anne Boyd really have consorted so intimately with Mr Ellis all those years ago to the point that she could have become Mrs Ellis? (Unsurprisingly, Professor Boyd demurs.) Does Sir Garfield Sobers really have such a large penis? Is it true that the political lives of Peter Beattie, Paul Keating and Neil Kinnock were driven by a fear of growing bald? Could Adele Koh really have been no more than a devious and shallow seductress who charmed her way into Don Dunstan’s life only to denounce and mock him in a private diary, the discovery of which, after her death, caused Dunstan’s breakdown and retirement from political life?

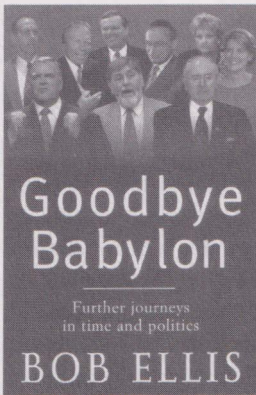
Nor is it hard to find prominent members of Sydney’s literary community who speak of Ellis’s ‘unreliability’ behind clenched teeth. It is of course on the public record that he should have been a little more circumspect in checking the story about Tanya Costello before including it in *Goodbye Jerusalem*. The defo lawyers are no doubt salivating at the prospect of another Ellis-assisted Porsche coming their way, and, on cue, the weekend before the book’s launch, it transpired that *Goodbye Babylon* faced legal problems in South Australia because of “notorious allegations in connection with the as yet untried Snowtown murders”. This is curious as the book’s references to Snowtown’s “genial mass murders” are very muted indeed. Along with the author’s threat to set up a book stall at the South Australian border, the ban is all grist to the mill of

publicity. Nonetheless, a somewhat nervous Bob Sessions of Penguin Books admitted in the *SMH* that in view of Ellis’s track record *Goodbye Babylon* had been read “very carefully for defamation”.

Given the vagaries of Practice Note 114, I hope Penguin’s lawyers prove up to the task. Presumably it was they who added the caveats in the “story, manifestly untrue, or I hope it’s untrue, about a cricketering giant”. He might see it otherwise but the prospect of Sir Garfield Sobers having it off in a panel van with lonely Adelaide matrons and entering his penis in a competition as to its length is a fairly tawdry insight. As the Andrew Ettinghausen case suggests, sportspersons can sometimes be sensitive in respect of their members. And the week *Goodbye Babylon* was launched the famous West Indian cricketer was in Australia to promote his own literary endeavours, appearing at Gleebooks just two days before Ellis. Literary biffò always makes sport seem very tame.

Having said this, some of the best sections of the present book are the descriptions of the previous, celebrated defamation case in Canberra and the many digs at Tony Abbott, “the author’s friend”, who famously remarked, “It’s been a terrible ordeal, and now it’s over.” Some readers may recall Ellis’s appearance on television outside the Supreme Court in Canberra. Unsummonsed by his publisher’s lawyers, Ellis appeared, “hair disordered, shabby, glutinous with flu, my gait much like John Nash’s during one of his demon possessions”. As Bob Carr quipped, he looked like “a possum erupting from a Glad Bag”. Comfortable in the role of court jester, the serious points Ellis makes here—about the continuing implications of Australian defamation law vis-a-vis free speech—are important and salutary.

No doubt Bob Ellis wrote the publisher’s blurb to the effect that he is “a kind of dusty national icon revered [sic], affectionately mocked and sometimes disliked by literate Australians of all ages”. Indeed Ellis is perceptive enough to wonder whether he has been marginalised by the mimicry (Max Gillies!) and the sarcasm. Like the author, *Goodbye Babylon* inspires contrary emotions. Ellis inhabits a decidedly blokey mental universe, and there are hints of misogyny in his depiction of women, invariably “luminously lovely” and implicitly sexually available, usually featuring in the text as the bed-fellow of one or other famous writer, actor, playwright or politician. Despite the judgement of



What about putting Beazley in a headlock and refusing point blank to release him until he did the decent thing?

Gareth Evans, the thought of Ellis standing in a lift with Cheryl Kernot, harbouring vaguely carnal thoughts (“potbellied longing”) is, well . . . tacky.

But it is a truism to say that Bob Ellis can write! *Goodbye Babylon* is no exception. The excerpts from Yeats are a great start for an author who sets out to pull at the heartstrings. Bob Ellis has a talent for the arresting phrase. Chris Schacht does have “a big, portentous dark-chocolate voice of many things”. Sir John Kerr is vividly captured as “widowed, grief-soured, hag-ridden, scotch raddled”. Among the highlights are ‘From the Forged Diary of John Howard’. ‘Night Thoughts in Hawks Nest’ made me hug myself with delight. An example is:

Took my usual walk in my sandshoes down to the old familiar newsagency, this morning. Only a few spitting and shouting pensioners. I was shocked to find, however, that David Barnett’s fine book *John Howard—Earlwood Messiah* has been remaindered at \$5.40, owing, Wal Buckley, the newsagent explained, to an overwhelming lack of interest in its narrative thrust. “How can you work up any enthusiasm,” I overheard him telling a customer as I came through the plastic strips, “for a man who lives with his mother, doing the washing up, until he’s thirty-two, and then locks her out of the nursing home when he’s fifty-eight.”

Bob Ellis is a great hater!

The main dilemma I have with *Goodbye Babylon* lies with Ellis’s role as a ‘Labor outsider’, part of the subtitle of *Goodbye Jerusalem* and the opaque self-perception this represents. The problem is that as both volumes make clear, Ellis is *not* a Labor outsider. It is quite endearing of him to describe

himself as a “bludging sixties Marxist”, but of course he is not. He has been intimately connected to various social democrats since the 1970s. The upside of this is that his portraits of some ALP leaders are compelling. Ellis is spot on in relation to Paul Keating. The boy from Bankstown in fact knew nowt about the ‘big picture’, above all because he was not intellectually equipped, despite the elegant veneer and the interest in antique clocks. Because he was given to the ‘hey-presto quick fix’ and fundamentally a chancer, Keating accidentally sold out Australia. Thanks to Bob Ellis, academics now have a great exam question: “Paul Keating wrecked Australia. Discuss”. Bob Carr, too, is skillfully—and sympathetically—captured. There is something quite compelling about a Labor Party leader whose animosity to Nick Greiner was caused by the Liberal leader calling a by-election in the January parliamentary break, thus preventing Carr from seeing *The Madness of George III* on stage in London. “It was at this point,” he said, “I determined to destroy him.”

But how much power does a great speechwriter and Labor acolyte like Bob Ellis have? On the one hand he says speechwriting is a “strange calling . . . unacknowledged, unquoted, and wherever heard, unheeded”. Sometimes Ellis credits himself with significant influence. Cheryl Kernot’s defection to Labor was, he suggests, 10 per cent attributable to *Goodbye Jerusalem*. All those dinners; all those convivial beers; all that boozy camaraderie must surely entail access to more than a modicum of power. The constant references to ‘Shotty’ (Chris Schacht) and ‘Swanny’ (Wayne) and Mike (Rann) and a Carr staffer called Bodisco become tiresome, but collectively impart a clear impression of the high regard held for Ellis in such powerful political circles.

So what happened in the 2001 elections? Given

his adulation for Kim Beazley, could Ellis have intervened to stop ‘Barbecue Man’ from throwing himself and the Labor Party into the moral abyss on the issue of *Tampa* and the refugees? *Goodbye Babylon* provides a few glimpses of the waverers. Carmen Lawrence, Ellis says, considered leaving the party because of *Tampa*. Duncan Kerr confided his doubts over a cup of coffee and made the undeniably correct point, “If we’d done the right thing . . . we could hardly have ended up worse off”. In the course of the elections Ellis ran into Beazley and gave him some lines which “meekly, attentively, he handwrote . . . down”. One went, “If it’s serious, it needs conscription. If it’s not, let’s talk about something that is”. Beazley evidently “yelped with laughter and said, ‘We can’t use that’”. Could not Ellis have been more persistent? What about his remarkable skills as a publicist, persuader and wordsmith? What about putting Beazley in a headlock and refusing point blank to release him until he did the decent thing? Ellis neglects to explain or explore his reticence. In the appalling events surrounding the ALP caving in to the Liberals’ racist agenda, where was Bob Ellis when we needed him?

Andrew Moore teaches Australian History at the University of Western Sydney. He once told Bob Ellis an apocryphal tale about Billy McMahon, which, astonishingly, does not feature in *Goodbye Babylon*.

## Life writing, not biography

### FRANK BONGIORNO

Andrew Riemer: *Hughes* (Duffy & Snellgrove, \$19.95)

Gough Whitlam: *My Italian Notebook* (Allen & Unwin, \$35)

Don Watson: *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM* (Knopf, \$45)

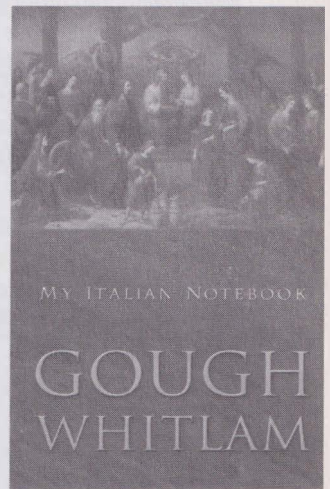
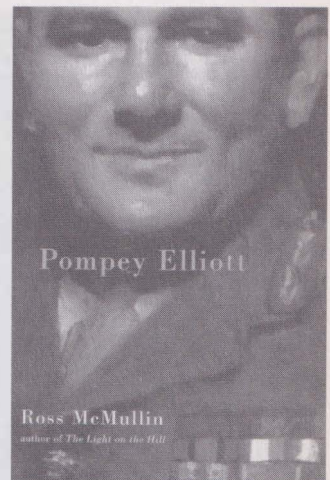
Ross McMullin: *Pompey Elliott* (Scribe Publications, \$45)

Paul Strangio: *Keeper of the Faith: A Biography of Jim Cairns* (MUP, \$49.95)

A pile of books arrives on your desk—over two thousand pages’ worth—and you feel an obligation to find a thread that links them—if not for your readers’ easy digestion, then to assist the editorial team at *Overland* in the unenviable task of finding a

title for your review. How about Italy, I thought, perhaps under the influence of some malign ghost of a long-dead ancestor? It’s obvious enough in the case of Whitlam’s *My Italian Notebook*, Bob Hughes’s immersion in Italian culture and perhaps even Paul Keating’s love of suits. By the time I got to the biography of Jim Cairns, I could only find the Italian surname of the author while Ross McMullin on Pompey Elliott was no use at all. So I settled on that handy little concept of ‘life writing’.

Not biography, mind you. Chunky, scholarly biographies of Australian subjects continue to find their way into print, and two of these books—Ross McMullin’s *Pompey Elliott* and Paul Strangio’s new biography of Jim Cairns—are distinguished examples of the genre. Each is the result of prodigious research. Strangio’s book, based on his PhD thesis, is a detailed yet thoroughly readable account of a remarkable life that is now best remembered for Cairns’s leadership of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign and the scandal that helped end his own career and the Whitlam Government. But what I find most impressive is its author’s willingness to take political ideas seriously. Cairns’s political career and philosophy are placed in the context of vigorous postwar debate on the political left, in Australia and overseas, about communism, socialism, democracy, decolonisation, nationalism and economic organisation and development. The conflict between Cairns and Whitlam, for example, is no mere clash of simple-minded idealism and a worldly pragmatism, nor an unseemly brawl between factions or personalities over the spoils of office. It is a contest between two visions of Australia’s future. At the same time, Cairns’s personality—and its re-



lationship to his political development—is explored fully and skilfully. The deprivation of physical and emotional intimacy in Cairns’s childhood is portrayed by the author as part of the explanation for his later political, personal and intellectual development, but the book never lapses into the reductionism sometimes found in psychobiography. Although sympathetic and rightly unwilling to endorse any notion of Cairns’s career as one of folly and failure, Strangio is by no means starry-eyed about his subject. He has produced an affectionate yet critical portrait, that should help to rescue Cairns “from the enormous condescension of posterity”.<sup>1</sup>

McMullin’s massive life of Pompey Elliott is also a model of its kind. Where the name Monash remains a part of modern Australian consciousness—if mainly because it is preserved by a university—Elliott has largely been forgotten by posterity. A lawyer and veteran of the Boer War, Elliott emerged from the Great War as one of Australia’s most distinguished commanders and a household name. His postwar career in the Federal Senate helped to keep him in the public view; his tragic suicide possibly contributed to the eclipse of his memory. McMullin presents a picture of a fearless individual, an Australian nationalist and a soldier’s soldier whose lack of tact undoubtedly stalled his rise through the military ranks. His failure to attain a divisional command during the war was a blot on his life from which he never recovered. McMullin presents the case for Elliott, as Strangio does for Cairns, but he is by no means blind to the flaws in his subject’s clay. The intimate bonds between Elliott and his men are one of the main themes of this book; a weeping Elliott in the aftermath of the appalling Battle of Fromelles is, for me, the most memorable image from almost seven hundred pages of text.

Yet authors are also experimenting with other ways of writing lives, sometimes by mixing genres in new and imaginative combinations. That said, in the case of Andrew Riemer’s *Hughes*, the results are not entirely satisfactory. Riemer’s book is part of the publisher’s ‘Brief Lives’ series, of which Michael Warby’s troubled *Ellis Unplugged/Unpulped* was also a part. Riemer’s publisher, Michael Duffy, has explained the rationale behind the series as follows: “I feel that sometimes in the big books, the important bits and in some cases the essence of the person’s life get almost lost or

drowned in facts, many of which are actually not that important,” he says. “A lot of Australian lives probably are not of sufficient interest to keep a reader going for four or five hundred pages, whereas parts of those lives, or a briefer look at those lives, is quite fascinating”.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the silly and anomalous cultural cringe in the final comment, there are at least an audience and a purpose here—and that can’t be said of every Australian publishing enterprise.

Riemer knew Hughes at Sydney University, and these memories—and those of a few later encounters—are incorporated into an account which is otherwise largely dependent on a reading of Hughes’s books and a viewing of a few TV shows. Riemer writes engagingly, even elegantly at times; his portrait of Hughes seems authentic. That said, one of the central problems with his book is that—dare I say it?—it contains too few facts. Even allowing for both the limitations and particular aims and target audience of the ‘Brief Lives’ genre, the thinness of the scholarship behind this study is, at times, impossible to ignore. There is one remarkable paragraph, for example, in which Riemer manages to tell us what Hughes’s parents probably thought of the United States. The kindest thing that can be said here is that he makes no attempt to obscure the point that he lacks a single shred of evidence about what they thought of the United States, Patagonia, Calathumpia or anywhere else. Moreover, there are enough other places in the text where we are treated to what Hughes ‘might have imagined’ or ‘may have remembered’, or what ‘could well have entered his mind’, to raise questions about the overall reliability of the account. Ian Britain’s sixty or so pages in *Once an Australian* (1997) said at least as much that is for the moment worth saying about Hughes, in less space, and with an apparently surer grasp of the publicly available record on the critic’s life and career. Perhaps a part of the problem is that there is too much Riemer in this book and too little Hughes. Integrated with more detailed research on Hughes, this ‘autobiographical’ approach to the famous critic’s life could have worked particularly well, injecting first-hand experience into a reading of the career of an important Australian expatriate author and modernist intellectual. Here it did not.

Gough Whitlam has a rather different problem from Riemer. His book contains *too many* facts.

Or, to put it more precisely, it contains a vast catalogue of names, dates and tit-bits on various topics which are presented without much of an attempt to arrange them into anything resembling a coherent narrative or argument. His wife, Margaret, is supposed to have once made the comment that “Gough can answer a question on any subject, particularly history—but the answer can be so detailed that you can regret asking it”.<sup>3</sup>

This judgement was astute. There’s a list of the world’s longest cathedrals, including their lengths in metres, in Appendix 2 (Just before Appendix 3, on ‘Castrati in England’).

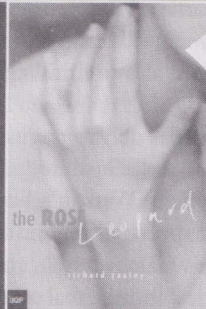
There are some fascinating details distributed here and there. Future historians of the Sydney Olympics will certainly need to subject to careful assessment Whitlam’s claim that “my wife’s and my contacts with the francophone African members of the International Olympic Committee and Unesco . . . secured the 2000 Games for Sydney”! Less controversially, did you know that Garibaldi came to Australia in 1852, and left an account of a Bass Strait island on which he stayed? Or that one of Garibaldi’s sons lived in Melbourne? Certainly, anyone attempting a study of the cultural connections between Australia and Italy will find plenty of worthwhile leads in this book. Whitlam has had a life-long love of Italian culture, and it is reassuring to be reminded that we once had a prime minister who did not regard Don Bradman’s batting average as the pinnacle of human achievement. I just wish Gough had allowed a little more of his passion to shine through.

Don Watson’s extraordinary portrait of one of Whitlam’s successors as Labor prime minister of Australia is, in my opinion, likely to endure as a book of immense importance—not only to our understanding of a creative, if flawed, prime minister and the politics of the early 1990s, but to Australian political culture generally. It’s obviously dangerous to predict what place, if any, a new book will occupy in the esteem of future generations. Books which look like they will be of enduring influence can quickly become regarded as ‘period pieces’; others quietly achieve a recognition that eluded them on first publication. Watson’s *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart* has already received favourable, if not uncritical, reviews. My sense, however, is that it will endure in the same way that, say, Alfred Deakin’s *Federal Story*, Warren Denning’s *Caucus Crisis* and

UQP

University of Queensland Press

NEW FICTION



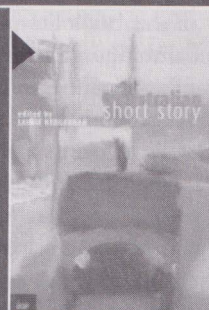
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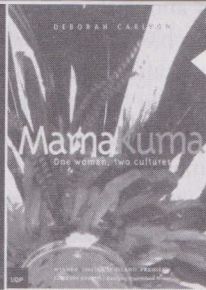
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BIOGRAPHY / MEMOIR



**Mama Kuma: One Woman, Two Cultures**  
Deborah Carlyon

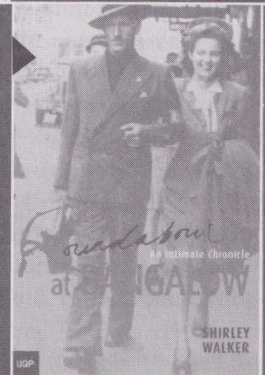
Winner of the 2002 Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards—Best Manuscript by an Emerging Author

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Available from bookstores nationwide

Paul Kelly's *The End of Certainty* endure. These books are important not merely because they are essential sources on the period and themes they purport to describe. Nor are they important because they are flawless in their scholarship and prose, or incontrovertible in their interpretations—they are neither. These books are important because they all tell us something about the way politics is done in Australia, and about who we are as a political community. So does Watson's.

Everyone knows that politics is about language. Yet I've never seen the point so well illustrated, and brought home so powerfully, as in Watson's book. Perhaps only an accomplished speechwriter and historian could have achieved this feat. After all, these arts are both about telling stories. But the real originality of this book lies not in this or that aspect, but in its ambitious mixture of genres. It is, in part, a life of Paul Keating, in the sense that it does explore his background and provide some basic biographical details. It paints a picture of a man who, by late 1991 when he became prime minister, was tired and lacking a hunger for the top job. The glimpses we gain of the collapse of Keating's marriage are particularly moving, and never unnecessarily intrusive. Yet the book is also a memoir of a Labor staffer and speechwriter, a view from the bunker. It is as much about Don Watson as about Paul Keating, but the balance is beautifully achieved. Indeed, the peculiar relationship between staffer/speechwriter and prime minister, the necessarily blurred distinction between self and other in such an odd situation, is one of the major themes of this book.

But, as they say on the ads, that's not all. *Recollected of a Bleeding Heart* is also an essay on how politics is done in modern Australia. It mightn't be *The Prince* and Keating's no Cesare Borgia (perhaps the Italian theme might have worked, after all?), but there's a great deal of wisdom in this book for the aspiring politician. Overly long—it runs to over seven hundred pages—and occasionally heavy-going, this book is a flawed masterpiece. How appropriate that it should be the work of an author who launched his career by writing a brilliant biography of Brian Fitzpatrick, that great producer of flawed masterpieces of Australian historiography.

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986 [1963], p.12.
2. *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 27 October 2001,

<old.smh.com.au/news/0110/27/text/spectrum7.html>

3. James Walter, *The Leader: A Political Biography of Gough Whitlam*, UQP, St Lucia, 1980, pp.85–6.

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## Wit with a wince

### VANE LINDESAY

Mungo MacCallum: *How to be a Megalomaniac (or advice to a young politician)* (Duffy & Snellgrove, \$30)

Australia's wittiest and most relevant journalist, Mungo MacCallum, writes to a fictitious nephew on how to become a politician. The reader will discern the deep truth of political deception, vague promises, meaningless abstractions and political clichés of contemporary politics. Every line in this book of 248 pages declares the bold truth—the author names names and events in his witty, compelling style.

Mungo instances how the first Aborigine to sit in the federal parliament, Neville Bonner, began pushing the case for Indigenous Australians and was promptly dumped to an unwinnable position on the Queensland Liberal Senate ticket. Thus this warning to Mungo's nephew to portray himself as an 'ordinary man'. Advising his nephew on ambition, Mungo suggests self deprecation using the old line that every corporal carries a Field Marshall's baton in his rucksack—"it was used frequently by the megalomaniacal Peter Reith . . . an exemplar of ruthless political self interest".

Mungo continues his avuncular instructions, advising of traps for the unwary. Peccadillos in the past which, he suggests "may, just possibly, be brought out by an opponent as unscrupulous as we hope to make you", should be declared up front:

Is there anything you would like to tell us? Are you sure? Not so much as a juvenile car theft, a suspended sentencing for break and enter, a small investment in a string of brothels? All of these can be glossed over—provided they are made public in advance.

Note the sympathy afforded Tony Abbott, who manfully confessed to jumping the wall of



his seminary because of uncontrollable lust and then fathering a child on a fellow student, the infant being cast aside for adoption.

And compare it with the monsterring of Cheryl Kernot, when it was 'revealed' by a breathless tabloid that she had an affair with a man who had previously been a pupil at a school where she had taught. And with the harassment of Paul Keating over a breach of promise suit brought by a girl named Kristine many years in the past which was triumphantly unveiled by the opposition as the greatest scandal since—well, since Menzies was sprung in bed with Elizabeth Fairfax, but at least we were able to hush that one up at the time.

In his seventh letter to Jack his nephew, Uncle Mungo has the following caution:

In the course of the campaign you will probably be asked about the filthy rumours which are circulating (indeed you will, even if you have to get a stooge to do it). Reply along the lines like "Well, of course I've heard stories—I suppose everybody has—(this will make those who have not rush to the pub to check them out)—but really, I'd like to keep this campaign on a higher level than that. I want to talk about policy, not personalities!" Outrageously, you can even add: "I leave that sort of thing to my opponents".

John Howard has always been a master at this sort of disclaimer, in spite of having a whole section of his inner cabal dedicated almost exclusively to spreading libel about his opponents. Not just politicians but Governors-General, High Court judges, church leaders, high-ranking academics and any number of lesser lights have been comprehensively smeared by Howard's operatives. But the leader, of course, stands aloof and knows nothing.

Mungo further advises his nephew, who is by now an MP—even better, MHR—to avoid the fate of a newly elected member of the Liberal party who, full of zeal and enthusiasm, found himself ignored by the party veterans. On every occasion possible he put his name on the whip's list to speak when there was parliamentary debate but was consistently ignored. Bewailing his fate in the members' bar he was offered a bit of advice by Jim Killen. Next time slip a tenner in the middle of your personal note to

the whip. This was what those in the know did, and "it was why they got so many guernseys in debates". Mungo's letter continues: "Our hero was dismayed that such venality was part of the system, but agreed to try it; next day the Liberal whip, an unbending Christian named Max Fox, received his first-ever inducement. The name of the sucker who offered it is now mercifully forgotten, as was his career from that point on."

Fearlessly recording, seemingly irreverently, the miscreant behaviour of major and minor parties, Mungo also dishes it out also to the Church and royalty. Over seventeen 'letters' and a 'wrap' of advice, which includes how to learn to fabricate sincerity, feign veracity and counterfeit charm, Uncle Mungo describes for nephew Jack the sport of bareknuckle oratory and its potential rewards.

Deadly serious in intent, Mungo MacCallum's *How to be a Megalomaniac* is no footnote to the history of Australian politics, but the inner history itself.

Vane Lindesay is a Melbourne designer and writer.

## Indicators: new poetry

### KERRY LEVES

Ouyang Yu, editor and translator: *In Your Face—Contemporary Chinese Poetry in English Translation* (Otherland No. 8, \$29.95)

Ouyang Yu has a rare gift for translation. These poems take advantage of English as few native-speaker poets do. They don't sound stilted, makeshift or muffled—they never lapse into "translationese" (Leith Morton's term for stylised, approximate translation). Instead, every phrase seems lively, apt—just the right shading to add to the mood and tenor of the individual work. The poems make word-music that neither draws undue attention to itself, nor short-changes the reading (listening) ear; or mind. Despite the fact that the poets—there are many—have been arranged in alphabetical order, there's a cumulative excitement to reading *In Your Face* from cover to cover; Ouyang's selection process has been inspired, lucky, painstaking or all three. His preface is terse, combative and informative, sketching with clarity and

gusto the diverse histories of recent Chinese poets. “I selected the poems I liked, regardless of the politics some here will always impose on China and everything to do with China.” The traditional delicacy of Chinese art is also under some (by no means total) erasure—the poems of *In Your Face* can be aggressive, dissonant, crude, loud, as well as plaintive, serene or quiet. Some work into rap-like protests and insults. Thematically *In Your Face* is very diverse. Few of these poets were born before the 1950s, many were born in the seventies, some later. A number of poems invoke the hostility of cities, the violence, prostitution, injustice; yet also the random islands of calm and pleasure city life can produce. Intimacy, these poems show, is still possible within the steel-and-concrete hive with its insect brutalities. Women’s voices are strongly represented—Mai Cheng’s ‘Penis History’ is brilliant. Family, through parental or life-partner figures, is celebrated, and also interrogated, found wanting, mocked. Yet there are nostalgic undertones, nuances of village life and village mores vitiated and submerged by big-scale commerce; in many poems a sense of the earth, of dust, rain, growth and groundedness. *In Your Face* is a triumph of the un-pompous; almost every poem is fresh and pungent.

| Liz Hall-Downs: *Girl with Green Hair*  
(Papyrus Publishing, \$16.45)

Taking to the road has been a rite of passage for many male poets; less so for Australian women poets. *Girl with Green Hair* offers multiple pleasures—moody, atmospheric journeys, lively pit stops and an engaging social trajectory, across two continents. Hall-Downs’s people aren’t exactly role models of success in the New World Order, but the poet makes them emotionally credible. ‘Tattooed’: “She’s tattooed his name/ on her shoulder blade./ He’s taking the train/ to work each day./ He’s shaved his head/ to be more cool./ They look into each other’s eyes,/ lovesick fools./ Who can tell you/ at nineteen/ that all our lives’ movies change scene.” Hall-Downs writes also into the tradition of stylish, painterly poems about domestic articles. Van Gogh famously painted a pair of boots; Hall-Downs writes ‘Yellow Boys’, about nasturtiums growing in a discarded pair of Docs. The ‘American Poems’ (“the dark faces of the shanty towns/ along the Rio Grande,/ the cool whiteness of Americans/ in their clean and sewerred houses”) get a travel rhythm

going, and introduce the large cast of characters. The ‘Australian Poems’ include ‘Notes from a bus trip: Brunswick Heads to Melbourne’, an extended understatement, mixing sleep-deprived visionary intensity into the quotidian details of the long haul.

| Margaret Bradstock: *The Pomelo Tree*  
(Gininderra Press, \$18)

Judith Beveridge, on the back cover, writes: “I know of no other poet who has written so movingly and convincingly about the Chinese experience in Australia.” I disagree, which doesn’t mean I dislike the book (or Judith), but when anyone refers to ‘the Chinese experience’ anywhere, they raise, by intent or inadvertence, the question—which ‘Chinese experience’ would that be? *The Pomelo Tree*, as a *livre compose*, enacts vast sympathy to the notion of being Chinese, and it’s informed, sensitive and sane. But it’s a writing of (and offers a reading into) a condition of love, and like any loving it involves selecting—focusing on some aspects of the beloved, and diminishing others. Through the poet’s fabulous scrim of reader-enticing exotica—rice paper lanterns, lotuses, dragons, painted fans, red maple trees and so forth—one may arrive at an idea of the Chinese in Australia as hard working, ecologically sound before their time, and dogged by Empire racism and its reliquary half-life (hello, Pauline and John). One may also arrive at a global idea of ‘the Chinese’ as individually diverse and generally harried by the violence of history. Yet, despite the careful modulations of tone in poem after poem, the pitch is a little declamatory. It’s as if ‘the Chinese experience’ needed to be set up, arranged until it epitomised lyrical grace, and polished till it sparkled—an act of love, to be respected, but also an act of projection, that inevitably opens a field of inquiry more complicated than this rather exquisite book, with its trans-cultural humanist vision, might otherwise suggest. Still, few readers will deny that reading it is pleasurable and informative.

| Samuel Wagan Watson: *Itinerant Blues* (UQP, \$19.95)

“eyes peering through sunkissed slits/ at a landscape bathing in a varnish of itinerant blue . . .” Tensions between fixity and flux, between ‘varnish’ and the changeful sky, between getting stuck and keeping in movement, vibrate through the book. Words—the English language, also a ‘varnish’ on Aboriginality—can’t escape inbuilt functions of

mapping, glossing, naming; ‘itinerant blue’ (as a colour) connotes the fluidity and contradictions of lived experience. The poet’s language travels between unclicked colloquiality—“putting the hose into the gas tank/ he’s almost unconscious in his stance, almost grey/ as if clouds have hijacked his mind’s eye”—and newly-minted urban baroque—“tongue dragging along the bitumen/ regurgitating yesterday’s gravel,/ the mind aflush/ with gas tank sonnets”. I think the poems are post-industrial, insofar as Watson uses concrete details of car travel—a “twin cam war party/. . . night racing through the suburbs”; halogen lamps; a semi-trailer with “little piggy eyes staring through the slats”; “\$5.95 truck stop sunglasses”; breakdowns (one requiring “meatball surgery with a swiss-army knife”); a “getaway car” that’s actually a pub lounge, full of hopefuls and desperates, lit up by a “supermarket blonde” behind the bar—to build a social landscape. Cars and driving, along with a closed-up factory and rampant building sites, may become the last reminders of the industrial age, with its hands-on, heavy-duty practical skills and concomitant mystique—‘blokey’ as Terry Whitebeach has noted (*Southerly* 62:2, 2002). The poems are post-industrial also in a prophetic sense, anticipating “the white squall ahead/ the encroaching absalom before us all/ an electronic highway”. Note how ‘absalom’ conjures Old Testament authoritarianism, a narcissistic blues-ish tone and a feeling of unwitting if not involuntary entanglement; note the unemphatic bluntness of the last line. This is a poet who quite deliberately plays high verbal conceits against the militantly ‘unpretentious’ spaces they refer to, and against themselves. It’s demonstrable these poems speak to a variety of people, from the articulate and erudite John Kinsella to very early school leavers, young men in gaols. *Itinerant Blues* is energised throughout by flashing indicators of steely, flexible and inclusive intelligence; it’s first rate.

| Peter Porter: *Max is Missing* (Pan/Picador, \$23)

Erudition, worked into fragile and allusive structures of feeling, may exist only in order to transcend (yes!) itself—final lines ground or re-ground the reader in the everyday, which turns out, after all, to be another fable in its nascent stage. Thus some overheard piano practice in a next-door flat, all “repetitions and untidy sequences”, becomes “the Ladder of Perfection’s missing rungs”—yet Por-

ter’s impeccably controlled tone manages to suggest that even this is, ahem, just a thought. An acerbic commentary on our language-obsessed, emotionally scattered times (“Words, first and last, have come to stay”), this book enables a sense of top-notch eavesdropping, which is, technically, an effect of the poet’s tonal control. A “septuagenarian on holiday” imagines restaurant crabs’ “boiling screams” yet evinces more apparent concern for a (constructed) writing self: “just a witty blank,/ Dreaming he cries to wake: awake he dreams”. The allure of it is scrupulously freighted with unease; if the world is a moral quagmire, what exactly is the ‘distance’ poetic art allows? Not much, the plangent title poem might answer. The fastidious metrics, the ingenious inventions, the elliptical phrasing, all serve to amplify feeling, giving weight to emotions that don’t merely colour but can, and do, drive decisions, actions, inactions, a life, even a consensual ‘world’. Meanwhile other lives go on—or not: “Behold the spiders in their high dissecting room/ quiring to the Sons of Morning, *All Flesh Is Grass*.”

| Deborah Westbury: *Flying Blind*  
(Brandl & Schlesinger, \$22.95)

Gambles with silence, using it as a space into which the poems—oblique, lyrical, edgy—seem cast like pebbles into water. The best draw a reader to think on what their words catch—the scrappiness of living; a dialogue between the poet and the mixed world she’s breathing into life. It’s a world where connections unravel. The poem ‘Susan, etcetera’ is about two discourses, one poetic, the other scientific or rather scientific, and how they fail to speak to each other. The near-phatic exchanges, between a massage therapist and a writer, avoid both *guignol* (despite the cadavers mentioned by the therapist) and more-sensitive-than-thou posturing by the writer, and the poem shapes a problem that doesn’t immediately suggest its own solution. The book’s reach is cosmopolitan. On Jerusalem’s Via Dolorosa, where pilgrims walk, the implied poet notes “a short balding man/ in Hell’s Angel leathers” bearing a cross that has “trolley wheels on its base/ easing like an opiate/ the burden of doubt”. This poem, ‘The Jerusalem Syndrome’, is modulated with skill into a consideration of the ideals and the exclusions pitched by religious discourse. For a book that never raises its voice above the level of quiet one-to-one conversation, or diaristic conver-

sation between self and self, *Flying Blind* is strong, sometimes funny, often incisive. It's also about betrayals—"necklaced" begins with a "bloke from next door" taking out his anger, against retrenchment from a steel works, on his garden; the toxic rage of lost social power is sharply caught. A few poems, slight and scenic, pass like clouds; otherwise, this is an involving book. The final poem closes a circle begun with the dedication, gently underlining the point that this is also a book of mourning. It's admirably tactful.

| Clayton Hansen: *The Ventriloquist's Child*  
(Interactive Press, \$20.85)

"please find a child to fit this jumpsuit . . ." An out-there original; reading it, you might imagine a twenty-first-century Mallarme, making use of paraphernalia lost to some impossible project—say, an Inventory of South Eastern Queensland begun by a distracted postmodernist, then abandoned, its contents appropriated piecemeal by solitary dreamers passing through. The ventriloquist's voice displays no "grain" except an apparent commitment to "going against the grain", and it animates trains, supermarkets, ATMs, currawongs, alleyways, ceramic ducks, pool cleaners, a workbench, historic images . . . Populated by colourful, textured objects of all kinds, this poetic world is also social, imbued at every twist and turn with a sense of the solitudes that germinate in conditions of material abundance. Quite systematic in its sensory derangements, *The Ventriloquist's Child*, as Peter Richardson noted in the *Sunshine Coast Daily*, "irresistibly draws the reader into the experience"; it's also an argument for poetic liberty, bi-laterally voyeuristic but also tender and spirited.

| Martin R. Johnson: *The Clothes-Prop Man*  
(Wakefield Press, \$16.95)

After the Second World War, water catchment projects like the Snowy Mountains Scheme and, in South Australia, the South Para reservoir, provided jobs for lots of men. Immigrants from European countries, restless loners from anywhere, and locals who brought their families with them, joined with men from the Yatala Labour Prison in the construction work. South Para took ten years, from 1948–58. The workers lived rough, in corrugated iron huts; their women—"seemed all I did was have kids"—"scrubbing floors/ with knees that knew the

long miles to town". Kids got bathed on Sunday nights, "the chip heater/. . . fuelled by the pong". The opening section, 'Building the Reservoir', could stand by itself as a 1950s social memoir. The poet's not only in control of his tone, he's also keenly interested in his material, and he uses his implied self as an oral historian, an interviewer who's allowed to be affected by the stories he's picking up. The textures and details are knotty and resistant; the portraiture is vivid and subtle. There are itinerant workers who show up, perform a tedious domestic job (e.g. the clothes-prop man of the title), get paid in "scones and fruit" and go, leaving orange-peelings in answer to the implicit question, who are you? There's the surveyor, the truckie; the Italian powder monkey with "Just enough/ English to get by", who's "in charge of a group/ of Greek men". There's 'Sack-'em Jack', general foreman and pragmatic tough bastard, and there's the "quiet bloke"—"I work five days a week/ for the bookies and publicans/. . . I'm not going to work six." All these put flesh on the bones of an era. The blasting, tunnelling and building; the jokes, boozing and fun, along with a sense of purpose that helped make it all liveable, are conveyed with adroitly mixed laconism and expressiveness—enough to confirm that Martin R. Johnson is (or can be) an impressive poet. In the second and third sections, 'Married Workmen's Camp' (Johnson spent his first twelve years there) and 'Williamstown' (his family moved there in the early 1960s), the implied poet writes autobiography—at first engagingly, then mythically, then journalistically and didactically; the tone goes off, while the form goes cast-iron. It's not that *The Clothes-Prop Man* elides some of the nastier aspects of 1950s Australia: the repressiveness and swilling, judgemental abruptness and brutalities are there. But not all readers will be able to share the laid-on nostalgia, or the insistent generalised group feelings. Johnson's rose-tinted views don't hold for everybody. While some 1950s women, no doubt, were "preferring" their husbands, between schooners at the bar, "to serve them outside inside the cars", there were also chattels—women and kids (I was one of the latter) for whom the ritual was painful: anxious hours, stuck outside the pub, waiting. Johnson doesn't seem to want to allow space for such negative experiences in the final parts of his book.

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet.



Jassim Al Abaddy's caricature of his Department of Immigration case officer. Biro on scrap paper, 2002. Officer's name obscured.

## Art behind the razor wire

LINDA JAIVIN

WHEN Jassim Al Abaddy chose to use instant coffee and the lid of a food container as the media for his dreamlike landscape paintings, he wasn't attempting to make some postmodern statement. He was in prison and didn't have anything else to work with. As I write, Jassim Al Abaddy still is in prison—technically 'detention'—but at least now he knows people who can take him paints and brushes and canvases. He's also gaining public recognition for his work.

Jassim Al Abaddy is an asylum seeker who fled the Iraq of Saddam Hussein with his family in fear of his life. Three years ago, he, his wife and five children embarked on a risky journey in a leaky boat on the Timor Sea to get them to Australia and to what they expected would be a safe haven from persecution and fear.

Instead, they found the nightmare of mandatory detention—first in Curtin, then Port Hedland, and now Villawood, in Sydney's western suburbs.

One of the first things you notice about Jassim Al Abaddy's art is its gentleness, its sweetness, the lightness of touch. Despite his circumstances there is nothing harsh or angry about his work. There is unmistakable sadness in the painting *Lost Horse*, and drawings such as one of a man sitting in a birdcage over which a tree has started to grow. Even at its most political, as in his caricatures of his Department of Immigration case officer, his cartoon of a boatload of refugees arriving only to be greeted by a big, open-mouthed shark that's marked DIMA (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs), or his satirical photocopy montages, his art is

A well-meaning visitor with a personality reminiscent of Patrick White's 'Cheery Soul' suggested to some asylum seekers that if they looked at the razor wire the right way, they could see love hearts. The detainees were too polite to say anything . . .

witty rather than bitter.

His 16-year-old son Humam, like Jassim self-taught in detention, vented his frustration and sorrow more baldly in his first series of work, pencil drawings of boys marking time in cells, caged birds looking out at free ones, the 'demon fist' of Philip Ruddock coming down on frightened refugees, and a big Australian boot crushing an egg. These drawings were shown at the Show Mercy concert in the Sydney Town Hall in 2002, and a number of other places, including television news reports on children in detention. Humam's work quickly improved in technical competence and sophistication. He has since done a series of striking portraits of himself, friends and family, and has continued to make political statements through such work as a detailed pencil drawing of Jesus behind the razor wire.

That drawing, which imagined that if Jesus had come to Australia seeking asylum, he would be locked up, along with Humam's self-portrait and a number of works by his father, were featured in the *Borderpanic* exhibition at Sydney's Performance Space in 2002. Jassim and Humam Al Abaddy showed a collection of smaller works in Simon Barney's portable Briefcase Gallery not long before. At the opening of that exhibition, in the Hollywood Hotel, a number of viewers wiped tears from their eyes.

In the *Borderpanic Reader*, Humam wrote:

I have been in detention since I was 13 years old, and now I'm 16 years old. That means I have spent three birthdays in detention. I have lost in these three years my freedom, my education and most of my friends. I hope that one day I'll get my freedom back.

His father's statement read:

I am a 47-year-old refugee from Iraq. My family and I got to Australia on 20 December 1999, and we have been in Detention Centres since that time. My skills are in painting, and my trade is tailoring.

Referring to a food-container lid painting of a twisty path through a mountain landscape, he explained,

"I painted this picture during a ten-month separation from my wife. It is an imaginary landscape. I wrote to her that one day it would be spring, the landscape would be green, and we would be together."

Jassim and Humam Al Abaddy are sincere romantics, imagining and creating for themselves a world of ideal beauty. The landscapes which they imagine in their paintings are full of long vistas, distant mountains, gorgeous beaches and watery horizons. Humam, like his brother Nashwan, is also a talented singer, and on the rare days he is moved to perform, he sings Egyptian and other love songs in an angelic voice. There have been occasions, when Humam is singing in the visiting yard of Villawood, that it's possible to close your eyes and enter that ideal world. But when you open them again, you're confronted with the landscape that is their daily reality, a landscape of man-made ugliness, patrolled by prison guards and limned by industrial steel fences capped with coils of razor wire, an invention designed specifically to hook and tear human flesh.

A well-meaning visitor with a personality reminiscent of Patrick White's 'Cheery Soul' once suggested to some asylum seekers that if you looked at the razor wire the right way, you could see love hearts. The asylum seekers were too polite to say anything at the time, but they found the notion detestable. The fences and razor wire can stand for one thing and one thing only, in art as in life, and that is the violent theft of freedom, and in Humam's case, of his youth as well.

At the *Borderpanic* exhibition, which also included work by Australian, refugee and other artists reflecting on the country's treatment and attitude towards strangers in general and boat people in particular, one of the most moving installations was a collection of empty chairs, tagged to represent asylum seekers incarcerated in our detention centres for the crime of wanting a better and safer life. One was marked Humam Al Abaddy; another Jassim Al Abaddy.

Linda Jaivin is the author of *The Monkey and the Dragon* (Text) as well as four novels.

# Newer Australians

COMMENT

FRANCIS OESER

**1961:** THE CRUISE-SHIP LEFT NAGOYA. The blue-rinse and balding round-trippers gossiped with curious pleasure about the young newcomer just embarked. Thin, sallow, with a mop of dark hair shielding his shy eyes, he had a ferocity, the elegant stiffness of a dancer, a damaged beauty. Was he a Spanish bullfighter? He guilelessly told his dining companions that he was an Australian who lived in Japan and was going home. That was all. Of his joyous and destructive adventures, of his journeys through its wilderness of cities and countryside, of his dallying as an *Overland* representative in the Press Club in Tokyo where Richard Hughes drunkenly sprawled, or in Geisha land with John Ishizaki of the *Asahi Shimbun*, of brittle friendships and of abuse—he communicated nothing.

In Hong Kong the ship was refitted and virtualled. It lay for a week in Kowloon attended by many Chinese. In contrast to the quiet order of Japan, here the streets seemed menacing and soulless; yet the distant hills of communist China beyond the border were as familiar as traditional ink paintings. At the end of the week the ship was filled with a crowd of White Russians, fled from Harbin. They were accommodated in steerage in the vast hold of the ship which had been divided by flimsy canvas curtains into spaces where ten to fifteen people camped with little or no luggage. These refugees were offered no frills; like the Chinese crew: oriental food and sleeping mats. Upstairs the paying passengers were treated to European comforts and fare. The crew and newcomers ate like emperors with banquets prepared by the Chinese chef.

Compared to the seemly order upstairs, life below decks was tumultuous: parents and relatives fussing over busy children, grandparents nurturing toddlers, old men squeezing folk accordions, teenagers playing guitars, singing and teasing; girls and boys ablaze with Slavic beauty; lively talk, the struggle with regrets and hope; a new language with questions and dreams about Australia which engulfed the ‘bullfighter’ who felt increasingly at home in this extraordinary crowd.

What should he say about Australia? A brutal school-life, the derision over differences; its con-

stricting ‘mateship’ . . . his answers were disturbing, confused. ‘New Australians’ were second class; these beloved newer Australians would be ranked still lower! Privilege and separation in Australia had spawned unnatural distinctions; yet the ordinary nobility of these Russians was an extraordinary gift to anyone. In the end, all he could say was, “I love Australia. You will too!”

Time passed. The sea rolled the boat southward until one dark morning it swung towards the grey smudge of land, to The Heads of Sydney Harbour. There it was shadowed by a Customs and Immigration launch as official entry processes were instigated. The ship meandered through the shelter of the harbour as the sun slipped over the eastern horizon. We stood at the bows as the distinctive ‘coat-hanger’ bridge grew visible in the greying light. With breathtaking brilliance myriad windows blazed, every wall of every building warmed, gilded by the sun. The city glowed and shone with gold. The wealth of the Antipodes transformed Sydney into a dream-city—a place of wealth and work and dignity, the home of hope. All eyes of the three or four hundred refugees reflected blazing gold, their growing excitement, their tangible joy as this day broke. They were here, in the promised land—a place to live, a place to love. It was the most glorious dawn we’d ever witnessed!

I stayed in touch with some of these friends for a long time. I saw how tough it was for them, learning the ropes in Melbourne. But I think that they eventually prospered; as Australia too, prospered. Because they complemented ‘Temper democratic, bias Australian’ (I like to think that it was rooted in the immeasurable gilding of that Sydney dawn in 1961).

**2001:** FOUR HUNDRED REFUGEES from Afghanistan denied landfall by an indifferent Australia, beset by fears of sharing its wealth and space. In forty years our gilded cities have dimmed, our dignified hope has withered. Fortress Australia; too well defended by law and force, which now cannot be inhabited by the beauty and strength of mankind, but will be overwhelmed by the emptiness which haunts its heart.

Francis Oeser is an overseas *Overland* subscriber.

# See you under the clocks?

In memory of Ron Simpson 1929–2002

**GRAEME KINROSS-SMITH**

MELBOURNE AND ITS cultural community—and Australian literary and artistic endeavour at large—has lost a clear-sighted, passionate and illuminating advocate. The death in October 2002 of the poet, editor and artist R. (Ron) A. Simpson, followed his many months of courageous footwork sidestepping and denying the infuriating insistence of cancer.

Ron, who published many times in *Overland*, found creative voice primarily through poetry—that quietly explosive and wise spareness of statement that was so particularly his. Bruce Dawe described him as the poet among all other Australian poets who took economy of line to its greatest depth and power. Ron was also among other things editor, teacher, receptive and wise husband and parent, painter and lecturer in art.

When I first met Ron at the Victorian Education Department, where we worked together as editors from 1966 to 1969, I came with a reader's love of his brief and limpid poems that I had seen in literary journals and newspapers Australia-wide. I was now able to marry these works with this unassuming and sensitive, dry-witted and infectiously iconoclastic writer. From then began our sharing of enthusiasms—poetry, film, painting and sculpture, the pulses of Melbourne city, family, travel, politics, line drawing, galleries and museums, Manhattan, new painting, the strange vagaries of history and human interaction. It was Ron who looked over my shoulder one day and deemed some of my words poetry. I hadn't presumed to attempt any before. From that day we traded drafts, checked lines, phrases, crucial words with each other, just as Ron had for years traded with fellow poets like Max Dunn, Alex Craig, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Vin Buckley, Laurie Collinson, Tom Shapcott and others who would offer the unfeigned and honest comment invaluable to artists involved in making and self-questioning. Those of us in turn who prize copies of our pieces in draft with Ron's sage questions and suggestions in the margin must number many. He took great trouble. He left us our freedom and yet his

most common advice—'Reduce! Reduce! Do you need this?'—was hardly ever off-beam. I think it was that eye to the essential that made him such a perceptive poetry editor first for the *Bulletin* in the 1960s and later for *The Age* for thirty years.

The houses of Ron and Pam Simpson—for long at Murrumbena in Arthur Boyd territory and later East Malvern—were places of books, paintings, sketches and etchings and illuminating talk, with Ron's unmistakable cackling laugh, at the sad ridiculousness of things, punctuating it. All this came out of eclectic reading, candour and humility, conjecture, fascination with the wonder of the human narrative and abhorrence at society's incipient censors. Both Ron and Pam had a steady concern for social equity.

Ron Simpson described himself as a 'city person'—I tried in vain, except on rare occasions, to tempt him to the provinces—and Melbourne was his city and the city of his poetry. I see him with the group of poets succoured by Melbourne University, *Meanjin* and *Overland* at Genevieve's in Carlton in the 1960s, or at readings in the University Union building, or at galleries, or waiting under the clocks at Flinders Street, or browsing at Collected Works, or over coffee at Sportsgirl or Manchester Lane, or at the Nova, the Lumiere, the Kino. And perhaps Manhattan—via stays made possible by the repeated kindness of Bernard, his and Pam's *New York Times* journalist friend—was his adopted city. Manhattan's galleries, its history, its polyglot vitality in pursuing the possible, fed his poems.

We've lost a generating poetic voice whose skill in bringing brief words to suggest so much will always make us marvel. Once, when I was ready to throw away the pen and typewriter in despair, Ron said: "You'll find you can't stop. We can't help writing." He was right. And it was inconceivable that he should stop. The books kept coming, and we will go on benefiting from them. His last book, edited by Alex Skovron, will appear this year. We are rich in having known him.



# Letter from Tasmania

RALPH WESSMAN

ON THURSDAY 17th January, the Tasman Peninsula home that poet Margaret Scott had lovingly restored for the past fifteen years, burnt to the ground. Fortunately—or unfortunately—Margaret was hospitalised with a particularly debilitating bout of emphysema at the time, and was in no immediate danger, but her manuscripts, books and personal effects were lost.

It was the day too that cancer claimed Tasmanian writer Elizabeth Dean.

Liz Dean's love of writing and literature resulted in short stories, reviews, essays and interviews published in a number of literary journals. She viewed writing as both a personal and communal activity, offering opportunity to explore, empower and perhaps dance with the ineffable. For a number of years, she was the mainstay of the Tasmanian Writers' Union, taking on the arduous and unheralded tasks of preparing submissions, seeking funding of the Union's programs including the Salamanca Writers' Festival, and helping, in effect, to lay the infrastructure for the current state of the local writing community.

When the TWU ceased operating, Liz channelled her energies into the establishment of Tasmanian publishing house Montpelier Press. In a little over three years, Liz, Philip Mead and Andrew Lohrey created a quality press publishing titles such as Margaret Scott's *Collected Poems*, James Charlton's *Luminous Bodies*, and Patsy Crawford's *King: the story of a river*. The poetry titles offered work of the highest standard, while Crawford's exposé of environmental degradation of the rivers of Tasmania's West Coast confirmed Montpelier's commitment to publication of works of social merit.

Speaking at Elizabeth's service, Amanda Lohrey voiced her appreciation of Liz's creative writing, in particular of the two novels she'd been working on during the past few years. Liz was at times a little

diffident, somewhat self-deprecating of her abilities, Amanda remarked, but this changed as a consequence of a public reading she performed during a residency at Varuna. "When she'd finished reading, there was simply silence ... and appreciation. For Elizabeth, the implications began to sink in."

Another to offer a few words was Pete Hay, who cited the genial efficiency with which Liz had run the TWU, virtually single-handedly, during the year of his presidency. Philip Mead spoke of his private and professional appreciation of a woman who'd impressed with her love of family and abundant generosity, loyalty, vivacity and charm. Others recalled a sense of personal flair, typified by Liz's decision on celebrating her sixtieth birthday to dye her hair a fiery red.

Margaret Scott, meanwhile, presents a brave face following her second close brush with the ravages of fire. One evening, the better part of ten years ago, Margaret was among a number of writers reading at Hobart's university campus. Within her repertoire of poems was one she knew by heart, a piece she'd written when she was 9 or 10. "It's the only poem I have left from that period of my life, the rest of my early work was destroyed in Hobart's bushfires of 1967," she explained. Fire has again destroyed the copious longhand notes of Margaret's work-in-progress, her books of reference and copies of published work but—undeterred—she regards the setback as a challenge and as an opportunity to start afresh.

Led by poet Andrew Sant and Hobart Bookshop's Chris Pearce, efforts to raise money to replace Margaret's library have resulted in donations in excess of \$2500. A benefit evening—"a big one", promises Andrew—is in the pipeline. Donations in support can be forwarded c/o Hobart Bookshop, 22 Salamanca Square, Hobart, Tasmania 7000.

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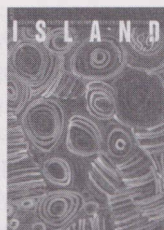
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**OVERLAND LECTURE:**

In 1974, the number of Australian men working longer than eleven hours a day was one in eighteen. By 1997, that ratio had risen to one in eight.

*Humphrey McQueen, p 98*

**CORPORATE WELFARE:**

Two companies, whose CEOs are close friends of John Howard, made generous donations to the Liberal Party. The coalition government reciprocated by giving Visy \$40 million, and handing the Manildra company a virtual monopoly.

*Lauren van Dyke, p 114*

**FICTION:**

In Abbotsford you got used to seeing the people around you change. One day you'd see an old lady with brown socks push a shopping jeep along Park Street, the next day she'd have a red gash across her face. A woman would see her mother off outside a flat, wave, meet your eye and duck inside with a swift swing of her jaw to prevent you from noticing the shiner she was sporting.

*Kerry Watson, p 29*

**CULTURE:**

The National Trust agreed to relinquish ownership of Ned's skull, but it did not contact me. Why? Its staff presumed I stole the skull and they don't want to dirty their hands with a thief.

*Tom Baxter, p 62*

**MEDIA:**

When Saddam did use chemical weapons against his own people, the *Australian's* coverage was remarkable for its portrayal of the Iraqi dictator in a positive light.

*Eddie Davers, p 18*

**COMMENT:**

A well-meaning visitor with a personality reminiscent of Patrick White's 'Cheery Soul' said to some asylum seekers that if they looked at the razor wire the right way, they could see love hearts. The detainees were too polite to say anything.

*Linda Jaivin, p 140*

**REVIEW:**

It's difficult to comment on the assertions in Bob Ellis's book . . . does Garfield Sobers really have such a large penis? Are the political lives of Peter Beattie, Paul Keating and Neil Kinnock really driven by a fear of growing bald?

*Andrew Moore, p 129*

**CURRENT AFFAIRS:**

The US and Britain have already started a war against Iraq; US and UK bombing hasn't ceased since 1991. Combined they have released 400 tonnes of bombs and missiles, justified on the basis that Iraq had not complied with UN sanctions.

*Peter Holding, p 7*

The amnesia and complacency demonstrated by the media and the Howard government is perhaps symptomatic of a cavalier attitude to civil liberties peculiar to Australia; after all, we inherited so many of our rights from foreign struggles.

*Nick Fischer, p 21*

**OPINION:**

Mark Latham said that a solution to poverty rests on the development of a 'stakeholder welfare state'. Incredibly, he suggests that the poor can help themselves by getting into the stockmarket.

*Judith Bessant, p 117*



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